



these broken wings

by crystallicroain

When Kurt becomes a widower at the age of 29, he and his son return to Lima to try to pick up the pieces. Perhaps the one person who can save him is someone that he had forgotten was there all along.

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*Blackbird singing in the dead of night,
Take these broken wings and learn to fly.
You were only waiting for this moment to arise.*

- "Blackbird", the Beatles

Table of Contents

Chapter One	- 6 -
Chapter Two	- 11 -
Chapter Three	- 16 -
Chapter Four	- 25 -
Chapter Five	- 31 -
Chapter Six	- 39 -
Chapter Seven	- 44 -
Chapter Eight	- 50 -
Chapter Nine	- 57 -
Chapter Ten	- 62 -
Chapter Eleven	- 68 -
Chapter Twelve	- 74 -
Chapter Thirteen	- 80 -
Chapter Fourteen	- 84 -
Chapter Fifteen	- 89 -
Chapter Sixteen	- 94 -
Chapter Seventeen	- 102 -
Chapter Eighteen	- 107 -
Chapter Nineteen	- 113 -



Chapter Twenty	- 118 -
Chapter Twenty-One	- 124 -
Chapter Twenty-Two	- 131 -
Chapter Twenty-Three	- 138 -
Chapter Twenty-Four	- 144 -
Chapter Twenty-Five	- 152 -
Chapter Twenty-Six	- 157 -
Chapter Twenty-Seven	- 164 -
Chapter Twenty-Eight	- 171 -
Chapter Twenty-Nine	- 179 -
Chapter Thirty	- 185 -
Chapter Thirty-One	- 191 -
Chapter Thirty-Two	- 198 -
Chapter Thirty-Three	- 206 -
Chapter Thirty-Four	- 216 -
Chapter Thirty-Five	- 224 -
Chapter Thirty-Six	- 232 -
Chapter Thirty-Seven	- 242 -
Chapter Thirty-Eight	- 251 -
Chapter Thirty-Nine	- 260 -
Chapter Forty	- 269 -



Epilogue



- 278 -

Chapter One

“This is the last of it,” Finn said over his shoulder with a small grunt, two carefully packed boxes in his arms as he made his way up the stairs. Kurt gave a small nod, looking after his step-brother with tired, vacant eyes.

"You're sure about this, kid?" Burt asked, placing a gentle hand on his son's shoulder, and Kurt nodded again.

"Positive," he said, his voice sounding raspy.

"It's good to have you home of course," Burt sighed. "I just don't want you to feel like this is your only choice. The houses are springing up just north of here, we could find a place for you and Aiden—"

"No," Kurt quickly cut across. "I just... I need to be home, dad. Here, with you. I don't think I know of anybody who understands what I'm going through better than you."

Burt nodded once, taking his son in his arms for a brief moment, and Kurt closed his eyes tightly, feeling safe and, for the first time in quite a while, content.

The stairs creaked slightly and the father and son pulled away from each other. Kurt turned to see his step-mother descending the stairs, a sad smile on her lips.

"He's fast asleep in our room," she told the two men.

"It was a long drive," Kurt sighed. "I'm not surprised he's exhausted."

"And what about you, sweetheart?" Carole asked, cupping his face in her hand. "It looks like you haven't *really* slept in days. Why don't you lay down?"

Kurt shook his head. "I can't," he said, his voice suddenly a little tight. "I haven't been able to since—not since Alex—"

Carole merely nodded, and Kurt took a deep breath. "How about I make you a cup of coffee, then?" she offered kindly, and Kurt gave her

a small smile.

"That would be lovely," he told her, and she nodded, moving into the kitchen where he heard her bustling around to make the pitcher of coffee.

"You've got to get some sleep, son," his father said worriedly.

"I know," Kurt said. "But it isn't from lack of trying. Trust me, I can hardly bring myself to move from my bed in the morning. If it weren't for Aiden, I'm not sure that I would." He sat down in one of the armchairs, hiding his face in his hands for a moment before looking back up at his father. "How did you get through it when mom died?"

Burt sighed heavily as he took a seat across from his son. "You've already pinpointed the reason, Kurt," he told him solemnly. "If it weren't for you, I don't know that I would have. But once you got a kid, it's just... everything's different." They were quiet for a few moments before Burt reached out a little awkwardly, taking his son's hand in his. "This is something I always hoped you'd never have to go through."

"It's something that I never even thought possible," Kurt breathed out, closing his eyes tightly as though it might all go back to normal if he just wished hard enough.

Carole placed the mug of coffee on the end table. "Here you are, sweetheart," she told him gently, and he gave her a faint smile, mouthing 'thank you'. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

He shook his head. "Thank you, though," he told her. "I've just got to push through."

The first few weeks passed in a blur of sleepless nights. Nights where he did manage to sleep for more than a couple hours involved horrendous nightmares. Either way, each morning Kurt found

himself making coffee for his family members, drinking his own helping black in increasing amounts as the days went on.

Though he never addressed the fact out loud, he quickly became aware that Carole and Burt did their best to make sure that one of them was at home with Kurt each day, or else they sent Finn to stay around the house and watch over his step-brother. And though he never said anything about it, he was very thankful. He had Aiden, but the idea of otherwise being left alone very nearly terrified him.

When Aiden woke up in the morning, it served as a major relief to Kurt. Once his son would walk down the stairs, clutching onto the railing, clad in his super hero pajamas, suddenly Kurt wasn't forced to sit in the kitchen, holding onto his coffee for dear life. He hated being left alone to his thoughts.

He hated remembering.

He heard the click of the lock and the front door opening, and he instantly knew that neither Carole nor Burt could get off work, so they had sent Finn over. Kurt took a deep breath, taking a long drink of his coffee as Finn entered the kitchen.

"Hey dude," he said, shrugging off his jacket.

"Hey," Kurt said quietly as Finn took a seat across from him at the kitchen table.

"I heard from Mercedes," Finn said. "She really wants to see you."

Kurt simply nodded.

"I can tell her you're not up to it if you want," Finn offered awkwardly.

"That would be good," Kurt sighed, staring down at his coffee, swirling it around his cup.

"Tina and Mike have been asking about you, too," Finn said. "And of course Rachel still wants you to call, whenever you're ready. But she doesn't want to push."

Kurt nodded again.

Finn leaned across the table. "You can't lock yourself up here
contents

forever, bro."

Kurt narrowed his eyes. "I'm *mourning*."

"But you don't talk to anyone," Finn pressed on. "You don't even talk to me or mom or Burt. We're just worried about you."

"I talk to my dad," Kurt snapped. "And the reason I don't talk about it to anyone else is because there is *no one* who can possibly understand what I have to go through right now."

"Kurt, I know you're hurting," Finn said. "We just want you to let us help you."

"Well, until Brittany finishes her time machine and someone takes it to go back and change the past for me, then nobody *can* help me," Kurt replied, pushing himself up from the table and placing his empty mug in the sink. He moved to leave, to check on Aiden, when Finn's voice stopped him.

"Blaine called."

Kurt's shoulders stiffened, turning to Finn.

"He really wants to see you," he said softly.

Kurt clenched his jaw. "That's *brilliant*, Finn," he responded vehemently. "I'm a damn *widower* at the age of twenty-nine and you want me to see my ex-boyfriend. Alex was killed just a *month ago*, and you—"

"That's not what I mean, Kurt, and you know it," Finn told him. "Blaine was one of your best friends for a long time, dating or not. He still cares about you, and you need to talk to someone outside of this house." There was a pause and Finn reached into his pocket, pressing a small piece of paper into Kurt's hands. "He gave me his number and address. He doesn't want to push you either, but... I think you might need this, Kurt."

Kurt stared down at the scrap of paper in his shaking hands. A phone number and address were scrawled out in Finn's familiar chicken-scratch writing.

"At least consider it?" Finn asked, suddenly reminding Kurt of the



man's presence.

He hesitated, then swallowed hard. "Fine," he responded, nodding. "I'll consider it."

Chapter Two

Kurt shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"I shouldn't be here," he sighed. He glanced at his hands, folded in his lap, then to his bag, set beside his feet. He stared out the window for a moment before bringing his attention back to the room, looking at the desk and the bookshelves around him.

"Why is that?" the woman across from him asked. She leaned forward in her seat, looking at Kurt kindly. He finally turned to her, though it wasn't for long. It crossed his mind that he might be acting rude by refusing to meet her eyes, but it simultaneously occurred to him that she must have plenty of patients who couldn't bring themselves to do the very same thing.

Patients. The word felt as though it was mocking him, the moment he thought of it.

"I'm not crazy," he said bluntly. "I don't need therapy."

"You're grieving," she responded. "This is supposed to help you get through your pain."

"I can do that just fine on my own," Kurt bit out, and the woman hummed in response, scribbling something on her clipboard as Kurt narrowed his eyes, his anger flaring.

"Why do you feel as though you have to act so strong, Kurt?" she asked him. "It *is* perfectly acceptable to hurt. You've been through a lot."

"I know exactly what I've been through," he told her angrily. "I think about it every day."

"Is it because of your son?" she pressed on in a painfully gentle, understanding voice. However, this only made him feel more furious, no matter how many times Kurt reminded himself that it was completely irrational. Still, with every word she said in that horribly calm tone, he found himself hating her more.

Kurt moved a hand up to his shoulder, holding himself slightly.

Perhaps she *wanted* him to break. Because *that*, he thought, bitterly, was *just* what he needed.

"Kurt?" she prodded, and he whipped his head back to her again, his eyes narrowed. "What are you thinking, now? It's all right."

And with those words, something inside of Kurt snapped. "It's '*all right*'?" he repeated vehemently. "It is most definitely *not* all right. Why would it ever be all right to find out that your husband of less than five years was killed in a *hate crime* because of some homophobic bastards? Why would it be all right to be left to take care of your three-year-old son on your own? You can't sleep in your own bed or stay in the home you made because it's like his ghost is *there* and every morning you realize that the only truth you're aware of anymore is that it *won't* be all right." He stood up, snatching up his bag and walking over to the door. "So thank you for trying *so hard* to help me, but you can't. Especially if you think that *this*, that *anything*, is *all right*."

He yanked open the door and stormed out of the office, people staring as he did so but he didn't care. He made his way quickly to the parking garage, clutching onto his bag's shoulder strap as he did so. Finally he tossed the bag into the passenger side of his car before climbing in himself. He gripped the steering wheel so tightly that his knuckles turned white. He hadn't even placed the keys in the ignition. His shoulders shuddered slightly and he pressed his forehead against the leather cover on the wheel, unable to stop the tears from coming.

He wasn't sure how long he stayed like that, but it was quite some time before his crying subsided and he started the engine, pulling out of his parking spot and making his way back home.

Once he pulled into the driveway and removed his key from the ignition, he glanced into his rearview mirror. His eyes weren't as red and puffy as he was afraid they might be, so after a quick swipe at them and patting at his hair, he pulled his bag and himself out of the car.

He found Carole in the kitchen, pouring herself a cup of coffee,

stirring in a large helping of milk. She turned and gave Kurt a smile. "Can I get you some?" she asked.

"Please," Kurt responded, taking a seat at the table and sighing heavily.

"Are you still taking it black?" she asked, taking another mug from the cupboard and turning to her step-son, who nodded. She handed him the coffee and took a seat across from him.

"How's Aiden?" he asked.

"Haven't heard a peep from him," Carole told him. "He's still fast asleep."

Kurt smiled softly. "Well, he'll be up soon enough, won't he?" he said, and Carole chuckled.

"And how was your appointment, dear?" she asked gently. "Did she prescribe you something to help with your sleeping?"

Kurt put a hand to his forehead, rubbing his temples. "I didn't exactly give her the chance to. And I don't plan on ever giving her one."

"Oh." Carole reached out and took Kurt's hand in hers. "Counseling isn't for everybody, sweetheart. I know your father said it wasn't for him either, and I know I only reacted well to group therapy. That, and my mother moved in to help with Finn." She sighed, giving Kurt's hand a squeeze. "Everyone copes differently. It just takes time, and I know that's one of the most painful parts. Just don't forget that your father and Finn and I are all here to help you. And anytime you need to talk, I promise that we'll drop anything we're doing and just listen."

"Thank you," Kurt responded.

She smiled warmly at him, patting his hand before standing up, placing her now empty mug in the sink. Her phone beeped as she did so and she pulled it out of her pocket, frowning at the screen. She sighed exasperatedly. "I *told* them I couldn't come in today," she mumbled to herself.

"Emergency at the hospital?" Kurt asked.

She sighed again. "Nothing major," she assured him. "I can have this sorted out in a few phone calls, it won't take too long."

"No," Kurt told her. "Go on. I'll be fine for one day by myself. It's about time I did it anyway."

Carole looked at him worriedly. "Are you sure, dear?" she asked. "I can call Burt, have him send Finn home—"

"I'm sure," Kurt told her with a faint smile. "And if I change my mind, I'll call one of you. Maybe I'll even give Mercedes a call... Finn said she's been texting him almost every day, just to ask how I am."

Carole crossed the room, giving Kurt a quick hug. "If you're certain," she said. "And remember, if you're not ready, you don't have to see anyone else. You can just take a bath and put your feet up and watch a movie. We *always* have *The Sound of Music*. I'm sure Aiden's not tired of that just yet."

"Oh, I'm sure he'll beg to differ," Kurt said, earning a laugh from his step-mother.

"Well, take it easy, darling," she told him. "I'll be back as soon as I can, all right?"

He nodded, sitting at the table for quite some time after his step-mother left. Eventually he dragged himself up, putting his cup in the sink beside Carole's. Slowly he made his way upstairs and into his bedroom, aware that his son was still fast asleep in Finn's old bed. He glanced around the room, looking for something to do, for some sort of distraction. He let out a breath, making his way to the corner of his room where a few pieces of his clothing were falling out of the hamper. He tried not to think of how uncharacteristic that was for him, normally taking such good care of his clothing, clean or dirty. He simply picked them up, throwing them back into the hamper, thinking to himself that maybe he could work on some laundry and help Carole with a few of the chores.

As the thought crossed his mind, a scrap of paper fluttered from the pocket of one of his pairs of jeans. He tossed the pants into the contents



hamper before picking up the paper that had fallen on the floor and unfolding it. He stared at the words written on it.

"Daddy?"

Kurt turned to the doorway, smiling as the three-year-old boy come into the room.

"Hey there," he smiled, crouching down and letting his son wrap his tiny arms around his neck. "I'm glad you're awake. How do you feel about going on an adventure today?"

Chapter Three

“Are we there now, Daddy?” Aiden asked from the back seat, and Kurt glanced in the rear view mirror. “Is it this house?”

“I think so,” Kurt said with only an ounce of hesitance. He picked up the paper from his cup-holder, smoothing it out against the center part of the steering wheel. Then, he looked out the driver's side window at the line of townhouses he was parked outside of, double-checking the number of the address. “Ready?” he asked, turning to the back seat, and Aiden nodded at him excitedly.

Kurt took a deep breath, unbuckling his seatbelt and climbing out of the car. He quickly moved to the door behind his, taking his son out of the safety seat and holding him in his arm, resting him on his hip. He closed the door behind him, moving back to the front to take his bag and pull it over his other shoulder. Shutting the door, Kurt turned to the row of townhouses and took a deep breath.

“What kind of a'venture is this?” Aiden asked, twisting in Kurt's arms as the man pressed the button to ring the doorbell.

There was a pause as Kurt waited for the door to be answered. He turned to his son with an optimistic smile. “Hopefully a good one,” he said.

“Good,” Aiden responded, wrapping his arms more tightly around his father's neck. Kurt heard the footsteps coming down the hall, and suddenly his heart seemed to stop completely.

This is it, he told himself, repeating the words over and over in his mind. *This is it, this is it, this is it.*

He heard a pause, and he could imagine Blaine pressing his eye to the peephole, to catch a glimpse of the visitor.

He wondered if he looked different from the last time Blaine had seen him. He wondered if Blaine would even recognize him.

There was a sudden movement on the other side of the door and he heard the locks being slid open with a slightly frenzied speed. He

squeezed his eyes shut for a brief moment as though he was suddenly unable to face this, to face him. Maybe he was doing the wrong thing.

"Kurt."

Kurt allowed himself to open his eyes, a half-smile appearing on his lips. "Hi," he managed to respond, awkwardly.

"God, I'm so glad you stopped by—here." Blaine stepped back, ushering the taller man inside. "Come in, come in." Kurt did so, stepping into the hallway, noticing the washer and dryer on his left, and the closet on his right, a door at the end that led to what appeared to be a small study. "And who's this little guy?" Blaine asked, trying to get Aiden's attention, but the small boy only hid by nuzzling into Kurt's neck.

"This is Aiden," Kurt said. "Come on, A, say hi." The little boy peeked at Blaine shyly, curling his fingers and extending them in a sort of wave before hiding his face in Kurt's shoulder once more. Kurt sighed amusedly. "He's a little shy sometimes."

"It's all right," Blaine said with a grin. "Here, why don't you two come upstairs? I was just making lunch."

"Oh I—I didn't mean to interrupt anything," Kurt stammered. "I just... I can always come back later and—"

"No," Blaine quickly cut across him. "I want you here," he assured him. "I told Finn to tell you to stop by at any time and I meant that. I'm just so glad you actually did."

Kurt didn't say anything else, simply nodding at Blaine's words and allowing him to lead him through his study and up the stairs to the second level. Again Kurt allowed himself to glance around, from the neatly laid out dining room table, to the kitchen, where Blaine disappeared to to finish making lunch, complete with a breakfast nook. He then turned his attention to the other side of the house, which he vaguely registered was the living room. He did a double-take, quickly realizing that there was another person in the house. There was a small girl.

Tilting his head, Kurt slowly entered the living room. The girl
contents

didn't look up at him, even as he sat beside her on the couch, looking at the drawing she had made with crayons on a fold-up TV table that had been pulled right up in front of her.

"Who are you?"

Kurt jumped slightly when she addressed him, though she was still focused on her coloring, dropping the yellow crayon and picking up a pink one instead.

"Don't be rude, Ella," Blaine told her, and she looked up at him, pouting as he placed a plate with a sandwich and apple slices in front of her.

"I'm not!" she said quickly and defensively. "*You* didn't introduce him to me!"

"She's right," Kurt pointed out with a crooked smile. "I think that was very rude of *you*, Blaine."

Blaine rolled his eyes and stuck out his tongue, though he was grinning.

"Uh-uh! No faces, Uncle Blaine!" she said, attempting anger though she was giggling.

Kurt took this time to take in the girl's appearance, noticing just how much the tiny girl looked like Blaine. She had dark, curly hair and the same shiny, hazel eyes, though hers weren't currently hidden behind wire frames.

"I'm Kurt," he told her at last. She turned to him, grasping half of her sandwich and sighing heavily, which, admittedly, made him smile a little.

"I'm Ella and I'm five," she told him dutifully. "And I'm drawing Princess Aurora because Uncle Blaine and I watched *Sleeping Beauty* for our Disney princess movie this week."

Kurt licked his lips, unable to hold back a smile. "You watch a different Disney princess each week?" he asked, trying not to laugh. He glanced up at Blaine, who ducked his head.

"Oh yes," Ella told him. "It was Uncle Blaine's idea." She leaned in

a little closer to Kurt. "I think he likes them more than I do, sometimes."

"I think you're probably right," Kurt responded, grinning. "Which one's your favorite, if I can ask?"

Ella shifted thoughtfully, swinging her legs and screwing her face up in a slightly strained expression. "I like them all," she sighed. "I really like Ariel, though. She's next on our list. She sings really pretty and Uncle Blaine looks just like Prince Eric. And he promised me that next year I could be Ariel and he'd be my prince for Halloween." She paused, tilting her head to the side. "What's his name?" she asked, suddenly noticing Aiden's presence. "Does he wanna draw with me?"

"This is Aiden," Kurt told her, and he turned somewhat awkwardly to the little boy in his arms.

Ella crawled forward slightly. "Hi Aiden!" she said excitedly. "Do you wanna draw with me?"

Aiden turned his head, still leaning into Kurt's neck and clutching him tightly. He glanced at Ella with one eye before nodding against Kurt's shoulder. Kurt gently pulled Aiden away from him, setting him on the couch between him and Ella, the latter holding out a crayon in her hand.

"Here," she said, pushing the crayon towards him. "It's blue like your daddy's eyes. And here's a paper. Do you know about all the Disney Princes and Princesses? I can tell you about them."

Kurt smiled warmly at the two children before glancing up at Blaine, who quietly nodded his head back toward the kitchen. Gently patting Aiden's hair as the boy listened eagerly to Ella, Kurt pulled himself off the sofa and followed Blaine into the other room.

"She's precious," Kurt commented as Blaine pulled two mugs out of a cabinet and poured them each a cup of coffee from a pitcher. Kurt took a seat at the breakfast nook, and Blaine sighed, setting the coffee between them and taking a seat across from Kurt.

"She's a little fireball," he muttered.

"How long are you watching her for?" Kurt asked, the sweetness of the coffee taking him by surprise, having grown so used to drinking it without cream or sugar.

"Indefinitely."

Kurt's heart stopped, his mug of coffee still poised somewhere between the table and his lips. He licked his lips, setting his cup back down and tilting his head. "But, your brother—"

"Passed away," Blaine said solemnly.

Kurt swallowed hard. "Oh, god, I'm so sorry, I—"

Blaine sighed, waving his hand dismissively. "It's fine." He paused. "I mean, it *isn't* but..."

"I know," Kurt responded. "I'm sorry, I just... I didn't know." He looked down at his coffee for a moment. "Why didn't I know?"

Blaine sighed again, leaning back in his chair and running a hand through his hair. "Can I get you something to eat?" he asked, at which Kurt raised an eyebrow. "I'm not trying to change the subject," he assured him, leaning forward in his chair again. "I just... I guess it all takes a bit of explanation, and you can't pretend that you've been eating well over the last six weeks."

Kurt grimaced. "I've been eating," he mumbled.

"Mhmm," Blaine responded, giving him a knowing look. "And yesterday, what did you have, other than coffee?" Kurt grumbled something incoherent, and Blaine placed his hands on the table, pushing himself up. "Just what I thought. I'll make a salad. Nothing big, nothing fancy, just something so you're not running on coffee alone."

Kurt nodded absently as Blaine went to the refrigerator and took out lettuce and other fresh vegetables, chopping them slowly and placing them into a bowl.

"So... Ella?" he made himself ask at last, his voice soft and gentle, and Blaine nodded.

"Well, we started with the 'unofficial princesses'," he said, then

gave a small chuckle and tilted his head to the side. "Well, we skipped Esmerelda because she's definitely too young for that. But after the five we *did* see, we started going in order of the real ones, so that's Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora." He sighed. "I guess she came to live with me eight week ago? Almost nine."

"Right after your wedding," Kurt commented slowly, and Blaine gave him a crooked smile.

"*Would-be* wedding," he corrected.

"I should have been there," Kurt sighed, but Blaine shook his head.

"You were on business in L.A.," he said dismissively. "You had perfectly good reason not to come."

"I still should have," Kurt repeated, more insistently.

Blaine shook his head again. "It was a waste of time and money," he informed him, but Kurt gave him a wry smile.

"When have you known me to turn down a chance to dress fabulously?" he asked teasingly, and Blaine chuckled.

"Fair enough," he conceded. "It's probably better you weren't there, though. When he left, I felt like an idiot and I..." he trailed off slightly, pressing his hands to the counter and closing his eyes tightly. "I was a wreck."

"All the more reason I *should* have been there," Kurt argued.

Blaine merely shook his head. "It was just about two weeks after that I got the call about my brother," he continued somberly, not looking at Kurt as he chopped vegetables on the cutting board. "He and his wife were in a car wreck. They died instantly. That was when I found out I had been named Ella's legal guardian." He tossed everything into a bowl, sighing and wiping his hands clean. "I came here from Westerville so she wouldn't have to change schools. This house was up for rent, so I got it and got all of my things moved down." He grabbed two plates from a cabinet in one hand, the bowl of salad in the other and moved back to where he and Kurt had been

sitting before. "I'm lucky to have her," he said softly. "Between my romantic failure and my big brother's sudden death..." He stopped abruptly. "Ella?"

The tiny girl had appeared at the table beside them, looking at Kurt curiously. "I have a question for Kurt," she said. The two adults shared a quick look before turning their attention back to Ella. "Aiden said that he won't ever get to see his other daddy again. Is he the same place as my mommy and daddy?"

"Ella—"

"Yeah," Kurt said, his words cutting Blaine's off. "Yeah, he is."

"I'm sorry," she said, tilting her head slightly. "I hope it doesn't make you too sad all the time. I know sometimes I get really sad, and Uncle Blaine does too."

Kurt nodded, blinking rapidly and pressing his knuckles to his lips. He could hear Blaine suck in a breath from the other side of the table. Blaine leaned forward and put a hand on the five-year-old's back and she turned her attention to him.

"Sweetheart, will you take Aiden upstairs and show him your bedroom?" Blaine asked her softly.

"Am I in trouble?" she asked quickly. "I didn't mean to make Kurt cry!"

"I know," Blaine told her.

"Are you going to take care of him and make him feel better?" she inquired.

There was a moment of quiet as Kurt squeezed his eyes shut tightly. "Yeah," he heard Blaine's voice. "I am."

Kurt felt the tiny girl hug around his knees before running off, hearing her distant words as she addressed Aiden and took him up the stairs.

"I'm so sorry," Kurt breathed out after a moment. "I should have been there all of those times. I ignored everything that happened to you and everyone else over the past few years. And now I'm a

shattered mess but everyone still wants to sweep me up and put me back together. I just..."

"Everyone cares about you, Kurt," Blaine told him, taking his other hand in his. "It doesn't matter what's happened, we still care and we want to help you because right now, you need it."

Kurt left out a sad, terrible laugh. "I'm such a mess," he said.

"You have every right to be, right now," Blaine responded, giving Kurt's hand another gentle squeeze.

Kurt awoke, his legs and neck stiff, his cheek sticking slightly to the faux leather couch. His mind was sluggish and he slowly came to the realization that he had just awoken from one of the best periods of sleep he'd had in almost two months.

His eyes fluttered open slightly and he didn't immediately recognize his surroundings. His breath caught slightly and he fumbled to sit up.

"Aiden?" he called out, his voice cracking slightly.

Almost immediately there was a figure before him, taking his hands in one of his own, brushing his bangs out of his face with his other. "Hey, it's all right," Blaine told him quickly. "Aiden's taking a nap. He's upstairs in the guestroom. Do you want to see him?"

Kurt swallowed, slowly taking in Blaine's words, letting things slowly come back to him. He shook his head. "No, it's all right," he said at last. "Thank you." He looked down to where Blaine was stroking the back of his hands with his thumbs. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you or... or cause any worry." He smiled wanly at the man. "And I'm sorry I fell asleep. You could have woken me up."

"I didn't want to. I know you haven't been sleeping," Blaine sighed. "I couldn't sleep for weeks after..." He licked his lips and he trailed off.

"Thank you," Kurt responded, nodding vaguely.

"Can you get back to sleep?" Blaine asked him, and Kurt shrugged. "Why don't you try? I can text Finn, tell him where you are..."

Kurt nodded. "That would be great," he said, smiling warily. "Thank you."

Blaine grinned, patting Kurt's knee and standing up. "Any time," he said. "Really."

And Kurt nodded again, leaning back against the arm of the sofa, taking a deep breath and closing his eyes, realizing that he actually believed him.

Chapter Four

"I don't get why you don't want to tell them..." Finn said slowly. He was sitting on a barstool, looking at Kurt curiously as the slender young man pulled out pots and pans that seemed to have never been used. Kurt sighed, crossing his step-brother's small kitchen to the counter where Finn sat across from him.

"I don't feel comfortable about it," he responded simply.

"Why not?" Finn asked, but Kurt merely shook his head as he hustled around the kitchen.

"Why are you interrogating me?" Kurt inquired in turn, dropping a pot filled with water on the stove. "I could do the same to you. I could remind you that you've been engaged to Rachel for *years*. So ready to marry her in high school, but after enlisting, you suddenly can't. I could ask you if it's going to take her getting pregnant for you to finally actually *marry* her."

"Dude," Finn sighed, running his hand through his hair. "I talked to you about that. You said you understood..."

"Well, I don't anymore, Finn!" Kurt snapped, slamming down another pot with a harsh clang. "You could *have* the person you love!"

Silence rang through the apartment, except for the television that Aiden was watching. Even the three-year-old glanced hesitantly at the two adults.

"You have Blaine," Finn said at last, his voice painfully quiet. Kurt laughed bitterly, pointing a spoon at him.

"The *exact* reason I want Mom and Dad to think I was just... running errands and came here after," he said.

"But you do love him," Finn protested.

"I care about him," Kurt said in an even voice, stirring the pasta sauce as the noodles boiled. "I care about him the same way I care about Mom and Dad and you and Aiden. That's it." He let out a breath and licked his lips. "I *loved* Alex. And seeing an ex-boyfriend doesn't

mean that I've forgotten that." He paused, looking at Finn with a hurt expression. "Why didn't you tell me about his brother?"

"It happened right before Alex," Finn said, frowning. "I feel like an idiot admitting it, but I kept forgetting to say something the two or three times we talked before Mom and Dad got the call from you."

Kurt turned his attention back to the stove, nodding vaguely. "I felt like an idiot when I got there," he mumbled. "He got custody of his niece, you know."

"Damn, that's got to be rough for him," Finn breathed out, and Kurt nodded.

"He said she's helped him through it all, just by being there," he responded. "Kind of like Aiden has for me."

There was silence for a moment before Finn took a deep breath. "This is probably a terrible time to ask, but if something happened to you, am I the one who—"

"Yes."

Finn nodded. "Well, you will be the one to take care of mine and Rachel's kids," he offered.

Kurt shook his head, smiling. "Please don't tell me she actually *is* pregnant," he teased.

"Well, not that she's told me," Finn said, frowning his brow. "And it's been kind of a while since we've... *you know*—"

"Don't want to hear it!" Kurt said. "There is a *child present*, Finn Hudson."

"All right!" he said. "And I'll do it, by the way. Cover for you, I mean. But you owe me one."

Kurt raised his eyebrows. "I never told my father that you and your friends used to throw pee balloons at me," he said. "I don't care how old he is, he'll kick your ass."

"Daddy said a bad word!" came a cry from the living room, and Kurt squeezed his eyes shut and let out a sigh.

"No I didn't," he said as the tiny boy came running into the kitchen, wrapping his arms around his father's legs.

"Did too!" he insisted.

"Well, don't think that means it's okay for you to do it," Kurt pressed on.

"But then why can you do it?" Aiden asked, tilting his head and looking up at his father.

"Yeah, Kurt, why can you do it?" Finn asked, smirking, and Kurt glared at him.

"Go wash up, all right? Dinner's almost ready," he said, directing his attention back to the little boy at his feet. Aiden nodded and ran off again.

"By the way, I'm supposed to extend an invitation to you," Finn said, sliding off the stool and slipping into the kitchen to grab some plates and silverware.

"Oh?" Kurt asked warily.

"I know it's still a while off," he went on, setting the table, "but Puck's throwing a party between Christmas and New Years. All of the old New Directions are coming."

Kurt shifted and sighed. "I don't know."

"It's still over a month away," Finn reminded him. "But he did it the last year, and he said he wants to do it again."

"I'm not sure if I want to be around ten or twenty people, *plus* significant others, at one time," Kurt said.

"Well," Finn said, "look at it this way. You can knock out seeing them all at once, instead of meeting up with them separately, a few hours each." Kurt hummed in a noncommittal way. "Come *on*, it's *fun*. Last year Brittany got drunk and kept saying how she couldn't believe that Mike and Tina's baby was Asian like them, and even Artie and Quinn—"

"I'll think about it," Kurt sighed. "It's just.. it's a lot, you know?"

Finn nodded. "You took a big step by going out to see Blaine today," he said. "I'm really glad you did, bro. I think you needed it. When are you going to see him again?"

Kurt shifted uncomfortably. "I... I don't know," he admitted. "It was great to see him, but..."

"But what?" Finn asked. "You two have even more in common now. You both have kids, and you're both dealing with a lot, I'm sure he understands."

"Look," Kurt said, "I know you're trying to help Finn, but you're honestly making it worse and—and more confusing." He sighed frustratedly. "And besides that, you keep *saying* you're not trying to get me back with him, but—"

"Sorry," Finn said quickly. "I... I get what you mean."

Kurt nodded. "I did think I'd call Rachel tomorrow, though," he said hesitantly. "I think I owe her that."

"She'll be really excited," Finn told him, and he smiled weakly. At that precise moment, Aiden came toddling back into the room, and Kurt forced a bigger grin onto his face.

"All right, boys," he said, "who's hungry?"

Kurt stared at his cellphone in his hand, sighing deeply. Rachel's number was on his screen, bright white digits staring at him. He shifted his seat on his bed. It wasn't hard, really, he could just hit 'send' and talk to her. It was easy. Yet he'd been staring at the number for fifteen minutes.

He sighed exasperatedly, pressing the green call button and placing his phone up to his ear without another thought, listening to the ringing. For a brief moment, he didn't think she'd answer. He thought that maybe she was having dinner or taking a bath or had just decided to call it a night and go to bed early. He considered that

maybe he let himself get worked up for nothing, when he heard the ringing cut off and an intake of breath on the other line.

"Kurt."

Kurt licked his lips and closed his eyes for a few brief seconds.

"Kurt, are you there?"

"Yeah," he said, finding his voice at last. "Sorry about that. I'm here."

He heard Rachel let out a sigh of relief. *"I'm so glad you called,"* she said. *"I knew you'd want space but—oh, Kurt, not talking to you has been torture. How are you holding up?"*

"All right," he told her. "As well as can be expected."

"I miss you," she said. *"I miss you so much. New York isn't the same without you."*

Kurt smiled, allowing himself to let out a small laugh. "Thanks," he responded, and they settled into a small, comfortable silence.

"I don't suppose you want to talk," she said, and he smiled wryly. *"About it—what happened, I mean."*

"Not really," Kurt conceded. He paused slightly. "Honestly, I was hoping that this would be one of those conversations where you'd do all the talking."

Rachel laughed into the receiver. *"Are you actually inviting me to tell you about everything that's happened since you left?"* she asked. *"That's what you want to hear?"*

"Don't pretend that you're not itching to tell me every juicy detail about the show," he said teasingly. "I know how you are, Miss Rachel Berry. Tell me *everything*."

"Ohhh," Rachel sighed excitedly into the phone. *"You'll regret saying that in a few hours when I still haven't finished explaining the first two weeks..."*

Kurt smiled as Rachel began babbling incessantly about the show and what had happened after Kurt dropped out, expressing her

disdain for the majority of the cast (though he could still hear the fondness she had for them in her voice). And for most of the admittedly one-sided conversation, Kurt felt that maybe he really was making progress, that soon things would be better, even if they still weren't quite good. It wasn't until she made what he knew was supposed to be a supportive, passing comment about *when he returned to New York and the theatre and Broadway* that his heart stopped.

Kurt brushed his bangs out of his face, unable to focus on the words the woman on the other end of the line was saying. It was something that he had decided at the beginning of the entire ordeal, but the reality struck him at that moment that he hadn't told a single soul.

How was he supposed to tell Rachel that he never planned on returning to New York? That he'd let go of his dream—*their* dream? How could he explain that things had changed? That he had changed?

His took his bottom lip between his teeth and closed his eyes tightly.

Maybe things weren't getting better. Maybe he was just getting better at faking it.

Chapter Five

December arrived quickly, and with it came icy cold, bitter winds, and quite a bit of snow. With each morning that came and went, Kurt tried to tell himself that things were getting better, that he was healing, that today maybe it wouldn't hurt so much. But by the end of each night, he'd find himself climbing into bed and wishing that he'd wake up to find it was all a terrible, terrible dream.

Sometimes he hoped he'd wake up and he'd just forget. Because then maybe he wouldn't be in so much pain.

That day he had gone to visit Blaine, he had given the young man his phone number. Occasionally, he'd receive a phone call or text from him. The calls he would ignore, just like all the others, letting them go straight to voicemail, watching as the bubble that indicated the number of messages increased by one. The number was over forty now, messages from his family, from his dad and Carole and Finn, as well as from the few Broadway connections he'd made, and his high school friends. Mercedes had called him countless times, as had Tina and Santana and Brittany, and even Puck and Sam. But he ignored them all.

Part of him was afraid of the actual talking. Afraid that they'd be able to hear the sadness in his words, or perhaps that his voice would break. He was afraid that they'd ask him questions he couldn't answer, or didn't want to answer. Eventually, it had just become routine to ignore them all.

Logically, he knew that he should at least listen to the messages, but the idea of accessing his voicemail wasn't one he could fathom. He knew that if he lost count, he'd accidentally reach the old messages that Alex had left him, telling him he loved him and he'd see him for dinner that night and he couldn't wait. Kurt just couldn't handle that.

So he left the messages unlistened to.

He had to give Blaine credit for catching on. After a week of contents

unanswered, unreturned calls, he texted Kurt. Asked him to see him.

Kurt responded with a simple, *'I'm sorry, I can't.'*

Blaine didn't ask any questions. He just said, *'I understand.'* Then, *'Whenever you're ready.'*

Kurt almost wanted to hate him for being so understanding. But every time he had that thought, he took a deep breath and reminded himself that, honestly, he was thankful. He was just angry at everything else.

Somehow, Finn had convinced Kurt to attend Puck's holiday party. He figured the breaking point was on Christmas morning, as Aiden was excitedly tearing wrapping paper off of presents, and Finn brought it up once again. Only, that time, he had done it in front of Burt and Carole.

"I think it'll be good for you, kid," Burt had said, leaning back in his chair. "Carole and I will watch Aiden for ya."

Kurt sighed, glancing down at his empty cup of coffee before pushing himself off the couch and walking into the kitchen to get more.

"If you don't mind my asking, sweetheart," Carole said gently, appearing at his side, "why is it exactly that you don't want to go?"

Kurt shrugged. "It's a lot of people," he told her quietly. "That's a lot of acting like I'm okay, and if I slip up, a lot of hugs and comforting and people telling me that it *is* okay. It's a lot of people who honestly could never understand what it's like. And I don't blame them for it, I'm glad they don't have to feel this way, but..." He trailed off, sighing heavily. "I don't know if I'm ready to handle all that. I know I've taken time to heal, but—"

"It takes some people longer than others," Carole told him. "Just because some get over loss more quickly doesn't mean a thing about how long it will take you. You take your time."

"But?" Kurt asked her, smiling crookedly.

"You won't truly know how far you've come unless you go out

there and try," she said to him. "Maybe you've made more progress than you think."

"And if I haven't?"

"Then you call me and I'll come pick you up," she said. "You can give it a shot, find out you don't like it or aren't ready, and then I'll come and get you. Or, you might find out that it's not as bad as you're making it out to be."

Kurt nodded. "You'll keep that promise?" he asked her. "If I want to come home?"

"Of course," she assured him, smiling.

He sighed. "Then I suppose I don't have much of a choice. I'll do it."

Just a few days later, Kurt found himself sitting in the passenger seat of Finn's truck, listening to the latter go on about everything to expect and what topics to avoid. Kurt tried fighting the sensation that he was going to a party with an entirely new group of people he'd never met in his life, not the friends he had spent years growing up with. He half-felt that he'd gone a lifetime without seeing them, not a handful of months.

"You definitely don't want to ask Quinn about the divorce," Finn told him. "Artie said that last week, Lauren just mentioned it and then Quinn flipped. And Tina will definitely force you to feel the baby kick. She's like... eight months along now? Dude, I'm telling you, she's *huge*. Oh, and since Sam moved to Columbus last month, he's coming. He actually promised to pick up Rachel from the airport, since he lives so much closer." Finn finally paused to take a breath, glancing at Kurt. "Hey, you okay bro? I mean, if you're not really sure about this..."

Kurt shrugged. "You're the one who wanted me to come so badly," he reminded him. "And I'll take your mother up on her offer if it gets too unbearable."

Finn nodded quickly. "Good. I'm really, *really* glad you're coming, dude. Everyone's been dying to see you." He paused. "Uh, yeah, sorry,

bad choice of words..."

Kurt rolled his eyes, staring out the window as Finn slowed down considerably, before finally pulling to a stop.

"Well, this is Puck's new place," he said, shutting off the ignition and jamming his keys into his pocket. He opened his door and climbed out, Kurt doing the same, a large tin of homemade cookies in his hands. He stared up at the surprisingly large house, hearing the door to the truck slam again. Finn appeared beside him a moment later, one hand on the handle of a case of beer, placing his other hand on his step-brother's shoulder. "Ready?" he asked, and Kurt nodded. He patted the man's shoulder and led the way to the front porch, pressing the doorbell the moment they got there.

The door opened seconds later to reveal Puck, sporting a shaved head, but otherwise looking nearly identical as the boy he had known in high school. He gave his usual crooked smile. "Hudson. Hummel. Cookies and beer? Good choice, men." He stepped back to allow them inside. "All that can go in the kitchen. Show him, Finn?"

Finn nodded, walking in the direction of the kitchen, Kurt following him closely. The counter was already covered with food, as was the small kitchen table, and through the archway Kurt could see that the dining room table had been made into a sort of bar. Finn walked through the kitchen to the other table, setting his case of beer down before picking up a few different bottles of liquor, looking at the labels.

Kurt set down his cookies, just a second before he heard a squeal of, "Kurt!" He turned to the doorway, and Tina was enveloping him in a hug not even a moment later. He grinned, laughing slightly as he awkwardly hugged the very pregnant woman back. "It's so good to see you," she sighed, squeezing him tightly. "I was scared you weren't going to come."

"Wouldn't miss it," he responded with a crooked smile, as she finally released him.

"Would you like to feel the baby kick?" she asked quickly, taking

his hand in hers and placing it on her stomach. "Mike and I are expecting a girl this time around. I'm so glad she'll have her big brother to look after her one day." She smiled fondly at Kurt. "Come on," she continued suddenly, removing his hand from her belly and interlacing their fingers. "Everyone will be so glad to see you!"

At that he was being pulled into the living room. Immediately he was being introduced to some girl that Artie had been seeing for a couple weeks, and Brittany was throwing her arms around him to tell him how much she had missed her favorite unicorn, and then he heard the door opening and Rachel was running toward him to kiss him on the cheek. His head was spinning as everyone was telling him stories and asking him questions and he needed a breath.

He excused himself to use the restroom, patting cool water on his face and breathing deeply, placing a hand on either side of the sink to steady himself.

They were his friends, he reminded himself. He was so glad to see them, they were thrilled to see him. Still, he couldn't help but feel a little overwhelmed by it all. He licked his lips, and glanced up at his reflection for a moment before pushing himself up. He pulled his phone out of his pocket. Forty-six voicemails and four months. He'd kept in relatively good contact with everyone up until that point. How the hell could so much happen in that period of time?

He sighed, stuffing his phone back into his pocket and straightening himself. He opened the door, and gasped slightly when he realized that someone was right out the bathroom.

"Here," Finn said, pushing the glass into his hand. "I figured you might need this." Kurt raised his eyebrows. "Puck made it, I didn't. So no need to worry."

Kurt smiled slightly, pressing the glass to his lips, shuddering slightly at the strong taste of alcohol. He wrinkled his nose, but kept drinking.

"It's starting to snow," Finn told him. "Tina and Mike just headed out, so they didn't get stuck here."

"Are we going to get stuck here?" Kurt asked, the slight concern evident in his voice.

"Nah, dude," Finn assured him. "I mean, I know it's Ohio, but it isn't even January. You know we don't get the bad storms like that for another few weeks."

Kurt nodded warily.

"Blaine just showed up," Finn told him, and with that Kurt drained the rest of his glass, pushing it back toward his step-brother and walked back into the living room.

With what Lauren deemed 'the responsible couple' gone, suddenly the others were drinking more heavily. Within no time, Kurt noticed Artie and whatever-her-name-was kissing heatedly in the corner, and Rachel and Finn were doing the same. A few of the others had settled themselves on the couches and chairs and floor and were reminiscing about their high school days, Quinn with a cigarette between her lips, Lauren lighting up one of her own, all of them smiling and laughing.

Kurt liked this better. There was less attention directly on him as they sat in their misshapen circle, talking about what none of them really deemed 'the good old days', yet it seemed the only way to refer to it.

Puck, who seemed to have gotten ridiculously drunk in a short period of time, suddenly leaned forward, wrapping his arm around Kurt's shoulders. The latter raised his eyebrows at the man, laughing slightly.

"Dude," Puck said. "It's gotta be said. I am *so* fucking sorry about everything."

Kurt rolled his eyes. "You were young and stupid, I get it," he said, waving his hand.

"No, not that," Puck said, grasping Kurt's shirt, so that the other boy had to look at his face. "I mean, yeah that, but that isn't what I mean." He paused. "*Alex*. That shit is *so* fucking messed up."

Kurt's breath caught slightly, and suddenly Brittany was leaning toward him, too. "He's right," she said, sounding on the verge of tears. "It isn't fair! Of everyone, you're the one it *never* should have happened to." Without another moment, Santana was taking the blond in her arms, comforting her. Even Lauren, whom he'd never been particularly close to, was putting a hand comfortingly on Kurt's shoulder.

It was too much. He pushed himself up off of the couch and rushed out of the room, out of the front door. He took a shuddering breath, grasping onto the porch railing.

"Kurt?"

He whipped around, breathing heavily, staring at the dark-haired man before him. Kurt squeezed his eyes shut, licking his lips, and shaking his head.

"I want to go," he breathed out. "Carole said she'd come and get me but Finn said it wasn't snowing this hard, and... god, I just *want to leave*."

"Come to my house," Blaine offered softly. "They're all talking about staying the night at this point, anyway. And this way, you don't have to have Carole driving in this weather."

"We had too many drinks to be driving," Kurt said shakily, and Blaine merely smiled.

"I'm less than a mile away," he said. "At worst, it'll be a fifteen minute walk, if you don't mind that." Kurt stared at him uneasily. "I can go in and tell Finn for you, if you want."

He sighed, nodding. He was really desperate to get away, and would take any opportunity he could get.

A few minutes later, Blaine held out Kurt's coat to him, pulling up the hood on his own jacket. He paused slightly, and Kurt noticed his hand twitch, as though he were about to grab Kurt's hand before thinking better of it.

"Come on," Blaine said softly, instead. "Let's get going before it

gets any worse."

Chapter Six

Kurt felt his bangs being brushed out of his eyes. He smiled groggily, leaning into the touch.

For a split second, he remembered, and he wanted more than anything for his bed to swallow him whole. He moved away from the hand touching him, into the pillows, and the scent filled his nostrils, stopping his heart.

The spicy smell of cologne. Cinnamon. Freshly cut grass.

Alex. It smelled like Alex.

He turned slightly, almost afraid to open his eyes, but he cracked them open ever-so-slightly. The hand returned to his face, gently stroking his cheek, the man grinning fondly down at him. Alex raised an eyebrow, laughing softly at the expression of confusion on Kurt's face. He leaned down, running his thumb along Kurt's cheek bone, pressing a kiss to the top of his forehead.

He pulled back, looking at Kurt now with more concern than amusement. He tilted his head, frowning slightly. Kurt pushed himself up on one arm, staring at Alex uncertainly. Hesitantly, he reached out. He ran his hand up Alex's arm, resting for a brief moment at the curve where his shoulder met his neck. He could feel his warm skin, feel his locks of black hair, soft between his fingers.

He was there. Alex was there.

Kurt continued to move his hand up ever so slightly, cupping Alex's cheek. He could feel the slight roughness of stubble beneath his palm. He needed to shave, but god, Kurt didn't care. He pulled Alex's face closer to his, placing his other hand on the other side of his face. With only the slightest pause, Kurt closed the space between them and let their lips meet.

Alex's lips tasted like caramel, the slight bite of cinnamon gum once he pulled away.

He didn't open his eyes, but simply let the feelings wash over

him. He laughed slightly, though he could feel the tears running down his cheeks. Alex quickly kissed them away.

"I missed you so much," Kurt breathed out, his voice cracking slightly. He opened his eyes, furrowing his brow when he noticed that Alex was moving his lips in response, but he didn't hear a sound.

Kurt leaned closer to Alex, but still nothing. The floating feeling that had filled him was quickly disappearing. And then, it struck him how wrong it all was.

Kurt's mind was suddenly jarred awake, his head pounding.

A dream. It had only been a dream, he told himself, and he felt his breath catch slightly, the awareness sinking in that it had been a fine dream, a wonderful dream, even. Yet it was that that seemed to make it hurt so much worse.

He buried his face in his pillow, trying to will away his headache, taking in a deep breath through the pillowcase. Only then he realized that he recognized the smell; it wasn't the same scent of lavender he'd grown used to during his stay in the Hudson-Hummel household, as that was the detergent that he knew Carole always bought because she was so fond of. Instead, it smelled faintly of fabric softener, with the smallest hint of coffee and chocolate.

Blaine.

He rolled over, glancing at the young man in bed beside him. He took a deep, shuddering breath and closed his eyes.

He could remember the party. He remembered Blaine offering him a place to stay, and hesitantly accepting. He remembered Blaine giving him an extra t-shirt and pair of sweatpants to sleep in.

"Take the bed," he had told Kurt. "I can sleep on the couch, or in Ella's room."

Kurt frowned at him. "I'm not taking your bed." Blaine raised his eyebrows at him, and Kurt sighed. "Fine, we can share your bed."

Blaine licked his lips, taking a long pause. "Are you... sure about

that? I mean..."

Kurt waved his hand dismissively. "Obviously you won't let me sleep anywhere else, and I refuse to take your bed from you..." he sighed again, then shrugged. "It'll be like after Rachel's stupid party in high school. Honestly, it's not a big deal."

Biting his lip slightly and opening his eyes, Kurt pulled off the blankets, doing his best not to disturb the other man. However, Blaine didn't stir, and Kurt quickly made his way out of the bedroom and down the stairs, into the kitchen. He instantly began working on a pot of coffee, not leaving the room as he heard the machine working. Instead, he stared out the window at the snow, numbly replaying his dream again and again in his head.

At last he helped himself to a cup of the coffee, still thinking of his dream. He wondered what Alex was trying to say. He tried to imagine it.

He frowned slightly, glaring out the window, and tried a little harder to imagine. But while the words were coming easily to him, it was as if they were manifesting themselves in black text on white paper, neatly typed out for him to read. He stared intently at the tree in front of the building across the street, forcing his mind to work harder at fixing the scenario from his dream.

But with each passing moment, Kurt was beginning to come to a realization. He felt the prickling behind his eyes indicating oncoming tears.

"Kurt?" Blaine's voice was hesitant, and Kurt couldn't bring himself to look at the other man. Instead, he stared into his coffee cup, swallowing hard, trying to regain power over his voice, trying not to choke on his tears. "Hey," Blaine continued softly, placing a hesitant hand on Kurt's shoulder. "Talk to me."

"I can't remember his voice," he breathed out at last, turning to Blaine. He looked at Kurt sadly, taking the coffee from the latter's hands and placing it on the counter beside him. He gently pulled Kurt into his arms. Kurt shook slightly as he spoke again. "It's only been

four months and I just... I can't remember his *voice*."

Blaine pulled back slightly to wipe away Kurt's tears with his thumb. Kurt glanced at the other man's face, and could see the pain and concern in his eyes.

It felt like Kurt's brain had stopped working. It felt like he wasn't him anymore, like he was watching himself or like he was just completely and utterly removed. Nothing made sense and it was just too much. It was all *too much*. All he could see was Blaine's hazel eyes, and though it was different, though it wasn't quite what he was looking for, he remembered *something*. Something that seemed so much further away, and yet, there it was...

Kurt leaned in, kissing Blaine softly. He felt Blaine pause for a moment before returning the kiss, his lips soft and gentle and so *different* from what he'd grown accustomed to with Alex. But this *wasn't* Alex. This was Blaine, the man who was too good with him and too patient and too forgiving, who tasted like coffee and vanilla mint.

Kurt pulled away slightly as he became more aware of what exactly was happening, though he immediately missed the feel of Blaine's lips on his. He moved forward again, desperately, just wanting to feel something, anything.

"Kurt, stop," Blaine told him, hardly audible, and for a moment, Kurt didn't actually think that Blaine had said it. But his eyes fluttered open, and there was the other man, shaking his head slightly, his eyes looking even more pain-filled than they had before. "Not now," Blaine pressed on, and Kurt only continued to stare at him, a little blankly. Blaine sighed heavily. "I would be lying if I said I didn't want to. I do, so badly, but... not now. Not like this."

Kurt pulled away completely from him, feeling the heat in his cheeks rise. He felt stupid, felt embarrassed, felt ashamed. He squeezed his eyes shut, not wanting to even look at Blaine. "I should go," he breathed out.

"Kurt..." Blaine tried desperately, but Kurt shook his head.

"No," he said, looking at him at last. "I know. You're so right. I'm sorry, I don't know what came over me." Blaine reached out to him tentatively, but Kurt avoided the touch, walking past the other man. "I'm sorry, Blaine."

"You don't have to go," he told Kurt in a small voice, but again the man shook his head.

"I do," he said, taking in a deep breath. "I've been sitting back for too long. I've taken enough time and... well, I need to get my life back in order."

Blaine nodded slowly, looking at Kurt with a sort of resignation. "So what does that mean?"

Kurt shrugged slightly. "I don't know," he admitted. "I just have to do whatever it takes." He forced a smile. "Thank you for everything, and again, I'm sorry. Maybe when I've sorted things out, I'll... maybe then I'll be able to see you again."

He turned to leave, ignoring the "*Kurt, wait—*" from Blaine. Instead, he grabbed his things and made his way out of the house as quickly as possible, desperate for everything to change.

Chapter Seven

“Sleep tight,” Kurt whispered, pressing a kiss to Aiden's forehead. The toddler was drifting off to sleep, tiny fingers clutching his blankets. With one last smile at his little boy, Kurt left the room, making his way down the hall into his own bedroom.

He took a deep breath, settling himself on his bed and pulling out his cellphone.

Step one, he told himself.

He tapped on the symbol for his voicemail, listening to the short ring before the automated voice came on, asking for his password and for him to press pound. He quickly obeyed, tapping in the four digits before hitting the pound key. The automated voice then told him he had forty-six new voice messages, and they started to play.

The first fifteen messages were from his father, Carole, and Finn, and Rachel. Just short messages, asking him to call, wanting to make sure he was okay. After that, the callers varied. The next few were from Mercedes, from Tina, Mike, Brittany, Santana, Puck, Artie, Sam... and then Blaine. They were all roughly the same, offering apologies and sending their wishes and just wanting to make sure that he was coping in some way. It took at least twenty minutes for Kurt to make his way through them all, occasionally jotting down phone numbers that his friends gave him, for their new work or their new home or their new cell. But this, to him, was making progress, no matter how small.

Finally, the voice came onto the line again. *"End of new messages. You have—three—saved voice messages. To listen to your saved messages, press one. To hear more options, press zero."*

Kurt licked his lips, feeling his heart pound a little more quickly. Without a second thought, he pressed the number one.

"Hey there," came the voice and that was *it*. *That* was the voice Kurt had been struggling to remember and he laughed a little bit,

feeling tears rolling down his cheek. He knew the message by heart, from the time his little family had gone to Florida on vacation, and then Alex had needed to catch a different flight for business. He could remember it so clearly, remember Aiden's tears and remember assuring his son that it was just a short trip. It didn't seem like it had been so long ago at all.

"I know you're already on the plane back home so you're phone's off, but I just wanted to say how much I miss you and A already. Have a safe trip, and I can't wait to see you at home. Give him my love, of course, and make sure you tell him again that Dada's coming back as soon as possible. Love you, Kurt. Bye."

There was a pause in the message before the woman's voice came on again, requesting him to save or delete. He quickly saved the message before ending the call.

"It is so good to see you again, Kurt," Mercedes sighed, sitting across from him at what had once been their 'usual' booth at Breadstix. "It feels like it's been forever."

"It has," Kurt reasoned with a smile.

"I missed my best friend so much," she went on, and Kurt raised an eyebrow.

"You still call me your best friend?" he asked, his voice half-teasing, half-incredulous. "After all that stupidity we pulled in high school and after?"

Mercedes sighed. "I was worse than you," she said, a little bitterly. "Lord, *what* I was thinking..."

Kurt shrugged. "You'd had enough of being treated like you're second best," he told her. "Believe me when I say that I completely understand."

"And yet *you* didn't go off, acting like a complete fool like I did,"

she responded, and he laughed. "Seriously, boy, the fact that you're still willing to see me... Hell, the fact that *any* of you all are..."

"New Directions has always been a forgiving group," Kurt reminded her. "You wanted to come back in senior year, so we let you. You want to come back now... well, they're taking *me* back. Everyone's had so much patience with me in the last few months, I can't even begin to fathom it."

Mercedes grinned. "We all know how you work," she said. "I think everyone would have been more surprised if you came looking for help or something of the sort."

Kurt chuckled softly. "True enough," he admitted.

"Besides, you were completely in line," she went on. "I didn't realize just how out of line I was until my big-time L.A. record label *and* my stupid, cheating semi-pro football boyfriend from Palm Springs both dumped my ass." She sighed. "I just never thought I'd be *that* girl. I always thought I could keep my head on straight."

They fell quiet for a few moments, idly munching on the complementary breadsticks until Mercedes sighed heavily. Kurt looked up at her, tilting his head slightly.

"I want to make things right with you, Kurt," she told him suddenly. "I want to right the wrongs from high school." She shifted a little uncomfortably. "I didn't want to tell anyone else this, not until I told you." She took a deep breath. "I'm moving back to Ohio. I'm going to be moving in with Sam."

Kurt raised his eyebrows. "Sam, huh?" he asked with a grin.

Mercedes smiled slightly. "It was stupid to never tell you about it in high school," she said. "And then when I saw him at the Christmas party... I don't know, I got there so late, and everyone else was drunk, and you and Tina were already gone... he and I talked. And it probably sounds stupid, but honestly? After all the stupid choices I've made in the past ten years, I feel like this is my first really smart one."

"I'm happy for you," Kurt assured her, taking her hand in his. "If he makes you happy, then that's all that matters." Mercedes smiled

and he chuckled slightly. "God, I feel like this really *is* just high school all over again..."

Mercedes raised an eyebrow. "How so?" she asked. "Please don't tell me that there's another Rachel and Finn love triangle, I might just have to kidnap the third party to save us from the drama."

Kurt laughed. "No," he assured her. He sighed, resting his head in his hands. "I... Actually, I kissed Blaine."

He heard as Mercedes took in a slow, deep breath. "Well... damn," she muttered, looking at him slightly taken aback.

"It was stupid," he mumbled. "It was just... a lapse in judgment."

"How was it?" Mercedes asked, and he raised his eyebrows. She rolled her eyes a little and waved her hand. "I don't mean like *that*," she clarified. "Just... any thoughts or feelings?"

Kurt ran a hand through his hair, smiling and thanking their waitress as she brought their food to their table at last. The moment the other woman walked away, he sighed. "I don't know," he said. "I just... I don't know." He poked at his pasta with his fork. "Honestly, it doesn't even matter if there *were* any feelings it brought up. My husband died and it's about time I stopped playing the victim about it all." He shut his eyes. "I can't bring him back," he continued softly. "And believe me, I wish I could. But what I had with Alex isn't my life anymore. I need to start making a new life."

"And what will that be?" Mercedes asked gently.

"I'm staying in Lima," he told her. "Once things are stable, I'm going to start looking for a house where I can raise Aiden." He sighed. "In the meantime, I need to find a job, I need to enroll Aiden in preschool... I need to find a professional I can talk to who doesn't make me feel like I'm going crazy. I need to completely rebuild, get back everything I had in New York."

Mercedes nodded. "Sounds like you have it worked out," she commented.

"A bit," he admitted. He licked his lips and paused. "I did find an

ad in the paper, I was thinking about sending them my resumé."

"That's great," she smiled. "What is it?"

He hesitated slightly before pulling out the want ads from his bag, laying it on the table, one of the sections of print outlined in green highlighter. Admittedly, he had been carrying it around for some time, whipping it out at odd moments and taking it all into consideration. It was different, it wasn't Broadway, but he knew he could do it.

"A fashion columnist?" she asked with a grin.

He nodded. "It's an online periodical," he said. "I would mostly be working from home, so I can still be there for Aiden whenever he needs it. But they have a small office building, so I wouldn't be stuck at the house, either."

Mercedes nodded. "You know, you don't have to give up on your dreams," she told him gently.

He shook his head. "I knew I had to do this from the moment I quit the show back in August," he admitted. "It's just... it's not my dream anymore."

"Well, everyone will support you no matter what you decide," Mercedes assured him. "Personally, I can't think of anything else better for you."

Kurt smiled in appreciation. "And what about you and your big L.A. dreams?" he asked. "No record labels in Lima to sign you."

Mercedes chuckled slightly. "I figure I need a break from all that," she said. "Sam and Artie know the ins and outs of recording technology anyway, I figure I can work on a few new songs and send them out. Maybe I'll get a new deal, and maybe they won't back out on me this time."

"I don't think this is where either of us thought we'd be ten years after high school," Kurt told her softly, and she laughed.

"Maybe not," she said. "A lot has changed. Hell, even *Breadstix* has changed." She gestured around the restaurant. "But not



everything has. Our friends from high school? Still the best, yet most dysfunctional, family in the world. And these tots?" She picked one up from her plate, and Kurt couldn't suppress a grin. "Still the best damn things I have eaten in my life."

Chapter Eight

As Kurt stared at the building before him, the one that, in a way, represented a sort of hell from his youth, he started having second thoughts. It was a ridiculous idea, really. He had no idea why he had even considered it.

But then again, if it worked, maybe this was just another step in the right direction for him. He took a deep breath, pocketing his car keys and making his way into his old high school.

Overall, he had to admit it looked fairly the same. A bit cleaner, he had to admit, and he could see that most of the lockers and desks and chairs had all been replaced with upgraded, better versions, as well as each room's technology. He had to admit that, at least from an aesthetic standpoint, there seemed to have been a lot of improvements made. He was walking toward the athletic wing when a plaque near the front office caught his attention and made him stop.

Eying the name on the plate, he tilted his head slightly, before entering the office and stepping toward the young woman behind the desk. She looked up as Kurt approached.

"Hi," he said a little breathlessly. "I'm... I'm here to talk to... the principal?"

"Name?" the woman asked him dutifully, but just as Kurt made to respond, the door to the office opened, and they both turned to the figure in the doorway.

"Porcelain," Sue Sylvester said in acknowledgment. She turned her attention to the woman behind the desk. "Cancel my call with the mayor," she ordered.

The woman very nearly looked offended. "But it's such an important—"

"If it's important, then he'll call back," Sue said plainly. "This is another important meeting I've been waiting for a bit longer." The other woman ducked her head and nodded, picking up the telephone

receiver. Sue looked at Kurt again, nodding her head toward her office, and Kurt followed quickly. She took a seat behind the desk in a large, comfortable-looking chair, and Kurt sat opposite her.

Sue leaned back in her chair, resting her elbows on the armrests and folding her hands together. "Well, Porcelain," she said. "I have to say, it's good to see you. I must admit that the student body's current collection of misfits is nowhere near as entertaining as those in your day. And those with *at least* questionable sexual orientation... well, let's just say that none of them hit the same soft spot that you did."

"Thanks," Kurt said, furrowing his brow slightly at Sue's strange compliment. "I thought you said you couldn't make as much of a difference in the halls by being principal," he commented vaguely.

"That's what I *thought*," Sue said. "That's why I made changes to exactly what I could do as principal."

"And the school board?" Kurt questioned, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, when I promised to make a considerable donation to the school, using the excess money from the Cheerios that I had funneled away over the years, I think they were happy to agree," Sue said with a slight shrug and tilt of the head. Kurt nodded, finding it hard to argue with what definitely looked like good results. "So what brings you here, Porcelain?" she asked.

Kurt smiled soberly. "I suppose I always assumed you'd keep tabs on the original New Directions," he commented off-handedly.

"That I do," she confirmed inclining her head. "But I've found that generally people take offense when I make correct assumptions, for whatever reason. They seem to just prefer explaining themselves. But if that isn't the case with you, which I'm starting to believe it isn't, then I'd be happy to say what I know: your partner passed several months ago and you're finally trying to get back on track."

"Husband," Kurt said quietly, and Sue raised her eyebrows. "We're... we *were* married legally."

Sue nodded slowly. "So that somehow brings us here," she commented plainly, and Kurt nodded.

"I figure we're the same in a lot of ways," Kurt said softly. "Well, maybe not a lot of ways, but..." He sighed, closing his eyes for a moment. "We react differently to certain... aspects... of death. The physical reminders mean a lot to me, and I remember when your sister passed, you didn't want to keep any of it." He paused licking his lips, noting that Sue was staring at him intently. "But I know that you never wanted someone to hold your hand and tell you everything's going to be okay, or treat you like an invalid just because you're grieving. And that's something I definitely relate to. And I just... I need someone in my life who understands that."

Sue leaned forward in her chair, folding her arms onto her desk. "What can I do for you?" she asked.

"As stupid as it sounds, I just need someone to talk to," he said, his brow knit. "I mean, as much as my friends and family try to help, it just..."

"It doesn't," she concluded for him, nodding, leaning back in her seat again.

He nodded. "And I'm trying *so hard* to cope with everything," he said. "I've gotten a new job, enrolled Aiden in preschool, signed up for group counseling... I just feel like I need something else. Someone who *actually* understands what I feel, and not just what I'm going through."

Sue nodded again, sliding on her glasses and flipping through a book on her desk. "So tell me, Porcelain," she said, picking up a pen, "when is it that you want to start these little meetings?"

"You're *serious*?" Rachel asked uncertainly, looking at him with raised eyebrows, sitting beside him in his bed.

Kurt nodded. "Principal," he sighed. "And for good, this time."

Rachel shook her head. "I never would have pictured it," she said.

"Actually... you know, I kind of can."

"Precisely my thoughts," Kurt told her. "I don't know, I know it's really far off, but... it sort of gives me hope that maybe Aiden can go there, and I won't have to look into private schools for him, just to ensure that he's *safe*."

Rachel nodded. She paused heavily. "There's something I have to tell you, by the way," she said slowly. "Finn and I are getting married."

"Rachel, honey, you told me that eleven years ago. And again almost seven years ago," Kurt said with a small eye roll.

"No," she responded quickly. "I mean, we... we're setting a date."

Kurt stared at her blankly. "Oh my god, you're pregnant," he muttered breathlessly, and Rachel looked even more alarmed.

"What?" she asked, scandalized. "No!" she told him quickly. "I can promise you that I'm not. Finn just... well, he said it had to do with you, actually."

"With... me?"

"Yeah," Rachel nodded. "He said that not long after you moved back, you told him something about how he could have the person he loved. I guess it really got to him." Kurt looked at his hands, and he heard Rachel draw in a deep breath. "He *also* said that that was when you first went to see Blaine."

"I don't like this transition," Kurt mumbled.

"Blaine called me," she continued pointedly. "He said you won't talk to him now."

"I assume he told you why?" Kurt asked, his voice feeling uncomfortably tight.

"Actually, no," Rachel confessed. "He wouldn't tell me, and I'm sure you won't have any problem believing that I asked." She paused slightly. "Repeatedly." Kurt smiled to himself. "We're best friends, Kurt," she continued, moving slightly so that he was forced to look at her again. "Please tell me what's going on."

Kurt sighed exasperatedly. "I just can't talk to him right now," he said, hardly audibly.

"And why not?" she pressed on.

"I... I kissed him," he said. "It was stupid. I shouldn't have done it."

"You're saying it like I don't understand what that's like," Rachel said, and Kurt chuckled despite himself. "Jesse, Puck, Blaine... Jesse again... And don't try to tell me 'it's different'," she told him. "I know that it is." Kurt merely hummed in response. "But why would that cause you to cut him out of your life?"

"I'm trying to get better," Kurt told her. "I don't need or want another complication in my life."

"And Blaine's just 'another complication' to you?" she asked. "Please, Kurt, we both know better than that. In high school, you were still his best friend no matter how many stupid things he did. Now he's trying to return the favor and be the friend that *you* need."

"I don't need any more friends," Kurt told her. "I've got you and Mercedes, and of course Finn..."

Rachel shook her head. "Kurt, you need all of the friends you can get," she said. "And that's *not* at all offensive, so stop looking like I said something bad. You suffered a *major* loss in your life. You need everyone who's willing to support you." Kurt grumbled something under his breath, but Rachel smiled victoriously. "Will you talk to him?" she asked. "Please?"

Kurt sighed exasperatedly. "Fine," he said. "I will. But later, all right? We haven't had a single sleepover in *months* and I'm really looking forward to some quality time with the one and only Rachel Berry."

Kurt picked up his cellphone, glaring at it, as though it was the
contents

one that had convinced him to make amends with Blaine. But it wasn't, it was *Rachel*. Kurt narrowed his eyes at his phone, just thinking of her name.

She was right, of course, but he'd never tell her that. Not out loud.

He briefly wondered if he could get away with sending the other man a text message. He quickly wrote off the idea, however. He knew it was a matter he'd have to actually *talk about* and *explain* and that meant dialing his number and *damn*, had he even used his phone like that in the past five months?

Rachel. He'd called Rachel.

But other than that? Not since he'd called his dad and Carole.

He shook his head slightly, quickly flicking through his contacts, finding Blaine's name and selecting it. He took a deep breath and pressed the phone to his ear. He counted the rings he heard, wondering for a split second if Blaine would answer.

Maybe he wouldn't. Maybe he wouldn't have to do this.

He heard the ringing cut off, and there was a heavy pause. Kurt took his bottom lip between his teeth. Maybe Blaine was just going to hang up on him...

"Kurt?" Blaine asked hesitantly.

"Hey," Kurt responded softly, and they were quiet for a few moments. He took a deep breath, and started, "I just wanted to—" , though he cut off when he heard Blaine say, "*Kurt, I'm so—*"

Silence again, and Kurt chuckled softly. "You can go first," he offered.

Blaine sighed heavily. "*I'm so sorry, Kurt,*" he said. "*I guess... I don't know, I was pushing or something, and I'm just—*"

"Blaine, stop," Kurt said quickly. "You don't have *anything* to be sorry for. You didn't do anything wrong. God, you haven't done anything wrong in a long time."

"But—"

"I'm sorry," Kurt said firmly. "I just... god, I don't know what I'm doing anymore, Blaine. And for someone who's always acted like they have everything under control, it's been really hard. I just... I don't think I know much of anything anymore. And I guess... I guess I just didn't know how to deal with one more thing that I had no clue about. I wanted to see if I could fix myself and then maybe see if... I don't know, see if you were still there, see what happened then."

Blaine was quiet for a long while, and Kurt felt his heart pounding slightly as he waited for an answer. "*You don't have to fix it all by yourself, Kurt,*" he finally said.

"I want to," he admitted softly in return. "I want to just *get better* and that be it."

"It's never that simple."

Kurt sighed. "I know."

Blaine paused again before responding. "*I want to be there for you, Kurt,*" he said at last, with a sigh. "*I'd be lying if I told you there wasn't some sort of... feeling, there. But what you need to understand is that I don't want anything from you, Kurt. Maybe in some time, when things are different, something with you will be possible. But that's not now, and right now there's nothing that you need to know about. I just... I want to be there. I want to help, if you'll let me.*"

"Blaine..."

"*I miss being friends, Kurt,*" he cut across. "*You were a big part of my life for a long time, and I miss having you there. I miss you.*"

"I want you to be there. I do," Kurt conceded. "And... I miss you, too."

Chapter Nine

“Thanks again for the help,” Blaine said with a smile. It was spring at last, and Kurt couldn't help but feel better, sheerly by the changes occurring in nature. The air was fresh, the weather beautiful, and the young man was feeling himself be warmed from the outside. He couldn't help but feel slightly optimistic.

He grinned at Blaine. "Honestly, did you think that I'd pass up the chance to attend a princess tea party?" he asked teasingly, and Blaine laughed in response. "I swear, I've been *dreaming* of this day."

Blaine smiled softly as he finished mixing lemonade in a large pitcher, and Kurt piled cookies onto a plate, placing them on the same tray as tiny cut sandwiches and some cheese and crackers. Kurt turned back to Blaine with a smile as well. "Ready to go feed the princesses?" he asked, and Blaine chuckled.

"As I'll ever be," he said in response. "I'm glad Aiden could come, by the way. Otherwise all the girls would be fighting over *me* to be the prince."

Kurt laughed. "Passing that job off to my son?" he asked with a raised eyebrow, picking up the tray and leading the way to the back door. "He's *four*, Blaine."

"He can handle it, I'm sure," Blaine responded with a grin, and Kurt laughed again, pushing open the door with his hip "Beside that, I'm sure he'll look back on this very fondly when he's old enough."

Kurt shook his head, still smiling. "All right girls, who's ready to eat?" he asked the dozen or so five-year-old girls, all decked out in princes dresses and tiaras, running around in the grass.

"Ooh! Me!" one of them shouted in response, and they all joined in, hurrying to the table that Kurt and Blaine had set up with a pink tablecloth and tea cups and plates. They each ran to their seats, where their names had been written on place cards, and Ella had approved of the arrangement before everyone had arrived. Ella was at the head

of the table, the most important seat to celebrate her birthday, and Aiden was happily sitting to her right, swinging his legs because his feet couldn't quite reach the ground.

Kurt moved to Ella first, letting her take her pick of the treats, putting them on her plate, letting her uncle pour lemonade into her tea cup. They made their way around the table until everyone had their food and drinks, and the two men made their way back to the small patio table.

Kurt grinned as he picked up one of the finger sandwiches, looking to Blaine. "They seem to be having fun," he commented, and Blaine nodded.

"I miss being that young," he said. "Things were a lot simpler." Kurt hummed in agreement, unable to suppress a smile at the thought of his own childhood memories. He picked up his glass, drinking some of the lemonade that Blaine had prepared.

"Ella," one of the girls said suddenly, and Kurt glanced over at the table for just a moment before turning his attention back to the man in front of him. "D'you think 's'okay for two princes to love each other?"

At those words, both Kurt and Blaine stilled, making silent eye contact for a moment as they both waited for the response.

"Of course it is," Ella told her, and Kurt watched as Blaine relaxed slightly.

"I had two daddies," Aiden piped up.

"Yeah," said Ella quickly. "And just look at my Uncle Blaine. He loves Aiden's daddy now and that's not bad *at all*."

Kurt licked his lips, feeling the heat in his cheeks rise. He glanced at Blaine, who had covered his face with his hands. Suddenly, the other man pushed himself up from his seat, walking back into the house, and Kurt followed after him as quickly as he could.

"Blaine," Kurt called out softly, the screen door slamming shut behind him. He glanced in the kitchen before walking up the stairs,

hearing the creak of bedsprings from Blaine's bedroom. He took a deep breath, following the sound. He saw the other man sitting on his bed, his face buried in his hands, a few of his curls poking out between his fingers. Kurt gently took a seat beside him.

"She didn't need to say that," Blaine muttered, not even looking up to Kurt.

"Blaine, she's just turning six," Kurt said gently. "She doesn't get what she's saying."

Blaine sighed and let out a grumbled response of, "I know..."

"Beside that, she didn't think you were listening," the brunette went on. "To her, she was just answering a question for her friend."

"I'm mortified," Blaine said into his hands.

"A bunch of five- and six-year-old girls aren't going to think of you any differently, Blaine," Kurt said gently. "And I definitely don't."

Blaine sighed heavily, dropping his hands to his lap. "You're supposed to not even have to think about it or consider it," he said. "Can we just write it off as something that belongs on an old episode of *Kids Say the Darndest Things* with Bill Cosby and it doesn't have any truth to it?" he asked.

Kurt licked his lips, looking down at his hands, hesitating. "Is it true?" he found himself asking.

Blaine smiled a little wryly, getting to his feet. "Doesn't really matter, does it?" he asked. "Not now."

"How was the party?" Burt asked, spooning potatoes onto his plate before passing the bowl to Kurt. The younger man smiled.

"Good," he said. "I think it went over well, anyway. Ella was thrilled."

"What did you think of it, A?" Carole asked in turn, looking at her

grandson with a smile.

The toddler, however, pouted. "Bad."

"Bad?" Kurt asked, furrowing his brow. "You seemed like you were having fun."

"No," Aiden insisted, awkwardly holding his fork and stabbing at the food on his plate. "It was bad."

"Why do you say that, sweetheart?" Carole inquired, frowning slightly. "What made it so bad?"

"Katie and Ella ruined everything," he said frustratedly, dropping his fork on the table.

"Hey," Kurt said sternly, putting his hand on his son's arm. "Aiden, what happened?"

"No!" Aiden responded, and Kurt withdrew his hand, frowning.

"Tell us, sweetheart," Carole prompted.

"Katie asked Ella if it was okay for two princes to love each other," the toddler said, his cheeks red, and his eyes welling up with tears. "Ella said yes, and then she said that her uncle loved my daddy. I don't want Daddy to replace Dada. But he's gonna and he doesn't care!"

There was silence around the table until Aiden burst into tears, running off in the direction of his bedroom.

"Kurt..." Burt started, and Kurt turned to him, the color in his cheeks rising.

"It's not like that!" he snapped. "I don't even—I would *never*—you know I would *never*—"

"You don't need to explain that to me, son," Burt cut across. "Go an' tell that to your kid."

Kurt nodded, quickly picking himself up out of his seat, slowly ascending the stairs. He took a deep breath, letting himself into Finn's old bedroom.

"Aiden?" he addressed the toddler softly, but the little boy didn't

turn to look at him, sitting on the bed and staring at the opposite wall. Kurt sighed, sitting beside him. "You're wrong, you know. I would *never* try to replace your father."

"But you *are*!" Aiden shouted.

"I'm not," Kurt insisted. "Your father was, and still is, so important to me. He was my world." He sighed. "You know, your grandmother, she isn't really my mother," he said softly to him.

Aiden swiped at his eyes. "She isn't?"

Kurt shook his head. "And Uncle Finn isn't really my brother," he said. "But I love them like they're my family. You see, Finn's dad died when he was a baby. And my mom died when I was little, too. Then, Grandma and Grandpa found each other. With a bit of help from me." He sighed. "No one could *ever* replace my mother, though. And I knew that, and my dad knew that, too. And your father was one-of-a-kind. I could never replace him, even if I wanted to."

Aiden sniffled slightly. "You're not gonna replace Dada?" he asked.

"Never," Kurt replied firmly, and he took Aiden in his arms. "I would never want to."

"Will you get happy again with Ella's uncle?" Aiden asked, still sniffing.

Kurt licked his lips, pausing slightly. "I don't know," he said softly. "I think I'm still too sad sometimes about your father."

"I want you happy again," his son responded.

"I will be," Kurt assured him. "I want you happy, too."

Aiden nodded and sniffed. "I really miss Dada."

Kurt closed his eyes tightly, pressing a kiss into his son's hair, holding him a little more closely. "I know," he told him. "I do, too."

Chapter Ten

Kurt pulled at the inflatable pool, tugging it toward the center of the shared yard behind the row of houses. He brushed his bangs out of his face, watching as Blaine yanked at the hose toward him, flashing him a smile.

"When did May get this hot?" Kurt asked, huffing slightly.

Blaine shrugged. "It's almost June," he reasoned, but Kurt merely grimaced.

"Stupid global warming..." Kurt murmured. "It's below zero in the winter, and in the nineties come May. It's ridiculous." He paused. "Jesus, I sound old."

Blaine grinned. "Thirty," he said. "You *are* really old."

"Just wait a few months until you catch up with me," Kurt said teasingly.

"Mmm, never," Blaine responded over his shoulder, moving back to turn on the hose. "I'll find a way to stop aging before then."

Kurt quirked a brow. "And not let me benefit from that? I don't think we can be friends anymore."

"Well, maybe if you ask nicely," Blaine said with a wink, returning to the other man as the water flowed from the hose, filling the pool.

Kurt sighed. "You think Ella will share?" he asked.

Blaine laughed. "Ella share?" he inquired. "Are we talking about the same kid?"

"Well, I'm sure that she would share with Aiden, if my dad and Finn hadn't taken him to that baseball game..."

"I was half-worried he didn't want to come because of me," Blaine admitted.

"He's better about that," Kurt assured him. "I'm sure it'll take him a little time to warm up again, but he's fine."

Blaine nodded. "So what team are they going to see?" he asked

contents

conversationally.

"Ohio," Kurt responded, leaning over the pool to adjust the hose slightly.

"I figured," Blaine laughed. "Which one?"

Kurt straightened, frowning. "What do you mean 'which one'?" he asked. "There's more than one?"

Blaine chuckled. "Don't worry about it," he told Kurt. "But next time, definitely bring Aiden. I'm sure Ella will love playing *Little Mermaid* with him."

Kurt smiled softly. "How's her voice? Is six too young to be asking that?"

"She definitely has a voice," Blaine commented. "For a kid, anyway. When she gets older, I want to get her voice lessons. I'll just have to find the right teacher."

"*Blaine*, you're a music teacher, now," Kurt said. "Why not teach her yourself?"

Blaine scoffed. "Middle and high school music classes aren't exactly any standard."

"So... you want to give your niece a Rachel Berry complex?" Kurt asked with raised eyebrows.

Blaine paused. "You're right. Maybe I *should* teach her..."

Kurt shrugged. "You could always have Rachel do it," he offered. "Assuming Ella wants to go in that direction. Who knows? Maybe in a few years she won't care about singing like Ariel and will want to do something completely different."

"Probably," Blaine sighed, moving back to turn off the hose. "I spent a good portion of my childhood wanting to grow up to be a dinosaur."

Kurt looked at him thoughtfully. "I really have no response to that," he said. "Though it does explain some of the expressions you used to make during glee performances." Blaine pulled a face. "Ah, there's one. It's a bit reminiscent of 'Raise Your Glass' with the

Warblers..."

"I've nearly had it with your mocking, sir," Blaine told him seriously.

"Are you trying to impersonate Thad now?" Kurt asked, grinning.

"I can go and get the hose, and then you'll be sorry."

"I'm terrified, actually," Kurt told him.

"Well then, I hope whatever you're wearing today won't get ruined, because you had this coming," Blaine responded, and Kurt backed away slightly.

"Did we somehow go from joking to serious?" he asked, a little cautiously. "Because in all seriousness, I would prefer to stay dry."

"What happened to hoping that Ella would share?" Blaine asked, and Kurt merely shook his head, taking another step back. However, in doing so, he slid slightly on part of the rubber of the pool, falling backwards. Yet he still managed to take a firm hold of the other man's wrist pulling him into the water as well.

"I should have seen that coming," Blaine laughed, Kurt spluttering and spitting out water. "Oh god, you look like a drowned rat."

"*Cat* is more like it," Kurt said, still choking slightly. "And I'll unleash my claws unless you get off me right now and let me get out of the water."

Blaine obliged, rolling off of him and scrambling to his feet, offering Kurt a hand to pull him up. "Would you like a change of clothes?" Blaine offered, still snickering, and Kurt sighed.

"Please," he said, and Blaine led him into the house, and up into the bedroom. He rifled through his drawers for a few moments before handing Kurt some clean, dry clothing, and the man took them graciously, moving to get changed in the bathroom. The moment he finished, he reentered the bedroom, pausing slightly as he did.

Blaine was struggling slightly with his shirt, pulling it over his head. Kurt's eyes traveled over his body, admiring the slight changes

since high school. He swallowed hard as Blaine finally managed to get his head through the hole, pulling his shirt down over his stomach, his curls plastered to his forehead. Smoothing the shirt, he looked back up at Kurt, flashing a smile.

Kurt covered the room in a few quick strides, and instantly grabbed Blaine's face. The other man instantly returned the kiss, a kiss that was eager and needy and desperate. Kurt's mind raced as he traced his fingers over Blaine's stomach, pushing slightly at the hem of his shirt to feel hot, smooth skin that he had glimpsed just moments before. He briefly wondered why he kept telling himself it was so wrong to feel anything right now when it felt *so good*.

Everything crashed down upon him suddenly, Kurt pulled away roughly. "I can't," he panted. "I just... I can't do this." He bit his lip. "I should go." He glanced to Blaine, who seemed to be clenching his jaw slightly.

"You can't keep doing this to me, Kurt," he snapped, and Kurt was taken aback. "I understand that you're hurting, and I understand that you wanted to wait, to hold off on anything else until you had more time to heal. But are you *serious* right now? Because this is the *second time* you've kissed me without any real intent of following any of it through, even just to *talk about it*."

"You said yourself that I'm trying to *heal*—"

"Then why are you fucking around?" Blaine asked heatedly, and Kurt snapped his mouth shut. "I get that I was kind of a jerk when we first met, and I unintentionally played with your feelings. But that was fifteen years ago, Kurt. We're twice as old now, we should be better than this, no matter what the reason is. You can't just convince yourself that what I feel doesn't matter, or that I don't feel anything at all, just because whatever you're feeling is confusing. Just—Jesus Christ—just *talk to me* about it instead of doing—doing *that*."

"This is why I didn't want to have anything to do with you anymore," Kurt said vehemently. "This isn't easy for me at all, Blaine. I just told you that *my son* thinks that I'm trying to replace Alex. I

just... god, it would be so much easier if you weren't in my life, right now!"

"Is that what you want?" Blaine shouted. "Because if it is, then you can leave, and you don't ever have to come back. If you want me out of your life, then I'll just leave you the fuck alone. *For good*, this time!"

"Yes, that's what I want!" Kurt yelled, though his voice cracked, a few tears falling down his cheeks. "Or—dammit, I don't know. I just... I hate myself for doing this, Blaine. For what I'm doing to you, what I'm doing to Aiden, and to Alex... I can't forget about him, Blaine. But this..." He let out a wet laugh. "Of course I feel something for you. I'm not doing this to just mess with your head. It just... scares me. I stupidly keep wishing that you weren't here or you weren't *you* just so I don't even have the *chance* of feeling something for you. I thought Alex was it, but nothing went as planned and now... now I'm crying in the bedroom of someone I think I'm developing feelings for, and that's almost more terrifying than anything."

Blaine's face had softened dramatically. He reached out slightly to Kurt, about to say something when the door to the bedroom opened, a tiny figure peeking through.

"Uncle Blaine, stop making Kurt cry," she told him, frowning deeply at the man.

"Sweetheart, no, he didn't," Kurt said quickly, but Ella shook her head.

"I heard you two fighting," she told them, and Blaine ran his hand over his face.

"Ella, I'm so sorry," he said quickly. "You weren't supposed to. God... we didn't mean to scare you—"

"I'm not scared," she responded. "I just don't like you two fighting. Uncle Blaine, you can't be mean to Kurt, because then he won't know you love him." She turned to the other man. "Same for you."

"Ella, he doesn't—" Blaine started quickly, but Kurt leaned down

and hugged the girl.

"Thank you," he told her. "You're right, I won't be mean to your uncle anymore."

"Good!" she said. "Are you two gonna say you love each other and kiss now, like in my princess movies?"

Kurt glanced at Blaine. "It's more complicated than that, Ella," Blaine told her softly, and she frowned.

"Well, I don't like that too much," she said matter-of-factly. "When I grow up, it won't be compulsory. I'm gonna find a prince and we'll say 'I love you' and kiss and get married. It isn't hard." She tilted her head slightly. "Maybe you're doing it wrong."

Kurt chuckled softly. "Let's go outside, and maybe you can explain it better to us," he offered, and she nodded quickly, taking one of his hands, and one of Blaine's, tugging them gently to the stairs. Kurt shared a look with Blaine, and he knew they were tacitly agreeing to talk about things later. In the meantime, he silently mouthed an '*I'm sorry*'; and Blaine responded to the gesture with a '*me too*'. After Blaine turned his attention back to Ella, Kurt continued to look at him and wonder.

He wondered if he was making the same wish that things were as easy as in fairy tales.

"I think a good place to start is Cinderella," Ella told them, nodding. "Now, let's see... Once, there was this beautiful girl named Cinderella..."

Chapter Eleven

The month before the wedding was, for Kurt (and he could only assume for Finn and Rachel and Burt and Carole and everyone else involved), a blur.

He had been sucked into the planning very quickly. Rachel had come to him, hysterical, about how she was in desperate need of help because she was still working on finishing the show and constantly traveling back and forth, not to mention actually deciding what the hell she was going to do once she *was* married, since she and Finn had built slightly separate lives for themselves over the years, in two very different places.

Kurt had gladly accepted to help with her wedding (because *how could he not?*), and she was able to relax. Slightly, at least.

There were still countless bumps that occurred along the way. Somehow, Kurt had found himself caught in the middle after agreeing to be Finn's best man (but not with a little objection, making sure a dozen times that he *really didn't want it to be Puck?*). Rachel had nearly lost it, shouting that Kurt was *her* best friend, and supposed to be her maid of honor (which he only took slight offense in, as he obviously was *not* a girl). Thankfully Kurt, with Carole's help, had come up with the solution that he could *easily* be both, they just needed to change a couple things, and in the end, Kurt had to admit it made things a little easier, both on the cost (though Rachel's dads didn't have any problem with that) and Kurt's self-assigned duty to ensure that the toasts made were appropriate, considering he'd be the one writing them, now.

Then, suddenly, it just seemed to be *over*. After months of quick and thorough planning, the day for the wedding came. And, much to Kurt's relief, it was perfect. When it came down to the reception, he stepped back, admiring the scene. Finn and Rachel were dancing happily, along with others. It was bright, and somehow the most beautiful day the summer had seen yet. And for the entirety of the

New Directions attending, Kurt had to marvel at the fact that there hadn't been a single moment of drama.

He watched as Ella danced with Blaine, the small girl in her very own princess dress and a wreath on top of her head, and who Rachel had assured him was the *perfect* flower girl. Off playing with Mike and Tina's son was Aiden, the little ring bearer.

The guests had eaten, they'd had their champagne, and the cake had been cut. Now they were simply relaxing and enjoying the festivities, and Kurt was leaning against the gift table, feeling rather pleased with the way it had all turned out.

Suddenly, a woman joined him, leaning back against the table. He watched as she took a long drag from her cigarette. "I thought you gave up smoking," he said conversationally. Quinn turned to him with a raised eyebrow.

"Does it matter?" she asked. Kurt shrugged. There was a quiet pause. "I took it up again when my husband started cheating on me." Kurt nodded quietly and Quinn gazed at him for several long moments before looking away. "I used to hate you, you know. In high school."

"I never would have guessed," he said sarcastically.

"Not for the reasons you probably think," she continued. "You probably can't see how perfect your life was. A father who loved you, even when you admitted the biggest secret of your lifetime. A boy who loved you unconditionally. You had friends and grades and a voice... you had everything."

Kurt laughed bitterly. "Yeah, I lived the high life," he said. "Being thrown in dumpsters, shoved into lockers, and slushied, long before any of you had to put up with it from Glee, all because of my sexuality. And let's not forget when my dad, my only family, almost died, or when I was voted Prom Queen by my peers, or when I was sexually harassed by one of my bullies, who then threatened to kill me so I had to change schools. And did I mention that all that happened within the course of just a few months? That sounds like a *great* life." He

sighed. "You know, I always kind of hated you too. But mostly, I just felt sorry for you. You could have had the perfect life, but every time you were close, you threw it all away."

She licked her lips, flicking her cigarette and grounding it into the dirt with the toe of her heeled shoe. "You're right," she said casually. "I'm a fuck-up, Kurt. And not just now, not because of my sham of a marriage. I think I always have been one. If I had never cheated on Finn in the first place all those years ago, maybe this would be my wedding."

"You honestly think you'd be happier with him?" Kurt asked, and Quinn laughed dryly.

"Probably not," she admitted. "Happier than I am now, but still not what I want in life."

"And what do you want?"

She glanced at him curiously. "You wanna know something funny? I haven't been very faithful. Ever. I cheated on Finn, on Sam, on Joe, on my husband... Of course, I got smart about it—never did it in the house. He's an idiot, so he did, but I caught all that on camera and plan on using it in court to ring him dry. I doubt he'll ever know I did the same to him." She smiled slightly, shaking her head. "I cheated on every guy I was ever with... except one."

"Puck," Kurt responded immediately.

She nodded. "Puck," she repeated. "He was the only one I decided to leave, too. I'll probably never understand why..." She trailed off, and Kurt considered her response to his question, if it could be considered one. Eventually she sighed, pulling out her pack of cigarettes again. "Sometimes I wonder why it all happened, or how things would be different. If I had stayed with Puck through junior year, or if we had gotten Beth back... I wonder if my husband would have cheated if I hadn't miscarried his baby. My life sucks, and I get that I didn't do much to help it, but the things that just happened and I didn't cause them... I wonder why."

"I wonder the same thing," Kurt said as Quinn put the cigarette to

her lips and pulled out her lighter. "Believe me, I do."

She nodded, thoughtfully. "I'm sorry," she said, taking a long drag from her cigarette and blowing out a cloud of smoke. "Nobody deserves to lose their husband like that."

"And nobody deserves to lose their child," he responded.

She jerked her head slightly to where Ella and Aiden were playing in the grass. "That your son?" she asked.

"Yeah," he responded, watching as Blaine swept each of the children in his arms, throwing them over his shoulder so they were squealing and laughing. He smiled slightly.

"Something going on between you two?" she asked, and Kurt bit his lip.

"I... I don't know," he admitted.

Quinn nodded in understanding. "Not to rush you, but you should try and figure it out," she commented. "Don't let him get away, or you'll definitely regret it."

"Speaking from experience?"

She lifted one shoulder in a shrug before walking off, to where Artie and Mercedes were chatting.

A moment later, Blaine came walking toward him with a grin on his face. "I'm holding these two captive," he said calmly, with a smile, turning slightly so that Kurt could see them where they were slung over Blaine's shoulders. "Any idea what I should do with them?"

Kurt chuckled slightly, the children still yelling and giggling. "I don't know," he said seriously. "If they were behaving, I'd say to let them have a bit of cake. But they seem to be making an awful amount of noise."

"No no no!" Ella quickly squealed. "We'll be quiet! Shh, Aiden, we need to be quiet! See, Kurt?" The two quickly quieted themselves, only letting out quiet giggles between their tiny fingers.

"Well, then I suppose..."

"Cake?" Blaine asked.

"Cake," Kurt nodded, and Ella and Aiden cheered slightly before clapping their hands over their mouths again to stay quiet. With a grin and a wink, Blaine walked off with the kids, and Kurt smiled after him. He let his eyes roam over the masses of people, finally laying on the table where his parents were sitting. He watched as his father patted Carole's hand before walking off in the direction of some clients. Instantly, he began walking over to his stepmother.

She glanced up as he got closer to her, beaming at him as he took a seat across from her. "You did a *marvelous* job, sweetheart," she told him, instantly taking his hands in hers. He looked down at them for a moment, wondering when it was they had started to wrinkle, remembering how it seemed to be such a short time before that he was planning her wedding to his father. He grinned at her in response. "And thank you for the reminder about the waterproof mascara," she added with a wink.

He chuckled. "Please, *I* almost cried when they said their vows," he told her, and she laughed.

"Have you been enjoying yourself?" she asked. "Or have you been too busy making sure that everyone else is?"

"You don't think I'm capable of both?" he inquired teasingly, and she raised her eyebrows knowingly. "I promise, I'm having fun."

She merely hummed in response. "Tell me, love, how are you, right now?" she asked in a soft voice.

He shrugged. "I'm fine," he assured her. "Should I not be?" She shrugged slightly, her eyes boring into his own, as though they could see something much deeper than shades of blue and green. He shifted slightly under her gaze. "Can I... ask you something?" he asked suddenly, softly.

"Anything," she responded, and he nodded, pausing slightly.

"When did you... get over Finn's father?" he asked in a hushed tone.

She froze momentarily before smiling a soft, sad smile. "I never did," she admitted. "The same way that your father never got over your mother." She tilted her head slightly. "Honey, nobody expects you to 'get over' your loss. It's not something that you just forget about and move on. You learn to live with it and you find a way to be happy again. And sweetheart, I think you're well on your way to doing that."

Chapter Twelve

Aiden rounded the corner into the kitchen, looking at his daddy curiously. He was staring out the window, looking sad. But, Aiden quickly realized, he'd seen his daddy look sad a lot. Not as much recently, of course. But since his dada died.

He tilted his head slightly for a moment, wondering what his daddy was thinking. He decided he'd better ask him.

Aiden shuffled into the kitchen, and tugged on his daddy's shirt. His father looked down at him, smiling at him, but his smile didn't look like his normal smile, and Aiden frowned. "Wha's wrong, Daddy?" he asked.

"Nothing's wrong," he responded, but Aiden didn't really believe him. He crouched down, taking his son into his arms for a moment. "I'm just not feeling well. I was thinking I'd lay down."

"Want me to take care of you?" Aiden asked quickly in turn. "I'm a good doctor. I played doctor in school yesterday, the teacher told me I was good."

Kurt smiled, pressing a kiss to Aiden's forehead. "I think I'll be all right," he told him. "Why don't you play with the trucks that Uncle Finn got you for your birthday?" he offered instead.

Tilting his head slightly, Aiden had to admit that his trucks *did* sound like fun right now. He nodded quickly, running back into the living room where his grandpa let him keep all of his toys in a bin. He started digging through the box, trying to find his trucks.

He quickly realized, however, that they weren't there. Frowning, he scurried around the room in an effort to find them, looking under the couch and in the couch and under grandpa's arm chair and even peeking into grandma's cabinet with all the fancy, shiny plates and cups and things. He came to the conclusion that they simply weren't there, he decided that maybe they were in his new bedroom.

Aiden climbed the stairs, but something quickly caught his
contents

attention—the lights in his daddy's room were turned off, and it looked like he wasn't even in there. He frowned and approached the bedroom, only to find that it was, in fact, empty. There was a glowing from his bedside table that Aiden noticed, and he crossed the room, picking up the object from the table and clasping it tightly in his hands. He needed to return it to his daddy. It was, after all, important.

He left the room, looking down the hallway with curiosity. First his right, but that was only his grandma and grandpa's room. He turned to his left, and noticed that the door at the end of the hallway was open slightly, and the lights were on.

Aiden knew this was strange. He'd never gone into the room, as the door was always locked. He knew it was an extra bedroom, just in case anyone ever came to visit, but nobody had visited. His aunt Rachel was always at Uncle Finn's house that wasn't really a house, but he didn't remember the word for it, and he had his Uncle's old room to stay in, so it wasn't needed. Even for that fancy party thing where Aunt Rachel became *Aunt* Rachel through some process he didn't understand, but he knew Ella kept saying it was a 'wedding' and it was important for princes and princesses to live happily ever after together.

Aiden wondered if his daddy was in that room. He figured he'd better check, just in case, because he should have his phone.

Aiden was careful not to push the door open any more, but to merely peek inside. The moment he did, he realized the room smelled like perfume and flowers and he saw that there was a dresser on the side of the room, and all the drawers were open. It was strange.

Then, he caught sight of his daddy. He was lying on the bed, his arm draped over his face so that his nose was visible just under the crook of his elbow.

Aiden quickly pulled back out of the room, running back down the stairs and into the kitchen. He looked down at his hands, where he was still holding his daddy's phone tightly.

He knew how to work it. Kind of, anyway. His daddy had showed him, just in case there was an emergency. He pressed on the contact button.

Listed there were lots of names, a lot of which Aiden didn't recognize. But first of those that he did know was Blaine. Blaine took care of Ella, maybe he could come take care of his daddy. He nodded, resolutely, pressing a tiny finger to the name and putting the phone to his ear.

He listened to it ring a few times before there was a tiny click and a voice came on. "*Hello?*" It was Blaine's voice. It sounded kind of funny, but he could still tell it was Blaine. "*Kurt?*"

"No, this is Aiden," the boy responded, and there was a pause at the end of the line.

"*Hey, Aiden,*" the man responded. "*Everything all right?*"

"No," Aiden responded in a serious tone. "My daddy's broken."

There was a sharp intake of breath. "*Is he all right? Is he hurt?*"

"No he's not hurt. He looks okay, just really sad," Aiden told him. "But I think there's something inside that's broken."

"*What makes you say that?*" Blaine asked.

"He's on the bed in the other bedroom, the one that's not his or mine or grandma and grandpa's," he reported. "He said he didn't feel good and wanted to lay down, but then when I go up there to find my trucks, he was in the other room." Blaine didn't say anything, so Aiden kept talking. "It smells like flowers in there," he added. He didn't know why, but that seemed important. "I don't know if he's sick, but I hoped that you could give him medicine or something."

"*Yeah,*" Blaine responded at last. "*I'll head over there now. I'll knock, so you know it's me.*"

"Good," Aiden said. "Will you knock four times? That's my favourite number. Also I'm four."

Blaine chuckled. "*Sounds like a plan. I'm gonna hang up, but I'll be there as fast as I can, all right?*"

"All right," Aiden replied. "Bye bye."

At first, Aiden tried counting to see how long it took Blaine to get there. But, they were still working on that in school, so after he got *really high* (he couldn't wait until his daddy felt better so he could tell him—he knew he'd be excited) he gave up. Instead, he waited quietly, opening one of the coloring books on the coffee table and doing his best to color scenes correctly.

At last, there were four, loud knocks on the door. Aiden scrambled to his feet and scurried to the door, standing on the tips of his toes to reach the knob. After opening the door a crack and stepping back, Blaine pushed it open the rest of the way, Ella's hand tightly in his. He released it upon entering, turning to close the door behind him.

"You said your daddy's in the spare room?" Blaine asked, and Aiden nodded. He watched as Blaine slowly ascended the stairs. After the man disappeared, Aiden turned to Ella, who quietly took his hand and tugged him in the same direction as Blaine. He opened his mouth to speak, but she quickly put a finger to her lips. He nodded, understanding.

Ella and Aiden peered into the other bedroom, quietly watching, trying to understand.

Aiden's daddy was shaking his head violently, mumbling something. He tried to push Blaine away before he was dissolving into tears, sobbing brokenly into Blaine's chest. Blaine merely pulled the other man close, holding him impossibly tight.

They heard the door downstairs open, and Ella and Aiden left the scene, rushing down the stairs to see who was intruding. Aiden cocked his head to the side, seeing his aunt and uncle entering.

In turn, Uncle Finn furrowed his brow. "Hey guys," he said, ruffling Aiden's hair, but still looking confused. "Is Blaine here?"

Ella nodded. "He came to take care of Aiden's daddy."

Uncle Finn and Aunt Rachel glanced at each other, sharing a worried look. "Is he all right?" Aunt Rachel asked.

"He's *really* sad," Aiden informed them, and suddenly Uncle Finn's eyes widened a little, sharing a meaningful look with Rachel.

Just a moment later, Blaine came down the stairs, pausing at the end, looking at everyone with hesitance.

"I just came down to get Kurt some a drink and a cold cloth," he said lamely. Aunt Rachel nodded quickly.

"I'll take care of it," she said, and Finn nodded Blaine to the kitchen.

"Thanks, Rachel," they heard Blaine say, and the woman nodded before leaving the kitchen and running up the stairs. Ella and Aiden shared a glance before peering around the doorway at Blaine and Uncle Finn, hoping they were still unnoticed.

"I completely forgot," Uncle Finn said, running his hand over his face. "I feel like such an idiot."

"I didn't remember until Aiden called me," Blaine admitted. "I mean... it's understandable. It's something that will probably always stay on his mind."

Finn nodded. "A *year*," he muttered. "I can't believe it's been a *year*."

"I know," Blaine breathed out.

"What's been a year?" Aiden asked curiously, and Ella quickly shushed him.

He wasn't sure. He knew it was a long time that he moved here from his old house. Maybe that had something to do with it?

"Should I call our mom or dad?" Finn asked hesitantly. "I mean... *how* is he exactly?"

"I think he's all right," Blaine reasoned. "Just... it's really hitting him. I mean, he's in the spare room, with all the drawers to his mother's dresser open—"

"Yeah," Finn quickly cut across. "I... I remember him telling me about that in high school."

Blaine nodded. "I can't blame him. Sometimes you just *need* that sort of comfort."

Finn nodded in turn. "I know what you mean." He sighed, leaning against the counter. "You know, I always thought I had it rough, growing up without a dad. But he died when I was so young, I don't even remember him. I never thought about how much it must have hurt Kurt to actually have those memories. It's like... it's better and worse at the same time, you know? And then to have to relive that with everything... I can't imagine it."

"I don't think he gets enough credit for how strong he is," Blaine responded. "I don't think he gives himself the credit."

"I don't know what I'd do if I lost Rachel," Finn admitted. "For him to lose Alex like that..."

And suddenly, Aiden understood. He pulled away from Ella, despite her grasping after him to remain hidden. He ran into the kitchen, looking up at the adults, who had cut off their talking.

"I didn't know," he said quickly, and Blaine and Uncle Finn shared a concerned glance. "I don't want my daddy to be mad at me for forgetting. Can I fix that?"

Blaine leaned down, picking up Aiden in his arms. "He won't be mad," he assured him. "But yeah, I think we can do something to make sure. What did you have in mind?"

"Can I get flowers for Dada?" he asked. "I know he's still in New York, but..."

"Yeah," Finn said quickly, nodding. "We can do that."

"I think that's a fantastic idea," Blaine assured him, and Aiden beamed. "I think that your daddy would really like that."

Chapter Thirteen

"I'd like to talk, actually."

Kurt himself was surprised when he spoke. He shifted slightly uncomfortably under everyone's gaze. He took a deep breath, slipping to the edge of his seat.

"I know I've said very little over the several long months I've been here," he said. "This will probably be the first time one or two of you have heard me say anything, and it'll be the last." Kurt paused, licking his lips. He pulled out a manilla envelope from his bag. "This past week, my sister-in-law was in New York. She's still in between her husband here and her job there. She... she gave me this.

"This envelope has news clippings and papers and documents all about Alex," he told them. "Every article she found about the trial... At first I didn't even want to look at the headlines, reading 'hate crime' in big letters. It felt like a wound and they were just pouring on the salt.

"But I convinced myself to read them. I knew I had to."

"And?" a woman of about his age prompted, looking at him kindly. He smiled in response.

"I'm glad that I did," he admitted. "I needed to know what had happened, especially to the people that did this." He paused, glancing around the circle. "Convicted of manslaughter with irrefutable evidence. I was terrified that wouldn't be the case. And even though it still hurts and it can't ever bring him back, it's still this amazing sense of... closure. And after fifteen months, that's so much more than I could ask for." He offered a smile. "I feel like I can honestly just... move forward from this point."

"Thanks again for your help," Kurt panted, placing one of the boxes on the floor. "The shop's short-staffed today so Dad and Finn
contents

can't leave. Rachel offered *her* help, but... dear god, I was afraid for what that would be like."

Blaine chuckled, setting another box beside Kurt. "Not a problem," he assured the other man. He smiled, glancing around the room. "You know, I really like this place."

"You're acting as though you don't already know that I have fabulous taste," he quipped, and Blaine grinned.

"Well, I'm glad you found some place that satisfies that taste," he amended. "Now, let me just grab the last box before we start moving things around." With another grin, he left the room.

Kurt smiled as he gazed around at his surroundings. A few pieces of furniture had been moved in already, just a sofa and an armchair in the living room beside the fireplace, and a table with matching chairs in the dining room. There wasn't a bed yet, and he hadn't managed to get the heating and electricity to work yet, but it was perfect. It was going to be *home*.

Kurt froze, the abrasive sound of ringing jarring him from his thoughts. He glanced around him, spotting Blaine's phone sitting on top of one of the boxes. He picked it up, staring at the name on the screen.

Blinking, he set the phone back down and crossed the room, folding his arms across his chest. He closed his eyes and took a deep, shuddering breath.

"Hey, I—Kurt?"

Kurt didn't turn at the sound of his voice, and he frowned slightly, unsure if he'd done something wrong, and it made him feel uneasy. "You missed a call," Kurt told him in a small voice.

Furrowing his brow, Blaine picked up his cellphone. And then he understood, upon seeing the name of the person who had tried to contact him: *Christian*.

"Kurt, it's nothing," Blaine breathed out.

"He's your ex-fiancé," Kurt responded, turning to the other man

with a forced smile. "It isn't *nothing*."

"It's nothing because I'm making it that way," Blaine told him firmly.

Kurt looked at Blaine uncertainly. "You don't have to," he said, sinking onto the couch. "It would be completely understandable if you wanted to be with him. It's your life. If he makes you happy..."

"He doesn't," Blaine assured him, leaning beside him on the arm of the sofa. "He's been calling me for the past week, and I don't want any of it. I don't want him to be a part of my life any more." He paused, looking at the other man intently. He raised his hand, cupping Kurt's cheek, and Kurt leaned into the touch. "I thought I'd made it very clear what I want, Kurt."

Kurt licked his lips. "Perhaps I need a reminder."

Blaine nodded at the words. He wasn't sure what he was thinking any more as his eyes flickered across Kurt's face. He wasn't sure it mattered.

He leaned down, pressing a gentle kiss to Kurt's lips.

"Wait," the brunette murmured, pulling away and for a horrifying moment, Blaine's heart seemed to completely stop as he stared blankly at the other man.

Kurt, however, leaned back slightly, placing a hand on Blaine's elbow and tugging him toward him. He smiled, understanding Kurt's intentions. He slid off the arm of the sofa, quickly capturing Kurt's mouth with his once again, before he even had the chance to fall back against the couch's other arm. Blaine felt the corners of Kurt's lips twitch, as though to smile.

This, this, *this*, Blaine desperately thought, *this* was perfection. No desperate neediness, no pain of loss trying to be pushed and hidden away... nothing but them, only them. There was something so wonderful about it all, soft and gentle and slow. Just *wonderful*.

And part of Blaine missed this so badly over the past ten years. And he was sure that he wouldn't change things, because he and Kurt

both needed to grow and learn and love differently before they could reach a point where they could truly be *forever*.

Forever, forever, forever. God, maybe it was childish for the thought to come so quickly, but Blaine just wanted this to last forever, for *them* to last forever...

He didn't even know how much time had passed as they lay there, kissing and holding and nuzzling and humming and just laying. He was fairly certain he didn't care, and he definitely didn't want to ask. But suddenly the house was lit only by the streetlamps outside filtering through the windows

"It's late." Kurt had been the one to say it, quietly, as though speaking any louder into the silence would shatter everything that had come to being.

"I... I don't have to go," Blaine told him softly, breathlessly, and he couldn't help but feel like he was seventeen again, when questions like this were never asked because it wasn't in their prewritten terms. "Ella's over at Katie's house, and since Aiden's at your parents'..." He licked his lips, and all Kurt could think was how desperately he wanted to kiss them again. "If you want—"

"Yes," he said immediately. "Please, yes, I want you to stay."

Blaine nodded, sweeping in to kiss him once again, despite their lips being red and swollen, and it really *was* like being seventeen again, but it was so, *so* different in ways that Blaine didn't mind in the least. "Then I'll stay," he said, his breath hot against Kurt's neck, and the brunette shivered slightly at the sensation. "I'll stay for as long as you'll have me."

Chapter Fourteen

Carole took the envelope that Kurt had given her and Burt and pocketed it before getting in the car. She figured it would be the kind, motherly thing for her to do, to perhaps make some coffee and breakfast for her stepson, or make a few calls if the electricity still hadn't come up. And it wasn't as though his new house was that far away. In fact, it was closer than Finn's apartment.

Fifteen minutes later, she pulled into the driveway behind Kurt's car, and then let herself into the house.

The first thing she noticed was that it was still rather cold, and she tugged her coat a little closer to her body. She wondered how on earth Kurt had been able to sleep. In fact, she knew for a fact that he usually slept under several blankets, and that was with their house kept at a heated temperature.

She walked down the hallway, deciding that she could easily light a fire for the boy, hoping it would add some warmth to the house.

She froze as she rounded the corner into the living room.

She had half-expected Kurt to be sleeping in the room, but on the couch beneath a dozen blankets. What she hadn't expected was to find her stepson with Blaine's arms wrapped around him, half-clothed in a tangle of covers and pillows forming a makeshift bed in front of the fireplace.

But, she reasoned, maybe she wasn't all that surprised, either. And the look of contentment that was on Kurt's face as he slept on, blissfully unaware? Well, she definitely wasn't upset by it. (And even though she knew Kurt wouldn't approve, she did say a small, quick prayer of thanks that they had found each other.)

Tilting her head to the side, she figured that maybe instead she could head to the Lima Bean and get coffee and bagels instead of lighting that fire. After all, they seemed so peaceful, and... yes, bagels sounded like a good idea.

Forty-five minutes, she hoped, was enough time for at least one of them to wake up. So she returned to the house with a bag of bagels and a carrying tray with three drip coffees (priding herself in remembering just the way Blaine liked it prepared). She let herself in once more and walked to the kitchen, setting the bagels and coffee down on the counter.

Only a few minutes later, after she had split one of the bagels and covered each half in cream cheese, Blaine entered the room. He froze, eyes widening a little as he saw her.

"Good morning, dear," she said cheerfully.

"I—I didn't—I mean—" he stammered. "Kurt and I—we just—"

She gave him a look. "Blaine, the two of you are thirty years old. You're adults." She handed him his coffee. He swallowed, nodding as he accepted the cup with a small 'thank you'. "And beside that," she continued, "I've thought for a while now that you and Kurt needed each other."

Blaine smiled sheepishly at her. "I think he's been fighting with not wanting to need anyone," he told her.

"Typical for him," she breathed out with a grin.

Blaine chuckled slightly. "I don't think he's ever made the connection that I need him just as much, if not more."

"Probably not," she conceded, and they were quiet for a moment before she set down her coffee. "Now, you wouldn't mind starting a fire, would you?" she asked. "I was going to call Burt to look at the heat, but..."

"Thank you for not doing that," Blaine said, a little uneasily, and Carole chuckled. "But yeah, I can do that."

They moved to the living room, where Kurt had sat up and was stretching slightly. His eyes opened sleepily, blinking a few times before registering Carole's presence. He yelped slightly, yanking at the blankets to cover his bare chest, only to tumble backwards onto the carpeting.

The woman raised her eyebrows in amusement.

"Carole!" he said breathlessly. "I didn't—I didn't know that—"

"Lots of that going 'round here," Blaine quipped, kneeling in front of the fireplace. He offered Kurt a weak smile before beginning to work on the fire. Kurt scrambled to reach for his shirt, quickly pulling it over his head.

"Honestly, sweetheart," Carole sighed. "I already told him that you're both *adults*. And as long as *you're* happy, *I'm* happy." She paused. "I was, however, hoping to call your father to get the heat working, so if, oh, I don't know... if you wanted to get dressed, that might be a good idea." She smiled, and Kurt felt the heat rise in his cheeks. He nodded, and with one last grin, she turned to walk out of the room, pulling out her phone. Kurt groaned, looking to the ceiling.

"Hey," Blaine murmured, crawling toward him, and Kurt turned to look at him. "There aren't any... regrets here, are there?"

Kurt looked at him with an incredulous smile. "Never," he breathed out, and he inched forward to press a kiss to Blaine's lips. "Any for you?" he asked, their noses still touching.

"Never," Blaine responded, and he smiled as he stole another quick kiss.

Kurt pulled away, with slight uncertainty. "So where does this take us?" he asked. He paused. "Is there an us?"

"Do you want there to be an us?" Blaine asked Kurt, brushing the other man's hair out of the way so he could look into his eyes.

Kurt nodded. "What do you want?"

Blaine hummed in response. "You," he said with a grin, and Kurt laughed.

"I'll see what I can do about that," he murmured. He hesitated, licking his lips. "What do we tell Aiden and Ella?"

"The truth," Blaine said simply. "Mm, once everything's all nice and set up here, we make dinner and tell them over dessert."

"And my dad?" he asked. "Finn and Rachel and... everyone?"

Blaine chuckled softly, pulling Kurt into his arms. "We tell them at our own pace, right?" he replied. "It can be on a need-to-know basis. Just... take things slow. Make them simple like Ella says."

"You *honestly* believe that will work?" Kurt asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Shh, let me have my moment and pretend that it will," Blaine told him, closing his eyes.

"Your dad's on his way," came Carole's voice, and Blaine pulled away slightly. "Up and dressed, boys."

Blaine stood, stretching, grabbing his jeans and pulling them on. "I can head off if—"

"No," Kurt said quickly, and he could see Carole's smile grow out of the corner of his eye. "I just thought that—I mean, Carole, did you drive the truck over? Because Blaine and I could go pick up the bedroom sets..."

After a quick moment, she held out the keys. "Sounds like a plan. I'll hold down the fort for you boys."

It was a quiet, peaceful trip. There was something very soothing about the way that Blaine slipped his hand into Kurt's without a word, the quiet that was between them so comfortable and relaxed, as though this wasn't something new to them, and maybe it was because, to an extent it wasn't.

However, after they returned to Kurt's new home, it was different. Burt had arrived, along with Finn and Rachel and Aiden, and the quiet, stolen moments that Kurt had been hoping for with Blaine had become a distant memory. Suddenly, every moment they had alone just to *breathe* was being interrupted by one of the other five in the house, asking Kurt questions or calling one of them away for help, working on getting everything right.

Kurt at last collapsed on the floor beside Blaine, who was putting the final few screws into Kurt's bed. "It wasn't this stressful the last time I moved," he huffed. "And that was moving ten hours away, not fifteen minutes."

Blaine chuckled, and he pressed a hasty kiss to Kurt's cheekbone. "That's the exact reason why," he said. "It's because right now there are seven people in your house, including you and your son, all trying to do things that, honestly, you could just as easily be doing yourself. In fact, it'd probably be easier if you were. Because it's *your* home, you know how you want it."

"I'd rather go back to yesterday," Kurt sighed, and Blaine smirked in response.

"Oh would you?" he asked teasingly, raising an eyebrow.

Kurt shook his head, but he was smiling. "You're terrible."

Blaine leaned in for another hurried kiss. "I can live with that."

Kurt reached up, placing a hand on the side of Blaine's face. "I bet you could," he murmured, and he closed the space between them, stealing a longer, more heated kiss.

"Kurt!" Kurt pulled away at the sound of his brother's voice, yelling down the hall. Kurt threw his head back in frustration. "Kurt, I think I got Aiden's room set up okay, but... I wasn't sure if—"

"Coming," Kurt shouted in response, grumbling as he got to his feet. He grimaced at Blaine. "I suppose it's too late to change my mind and go back to New York?"

Chapter Fifteen

When Kurt awoke in the middle of the night, he was a little surprised. He rolled over in his bed and tried to drift off once more, doing his best to write it off as simply being the new house. After all, it had only been a little over a week. He and Aiden were still rapidly adjusting.

Then, he heard a noise. His heart and stomach dropped, recognizing the sound all too well. He quickly threw off his blankets and padded down the hallway.

"Aiden?" he asked softly, making his way into his son's room and sitting down at the edge of his bed. The glow from his nightlight confirmed his fears when he saw his little boy curled up and crying. "What's wrong, sweetheart?"

"My—my tummy," Aiden said between sniffles, and Kurt furrowed his brow.

"Is it worse?" he asked worriedly, his heart pounding as Aiden nodded. Kurt stood, trying to steady his head. "We're going to fix that," he said, doing his best to keep a calm voice. "I'm going to carry you, okay?" Aiden nodded and Kurt scooped up his son in his arms. He'd never felt so tiny and fragile to him before.

The twenty-minute drive to the hospital seemed to take hours. And then, suddenly Kurt was sitting in the room with Aiden, who had at last drifted off to sleep. He was still clutching his son's hand, desperately waiting for someone to tell him what was wrong.

"Mr. Hummel?" Kurt's head snapped up, looking worriedly at the doctor returning.

"Is he—"

"He'll be fine," the other man said in a reassuring tone. "However, we were hoping that we could start surgery as soon as possible—"

"Surgery?" Kurt asked in a tight voice, his grip on Aiden's hand tightening.

"Your son has appendicitis," the doctor told him. "If we don't operate—"

"No, I understand," Kurt told him quickly, nodding wearily. "I don't... I don't suppose I can stay with him?"

The doctor sighed and shook his head. "I'm afraid not."

Again, Kurt nodded, looking at his son hopelessly as a few attendants filed into the room. The doctor turned to one of the nurses, murmuring something to her. She nodded quickly and approached Kurt with a kind, gentle smile.

"Mr. Hummel, I'll take you back out to the waiting room," she told him, and he nodded, pressing a quick kiss to his son's forehead before letting the young woman lead him from the room. "Is there anything I can do for you?" she asked. Kurt shook his head immediately. Then, he stopped.

"Actually, could... could you call Carole Hummel?" he asked. "She works in pediatrics. I—I just—"

"Of course, dear," the nurse said, offering a warm smile. "We don't allow cellphones in here, but if you like, you can step right outside and make a call to your spouse. I promise I'll come find you the moment anything happens with your son."

Kurt nodded absently, taking a deep breath and unearthing his phone from his jacket pocket as he stepped outside. He sunk onto a bench, staring at the phone, suddenly angry at his fleeting moment of stupidity. Who did he think he was going to call?

He shoved his phone away once more, burying his face in his hands. It was fine for him to think like that. It was natural, it really was. His son was sick and he wanted to call the boy's other father about it. It was normal.

He looked out at the parking lot, hugging himself tightly. He could wait for Carole and his dad. He was sure they wouldn't be too long. Then, he licked his lips, narrowing his eyes. Perhaps he had someone else he could call after all.

Once more he pulled out his phone, quickly flipping through his contacts before hitting the call button.

"*Kurt?*" Blaine's voice was groggy, and Kurt felt a pang of guilt for waking the other man up.

"Hey," he said lamely.

"*What's going on?*" Blaine asked.

"I... I'm at the hospital," Kurt told him.

He heard Blaine's breath hitch. "*Is everything okay?*" he asked immediately. "*Are—are you all right?*"

"I'm fine," he assured him. "It's Aiden. I woke up and he was crying because of his stomach, and... I rushed him here, and they said it's appendicitis. They're operating right now."

"*I'll be right there,*" Blaine said quickly. "*Lemme just take Ella to the neighbor's house, and I'll be there.*" There was a pause. "*Need me to stay on the line?*" he asked.

"No," Kurt quickly assured him. "It's fine, I just..." He sighed. "Thank you, Blaine."

"*Any time,*" Blaine responded. "*I'll be there in less than ten minutes.*"

Kurt remained outside after hanging up. Moments later, the nurse came looking for him, offering a sobered smile, and asked him to fill out a few more papers while he waited, which he did so absent-mindedly. He couldn't concentrate. He could barely even think.

Then, he heard the familiar shuffling of feet, and he glanced up as Blaine was approaching, his hands stuffed deep in his pockets, his scarf wrapped around his neck. Blaine's eyes met Kurt's for a brief moment, and he quickened his pace as he ducked his head against the wind once more. Kurt shakily got to his feet.

Immediately he was enveloped by the warmth of Blaine's arms. He let himself relax into the touch, feeling calm for the first time in hours.

"You're freezing," Blaine breathed into his ear. "Come on, contents

inside..." Kurt nodded vaguely as Blaine took his arm in his, leading him back through the doors. Blaine took the clipboard from Kurt and handed it to an attendant who took it, nodding, before leading Kurt to a chair. "Let me get you a coffee," he said softly, and Kurt nodded again. He was back in moments, pressing the warm cup into Kurt's icy hands.

"Thanks," Kurt murmured.

Blaine nodded, taking the seat beside him. "He'll be fine," he breathed out. "I promise."

"I know," Kurt responded. "I know he will, he... he has to be." He let out a tiny laugh. "You know, when I was younger, less than a year after my mom died, I fell out of a tree I was climbing. I broke my arm, ended up with a scar on my neck... I guess this is how my dad felt." He sucked in a breath, looking down at his hands. "I'm so glad that Alex didn't... didn't suffer," he said. "With my mom, and then my dad's heart attack... if he'd been in a hospital, I... I have no idea what I would have done."

Blaine nodded once again, and took the other man in his arms, whispering constant reassurances.

It seemed as though little time passed before Burt and Carole arrived, offering the same assurances and promises that things would be all right. Blaine didn't release Kurt for a moment, his arms tightly around him as the four of them spoke softly, until at last Burt and Carole settled themselves across from the two men.

Burt shifted himself in the uncomfortable waiting room chair, watching as Blaine's hand traveled up and down's Kurt arm. He narrowed his eyes slightly and leaned over to Carole.

"I know it probably isn't the time," he said in a hushed tone, "but is somethin' goin' on there?"

Carole looked up from her magazine, gazing at Kurt and Blaine for a moment before returning her attention to her reading. "You're right dear, this isn't the time."

Burt let out a rough sigh. "He's my *son*—"

Carole took his hand in hers. "And *his* son is in the hospital," she reminded him. "Now isn't the time." She gave him a smile. "Besides, he's an adult, dear."

Burt mumbled something under his breath that sounded like, '*still my kid*', and Carole chuckled, shaking her head.

"Mr. Hummel?" Four pairs of eyes looked up at the young woman, and Kurt felt his heart stop. Had something gone wrong? He wasn't even sure how much time had passed, how long he'd been sitting there waiting... She offered a slight smile. "Everything fine. We're moving him out of surgery now. I thought you might like to be there when he wakes up."

Kurt nodded desperately, pulling away slightly from Blaine's grasp before following the woman out of sight.

Blaine let out a sigh of relief, visibly relaxing, leaning back into his chair. Carole smiled at him as Burt muttered something about grabbing them some coffee. Her husband disappeared, and she took the seat that had been vacated by Kurt, next to Blaine. He sat up a little straighter and offered her a tired smile.

"Thank you," she said.

"I didn't do anything," he told her, and she smiled softly.

"I'm sure Kurt would beg to differ," she responded simply.

Chapter Sixteen

“Could you give me a hand?”

Kurt turned to Blaine, raising his eyebrows. "Blaine, I'm certain that between Dalton and your choice of attire at McKinley, you are perfectly capable of tying a tie," he said as he rolled his eyes, but all the same he crossed the room, taking either side in his hands and swiftly looping them into a knot.

"Probably," Blaine said with a grin. "But if it gives me a few more moments of this view..." He swooped in, kissing the curve of Kurt's shoulder. He suckled slightly on the patch of skin and Kurt gasped.

"Stop," he murmured in a very unconvincing voice, and Blaine merely tugged him closer, his hands clutching his back. He hummed and smiled, kissing up the other man's neck. "God, Blaine, I—if you leave a mark—" he cut off, moaning slightly. Blaine tightened his grasp on Kurt, letting one hand trail up the soft, smooth skin of his side.

"Kurt, I—*oh*." Kurt felt his heart stop as Rachel pushed open the man's bedroom door. She blushed slightly.

"Rachel," Blaine muttered, his cheeks red, letting go of Kurt. "We—"

"It's okay!" she said quickly. "You don't need to be embarrassed or anything. This one time, when I was younger, I walked in on my two gay dads—"

"*Stop*," Kurt said quickly. "Please, I... stop right now."

Rachel merely entered the room and closed the door behind her. "I'm saying that it's all right!" she assured them quickly, smiling and nodding. "I mean, I can't say I'm surprised really that this is going on... How *long* has this been going on exactly?"

Kurt shifted slightly, feeling his level of discomfort rise. "A couple weeks?" he offered.

"And you didn't tell me?" she asked breathlessly.

"We were going to, but—well, then Aiden—Rachel, would you let me get dressed?" he asked desperately. "I'd rather have this conversation when I'm wearing a shirt."

"Of course!" she said quickly, backing up into the door. "You two finish getting ready." She nodded and gave a coy smile before leaving the room once more.

Kurt groaned slightly. "Thank god we were saying something today," he mumbled, wrenching open the drawer and grabbing a shirt to pull over his head. He then yanked his button-up off the hanger and slid it on. "Otherwise, Rachel would have told everyone by the end of dinner without our consent." Blaine smiled, wrapping his arms around Kurt from behind and pressing a soft kiss onto his neck. He let his chin rest against his shoulder, and hummed in response. Kurt sighed. "I shouldn't feel this nervous," he said, a little awkwardly. "I've had this conversation with my dad and Carole before." He sighed, pulling away from Blaine to pull a sweater out from his closet.

"It's not about them, is it, though?" Blaine offered. "I mean, the difference this time is Aiden. And he's the most important one, isn't he?"

"Him and Ella," Kurt responded, nodding slowly.

"I promise you don't have to worry about Ella," Blaine told him with a grin. "We'll tell her when she gets back from her mother's side of the family, and I'm sure she'll ask us when we're going to petition for the first gay Disney prince movie."

Kurt sighed. "I just want Aiden to take it well," he said. "I know he understands now that you're not trying to replace his dad, but... I don't know." He licked his lips. "I wish we'd told him before. But then he was in the hospital and... it just didn't seem to feel right."

"Then we tell him now," Blaine suggested. "Save telling your parents and brother for later, after they get here."

Kurt looked at him, nodding slowly. "All right," he responded, and Blaine smiled at him encouragingly, offering his hand. Kurt offered a small smile in response, taking his hand in his. He took a deep breath

as they walked downstairs. "I want... I think I should tell him alone," he breathed out, and Blaine nodded understandingly.

"Of course," he said. "I'm going to call Ella. Make sure she's behaving herself." He flashed a smile, and Kurt gave him a swift kiss.

"Make sure Finn and my parents are on the way?" he asked, and Blaine nodded, heading out the back door. Kurt took a deep breath, walking into the living room. "Aiden?" he asked softly, and the boy glanced up from his coloring book, offering a grin.

"Look, daddy, I colored this for you. Do you like it? It isn't done yet, or maybe it is, but I don't think so, not yet," he gushed, and Kurt smiled, pressing a kiss to his son's forehead.

"I love it," he said. "Can I hang it when it's done?" Aiden nodded quickly, looking back down at his book. Kurt sucked in a deep breath. "A, how do you feel about Blaine?"

Aiden tilted his head slightly. "I like him," he responded. "He is super nice and he plays with me and colors with me. And he fixeded you when you were sad, so he can't be bad."

Kurt felt his heart swell slightly in his chest. He licked his lips. "I... I like him too," he said.

Aiden looked up at him again. "Do you like him like Dada?" he asked. Kurt opened his mouth to answer, but Aiden kept speaking, turning his attention back to his coloring book. "It would be okay if you did. Then he and Ella could come live with us."

"Well, I don't know about that last part," Kurt said with a smile. "But... yeah, I do like him kind of like Dada."

Aiden nodded. "Okay."

"Okay?" Kurt repeated a little skeptically, and Aiden nodded again. He took his son up in his arms. "You know, you're the most important man in my life, A."

Aiden grinned and squirmed against his father's chest. "Okay daddy!" he giggled. "Can I color again now? I wanna finish!"

Kurt let Aiden back onto the floor, patting him on the back and

contents

getting back to his feet. He smiled at his son, watching him for a few moments before turning and walking into the kitchen.

"Did you just tell Aiden about you and Blaine?"

Kurt turned, watching as Rachel entered the kitchen from the other side. "Yeah," he said. "I did. And he's completely fine about it." She broke into a grin.

"I'm so happy for you two—well, *three*," she breamed. "I'm so glad that your life is really turning around. You deserve it."

Kurt smiled at her in return. "Thanks, Rachel," he said. "And what about you and Finn? How have you been?"

She paused. "Good," she told him slowly.

Kurt raised his eyebrows slightly, about to respond when Blaine entered the kitchen. "They'll be here any minute," he told them. "How's everything going on in here?"

"Turkey's in the oven," Rachel told him dutifully. "As well as the tofu version. Potatoes are peeled and ready to be boiled, and all the other fixings are ready as soon as it gets closer."

"And I've got the snacks for while you and dad and Finn watch the game," Kurt said with a smile. "Everything's right on schedule."

The door opened, as if on cue, and Blaine glanced at his watch. "*Perfectly* on schedule, it seems," he commented, and Burt and Finn and Carole were filing in, offering hugs and holiday tidings. It only lasted a moment before everyone was being shooed back out of the kitchen by Kurt, as he bustled about, making sure that everything was going to be perfect.

He quickly brought out the pre-dinner treats into the living room, setting a tray on the coffee table for everyone to munch on.

He returned to the kitchen and Finn followed him in. "Looking for a drink," he commented when Kurt shot him a look.

"I had Blaine pick up some Natty Boh for you and Dad," he told him. "It's in the fridge. And will you pass me the bottle of Bordeaux? I'll pour some for Mom and Rachel."

"Oh, no," Finn said quickly, handing him the bottle. "None for Rachel."

Kurt raised an eyebrow, popping out the cork and pouring a glass. "Oh, *please*, Finn, it's her favourite brand. One glass of wine isn't going to send her over the edge."

"Dude, you know that sort of stuff isn't good for the baby," Finn said. Kurt knocked over the glass of wine, fumbling to set it upright and stop the spilling of the liquid.

"*Excuse me?*" he asked, turning to Finn in disbelief.

"Shit." Finn ran a hand through his hair. "*Shit*, she didn't tell you. I thought she told you!" He placed his hands on Kurt's shoulders. "Dude, you *can't* tell her I told you. She'll *kill me*. She wanted to make the announcement at dinner, but I thought she was going to tell you first because she *always* tells you first—she tells you these things before she tells *me!*"

"It's fine," Kurt said quickly. "I won't say anything I promise." Finn relaxed visibly, murmuring a brief 'thanks'. Kurt gave him a small smile. "So, how far along is she?"

Finn let out a breath. "A couple months?" he said uncertainly.

Kurt nodded. "I'm dating Blaine," he blurted out.

Finn raised his eyebrows. "Seriously?" he asked. "That's great, man."

"Dad doesn't know yet," he said, and Finn nodded. "I was going to tell everyone today."

"Rachel wanted to tell everyone today," Finn said. He cleared throat a little awkwardly. "So, give me a hand with those drinks?"

Kurt nodded, picking up the glass of wine for Carole and a plate of tarts. He followed Finn into the living room, where his stepbrother pressed one of the cans into Burt's hands, and then took a seat beside Rachel. Kurt placed the tarts in front of them and handed the wineglass to Carole, who smiled.

"You all right Rachel?" Blaine asked, and Kurt turned his contents

attention to the young woman, who did look a little pale.

"Fine," she said assuredly. "I just..." she trailed off slightly. Suddenly she pushed herself off the couch and bolted to the bathroom.

Finn moved to get up and go after her, but Kurt patted him on the shoulder and followed after her instead.

"Rachel?" he asked softly, wrinkling his nose slightly at the sound of her retching. He took a deep breath, pushing the door open and kneeling down beside the girl. He gently pulled her hair out of the way. "You all right?" he asked kindly.

She nodded, and he offered her a hand towel. She wiped her mouth and let out a shaky breath as he got her a cup of water and sat beside her on the floor, leaning back against the sink. She took the cup gratefully, and they sat in silence for a few moments.

"I'm moving back to Lima," she told him. She laughed softly. "You and I had such *huge* dreams, Kurt. But both of us ended up back here. We still couldn't get out." She swallowed, looking at him with a smile. "I'm pregnant."

Kurt smiled at her, taking her hand in his. "This isn't a terrible place to raise your kids," he said reasonably. "Some of the people who live here still have miles to go in the way of progress and all that, but it's always going to be home." She tilted her head onto his shoulder. "And he or she will be completely surrounded by family, this way." He felt Rachel nod against his neck.

They were quiet again before a cheer broke out from the living room and Rachel laughed softly.

"I suppose we should get back in there," she said, and Kurt nodded. Rachel pulled away and the man got to his feet, offering her his hand. She took it, and he pulled her up.

Everyone was on their feet in the living room, cheering and shouting as they watched the game. Blaine turned to him, grinning as he and Rachel returned to the room. Blaine quickly made his way to Kurt.

"Everything all right?" he asked softly, and Kurt paused, then nodded toward the kitchen. Blaine quickly followed him. "What's going on?"

"Rachel's pregnant," Kurt told him quickly, and Blaine's eyebrows shot up.

"Seriously?" he asked, and Kurt nodded.

"She's moving back to Lima because of it," he said. "They were going to announce it tonight."

"That's great," Blaine said with a grin and a laugh. "God, I'm so excited for them."

Kurt nodded, pausing slightly. "I told Finn... about us, I mean," he said.

Blaine smiled. "And?"

"And he's happy for us," he said, with a smile.

"Good," Blaine responded. He placed his hand on the side of Kurt's face, pulling him in for a kiss. Kurt pushed against him, his hands finding his hips and pushing up the hem of his shirt. "Mm, they're right in the other room," Blaine murmured against Kurt's lips.

"They're distracted," Kurt whispered. "And almost all of them know by now."

"Except your dad," Blaine muttered.

"It's fine, he's..." Someone cleared their throat from the doorway and the two men froze. Kurt's eyes flickered up. "Dad," he said, swallowing hard.

Burt adjusted his cap. "I'm just gonna—"

They pulled away from each other, Blaine leaning back against the counter and ducking his head. Kurt didn't let go of the man's hand, however.

"No, dad, I—" Kurt took a deep breath. "It's... it's fine."

Burt nodded. "So... you two, then?"

"Yeah," Kurt said. "The two of us."

"And Aiden knows?"

Kurt nodded. "He's fine with it."

Burt turned to Blaine. "You treatin' him right?" he asked, and Blaine quickly nodded.

"Of course, sir," he said.

"Good," Burt said, nodding. "I don't care how old you two are, he's still my boy." He cleared his throat. "Now, I'm gonna grab another beer and then go back into the living room, and I'm going to pretend that I didn't see anything." He nodded, took a can of beer from the fridge, and then left the room.

Kurt groaned, letting his face fall into Blaine's shoulder. "I had had really high hopes for today..." he grumbled with a sigh.

Blaine chuckled. "*Please*," he said. "It's *Thanksgiving*. With your *family*. You were honestly expecting something *less* than completely dysfunctional?"

Kurt allowed himself a small smile. "That's fair enough," he conceded.

Chapter Seventeen

Kurt dug the key out of his bag. It was kind of funny—he always thought when he was younger that the idea of giving one's key to a significant other was a bit foolish and old-fashioned. But as he pressed it into the slot of Blaine's door, he had to admit that it felt sort of... exciting.

"Excuse me!"

Kurt turned at the sound of the voice, watching as a brunette man quickly approached him. He raised his eyebrow slightly, removing the key from the lock and clutching it in his fingers. "Can I help you?"

"Do you—you don't live here, do you?" he asked. "I'm looking for Blaine Anderson's place."

Kurt frowned slightly at him. "And can I ask why?" he asked coldly.

The man held out his hand. "I'm Christian, his fiancé," he said.

"*Ex-fiancé*," Kurt corrected for him, and the other man lowered his hand. "You left him... what, a year and a half ago?"

"You a good friend of Blaine's, then?" he asked, a forced smile on his lips as his eyes roamed over Kurt.

"You could say that," Kurt said smoothly. "Now, what do you want? Because I think Blaine has made it very clear he doesn't want anything to do with you."

"Actually, I came to bring back his scarf. You see, he forgot it when we went out to coffee on Monday," he paused and produced the familiar scarf that Kurt recognized, even back from their days at Dalton. He smiled at the expression on Kurt's face. "I'm sorry, I take it he didn't tell you? I wonder why he wouldn't mention something like that."

"I don't know who you think you are," Kurt snapped. "Even if you weren't trying to specifically anger me, you still have absolutely no right to come around here. You hurt Blaine an inexcusable amount

when you left him on your wedding day. You don't have the right to just waltz back into his life, no matter what the conditions may be."

"I could say the same about you," Christian retorted, and Kurt narrowed his eyes. "You're his high school sweetheart, aren't you? I recognize you from his old photos."

"What happened between me and Blaine—"

"Isn't my business, of course," Christian held up his hands in defeat. "I just don't think it's fair for you to think that *you're* the one who's all high and mighty, when you broke his heart pretty terribly, too."

Kurt snatched the scarf from the other man's hands. "*Leave*," he told him forcefully.

"Fine," Christian said with a shrug. He stalked off, giving Kurt one last smirk over his shoulder.

Furiously, Kurt shoved the key into the lock once more, letting himself inside. He quickly made his way up the stairs.

"Hey," Blaine said with a smile as Kurt opened the door at the top of the stairs. "You look—hey, my scarf! Where did you find it?"

"Christian gave it to me," Kurt said evenly, and Blaine's face paled. "When were you going to tell me that you met with him?"

Blaine closed his eyes. "I wasn't."

"You weren't," Kurt snapped. "*Fantastic*, Blaine. We're going out for a *month* and already you're lying to me about meeting with the man you almost married. Just *perfect*!"

"Kurt, it wasn't like that," Blaine said. "All I did was tell him that I wanted nothing to do with him."

"And a simple *phone call*—"

"I blocked his number," Blaine cut across. "And then he came by my office at school. I didn't know what else to do." He looked at Kurt seriously. "You must know that I'm not cheating on you."

"Maybe not, but you just get yourself in these situations, Blaine,"

Kurt told him. "Some guy likes you, openly hits on you or asks you out, and you just... *befriend them*. And then it makes me look and feel completely and utterly pathetic because there you are, just like high school, another guy pining away for you—"

"I'm not befriending Christian," Blaine said, suddenly sounding angry, and Kurt looked taken aback. "He cheated on me, okay? He left me because he was cheating on me and decided he liked that guy better. I would *never* take him back, even if you weren't in the picture. Especially with Ella around? *Never*." He let out a cold, laugh. "You know, *I'm* the pathetic one." He shook his head, closing his eyes tightly. "When we decided to part ways, I *never* got over you. But you moved on, and you ended up *so happy*." He gave Kurt a sad smile, then he shook his head again, looking terribly hurt and broken. "Be honest, Kurt. Not with me, but with yourself. If things had went the way you wanted, you wouldn't be here. There wouldn't be an 'us'. The only reason that you're here is because Alex is dead."

The two men stared at each other for several moments longer before Blaine sighed frustratedly, snatching up his keys.

"W-where are you going?" Kurt asked him in a tiny voice. Blaine turned to him, looking less furious than before, but still mildly angry.

He sighed. "I just... I can't be here right now," he muttered. He turned and went back downstairs, the door slamming shut behind him just moments later.

Kurt took his bottom lip between his teeth, begging himself not to cry. He took a deep, shuddering breath, collapsing slightly in a chair. His heart was aching so badly, and he wondered if it was because of the things that Blaine said, or that somewhere deep down, he knew they were true.

The next day, Kurt thoroughly distracted himself with Aiden. He took the young boy shopping and spent hours playing with him,

forcing all thoughts of Blaine out of his mind. And in his opinion, he was doing it the best way possible.

However, the day after was some other boy from preschool's birthday party, and Aiden had been invited. And once his son had been dropped off, suddenly Kurt felt more alone than he had in a long time.

He had tried to call Blaine. Made phone calls and left messages and sent texts, saying that he was sorry, because that was really all he knew how to say. Nothing else seemed right or sounded right. But then again, he was finding that many things were that way without Blaine.

Rachel, with her sixth sense, had sent him countless text messages begging him to talk to her, but he ignored them. Even if he had felt like talking, he wasn't sure that she'd be the right person—she'd become an emotional wreck recently, Finn told him, because of the pregnancy, and if she thought that her two best gays had even the smallest chance of breaking up, Kurt was afraid she'd snap completely.

But that wasn't what Kurt wanted. He didn't want Blaine to leave him.

He loved him.

And maybe he wasn't ready to admit that, because somehow telling someone that you love them as an adult wasn't any easier than as a kid. Somehow, it seemed so much more difficult, like it carried a bigger weight. And despite knowing fully the consequences of saying such a thing (not like in high school, when *everyone* 'loved' each other, whether you were dating a day or a week or a year, or not dating at all) it still seemed like a terribly big word.

And honestly, no time had felt right to say it. So the only person he dared admit the idea to was himself. But that didn't change the way he felt, or how desperately he wanted Blaine to just come back to him.

He sunk onto the ottoman, running his hands over his face, lacing

contents

his fingers into his hair. He felt like he always got himself into these messes but wasn't so sure how to fix them once he got there.

He heard as the front door opened, but couldn't force himself to look up. His dad, Carole, Finn, Rachel... whichever one was dropping in, he didn't really care. Yet suddenly he was being pulled into an embrace by a different pair of arms, one he recognized too well.

He didn't dare move or open his eyes, just in case it turned out his mind was tricking him.

Finally, Blaine pulled back, pushing some of Kurt's hair out of his face. "I'm sorry," Kurt murmured to him, and Blaine nodded slowly.

"I know," he whispered. "I am, too."

"You're not just my second choice or a consolation prize," Kurt told him. "I want to be with you."

"I know," Blaine sighed again. "I was just being stupid."

"But it's not stupid," Kurt said. "I mean... I don't know where we'd be right now if Alex were still alive. I don't know where we'd be if Christian had treated you right, or if your brother hadn't died. The point is that this is where we are now. We can't change things. And all things considered... I'm content with where I am now."

Blaine smiled at him, pressing a kiss to Kurt's mouth. "I think I'm pretty happy here, as well," he said. "I don't want to lose you, Kurt."

"I don't want to lose you either," Kurt murmured. "Can we just... be okay again?"

Blaine smiled, chuckling softly. "If you'll have me," he said.

"Of course," Kurt breathed out. "I don't plan on letting you go again."

Chapter Eighteen

Kurt jumped slightly at the ringing of his cellphone, frowning slightly as he glanced at the unknown number. He brushed his bangs out of his face and finally picked up the phone from his desk.

"Hello?" he asked with slight hesitance.

"*Kurf?*" came a tiny voice on the other end.

Kurt frowned. "Ella?" he responded questioningly. "Sweetheart, aren't you in school?"

"*I am,*" she responded quickly. "*I don't feel good and I wanna go home but Uncle Blaine isn't picking up—*"

"Right," Kurt murmured, nodding absently. "He has class today."

"*Can you come get me?*" she pleaded. "*Please, Kurf?*"

"Of course, sweetie," Kurt responded. "Let me just finish up, and I'll be there in ten minutes."

"*Thank you, Kurt,*" she said.

"Be there soon." He clicked the 'end call' button and pocketed his phone, quickly saving the article he'd been working on and shutting his laptop. He grabbed his keys and was in his car in moments.

Twenty minutes later, after finding Ella and signing her out at the front office, she climbed into the front seat of Kurt's car, her pink princess backpack at her feet. Kurt looked at her, concerned. "What's wrong, sweetheart?"

She tilted her head, looking vaguely confused for a moment. "Oh, my tummy hurts," she told him, and Kurt looked at her curiously. He narrowed his eyes slightly.

"Your tummy," he said slowly, and she nodded quickly. "Well, I'll get you home then, okay?" She nodded again.

Kurt gripped the wheel, thinking carefully for several moments. Then he shifted the car into gear and started driving in the opposite direction as Ella pressed the side of her face to the cold car window,

unaware.

"I'm sorry you're sick," Kurt sighed, pulling into a parking lot. Ella sat up a little bit, her eyes widening as she looked out the window.

"What are we doing here?" she asked, turning to Kurt.

"Well, I was kind of hungry," Kurt told her, off-handedly. "I was thinking that getting some pizza sounded like a good idea. But if you're sick... I guess I'll be eating alone."

Ella squirmed in her seat, frowning. She nodded slowly.

"Come on," he said. "Can't have you sitting in the car during the wait. I'll get it to go, but..."

Ella nodded again and unbuckled her seatbelt. She clambered out of the car and met Kurt in the front of it. Kurt took a deep breath as he looked down at the little girl. "Now, I can give you another option," he told her. "We sit down out here," he said, nodding to the bench out front, "and you tell me the *real* reason that I came to pick you up from school early."

Ella stared at him, biting her lip and seeming to weigh her options. At last she nodded and Kurt gently placed a hand behind her, guiding her to the bench at the side of the building. She jumped up onto the seat, letting her feet swing back and forth, and staring at the ground.

"I *hate* school," Ella grumbled, and Kurt sighed, kneeling in front of the girl. "And I *hate* Andrew."

"Why?" Kurt asked gently.

"Because he's *mean*," Ella said, sniffing suddenly. She raised her hands to her eyes, rubbing at them.

"Sweetheart, what happened?" Kurt pressed on.

"H-he said th-that my Uncle Blaine is a b-bad man," Ella told him, tears falling from her eyes. "He said th-that it's *wrong* to—to—"

"To be gay," Kurt finished for her, swallowing thickly. She nodded again, swiping at her eyes. Kurt pushed a few of her dark curls out of her face, a sickening feeling in the pit of his stomach. "Sweetheart, I...

I am *so sorry*." He sighed frustratedly. "This isn't... this isn't something you should be thinking ... especially not now, when you're so young."

"I don't understand how it c-could be b-bad," she said, sniveling. "You a-and Uncle Blaine are s-so h-happy!"

Kurt sighed, brushing back her hair again. "I know," he murmured, and he finally got up off of his knees, taking a seat beside Ella. "Some people will never be able to see that. They're just going to always see it as wrong."

"But that's not fair," Ella pressed on. "Everyone should get a fairy tale ending!" Kurt merely smiled sadly at her. "And—and you to love each other *so much*," she continued, and Kurt raised his eyebrows slightly. "I can *tell*."

"You can, can you?" he asked hesitantly.

She nodded quickly. "I can," she said. "Every time Uncle Blaine looks at you he gets the same goofy look that Aladdin does with Jasmine." She paused, looking up at him, finally looking less sad. "And you smile at him like Rapunzel," she said simply.

"And that means we're in love?" Kurt asked her with a small smile.

"Of course you are," she said. She frowned. "You do love Uncle Blaine, don't you?"

Kurt licked his lips, feeling the heat rise in his cheeks. "You'll keep it a secret if I tell you?" he asked, leaning close to her, and she nodded. "*Promise* not to tell," he told her.

"I promise!" she assured him quickly, folding her feet up beneath her and looking up at Kurt expectantly.

"I do love him," he told her with a smile. "A lot."

She beamed at him, but her face fell after a moment. "Can you keep my secret then?" she asked him hopefully. "I don't wanna tell Uncle Blaine what Andrew said. I don't want to make him sad."

Kurt nodded. "I think we can arrange that," he told her. "Now,

what do you say to some pizza? Then we can head to my place and you can show me these goofy faces Aladdin makes at Jasmine."

"Blackbird singing in the dead of night," Kurt sang quietly, brushing his son's bangs out of his face. Night had come at last, Ella already fast asleep in the guest room, and now was time for Aiden to be put to sleep. "Take these sunken eyes and learn to see. All your life, you were only waiting for this moment to be free." Kurt listened as Aiden's breath continued to steady out, watching as the boy's eyelashes ceased to flutter. "Blackbird fly, blackbird fly into the night of the dark black night..." He ran his thumb along his son's cheekbone, feeling his breath against his wrist. "Blackbird singing in the dead of night, take these broken wings and learn to fly. All your life, you were only waiting for this moment to arise. You were only waiting for this moment to arise. You were only waiting for this moment to arise..."

He pressed a swift kiss to Aiden's forehead, quietly standing up and smiling down at his son for a moment before walking to the door. Kurt silently crept out, shutting the door behind him with a soft *click*. He turned and caught sight of Blaine leaning against the opposite wall.

"Jesus," he breathed out. "You just scared me half to death."

Blaine chuckled. "Sorry," he murmured. He smiled briefly at Kurt, a strange expression in his eyes. "I can't remember the last time I heard that song," he said suddenly. "Probably when you sang it in high school."

Kurt sighed. "Ah yes, for Pavarotti. May he rest in peace..."

Blaine nodded. He opened his mouth to speak, but he paused, laughing quietly. He shook his head, looking away. "The last time I heard you sing that song, I fell in love with you."

Kurt stared at him for a moment. "And now?" he asked quietly. Blaine looked up at him. However, the quiet was broken the ringing of his phone.

"That'll be Rachel," he murmured, digging his phone out of his pocket. "She said she'd call earlier about Ella's voice lessons... I have to—"

"Yeah, no, definitely," Kurt said assuringly, and Blaine answered the phone, quickly descending the stairs so that there might be less of a chance for Aiden or Ella to hear him and wake up.

After Blaine had disappeared, Kurt slowly walked into his bedroom, settling himself on his bed. He desperately wondered what had possessed him to ask Blaine the question. He wondered what the answer might be. He wondered if he honestly wanted to know.

He glanced up as Blaine returned, pocketing his phone as he stood in the doorway. He licked his lips nervously.

"No," he said.

"What?" Kurt asked.

"The answer to your question is no," Blaine said, slowly approaching, and Kurt felt something inside him twist strangely.

"Oh," he responded lamely. He didn't know why he had half-expected a different answer. But he had, letting himself believe in Ella's fairy tale ideals and now there was a strange, numb feeling in his chest. He stared intently at the objects on his dresser without really seeing them, simply searching for anything else to pay attention to that wasn't Blaine.

However, Blaine reached for Kurt's face, placing a hand on his cheek and forcing their eyes to meet. "But that's only because I was already in love with you," he whispered, and he quickly captured Kurt's lips in his own. It was heated and rough and Kurt was already thinking incoherently, but this was almost too much.

"Oh," Kurt breathed out again as Blaine pulled away to press a line of kisses to his jaw.

He felt Blaine's lips twitch into a smile against his skin. "Oh?" he asked.

"Oh," Kurt repeated, finally regaining control over his mind. He cupped Blaine's face in his hands, letting his lips find Blaine's. "That's good."

"Good?" Blaine questioned in between kisses, and Kurt hummed against his lips response. "Why good?"

Kurt pulled away, his eyes flickering across Blaine's face, still with a hint of uncertainty. "I love you," he responded. He felt a sudden lightness. "I love you," he repeated, grinning a little more surely.

Blaine swept in to kiss him again, pulling the other man desperately close to him. He smiled against Kurt's mouth, and they kissed slowly yet eagerly. Their hands moved gently, softly, always refamiliarizing themselves with the skin they used to know so well, cataloguing each and every change that had occurred over the years. He hoped he never had to miss another moment of this man's life, hoped that he would never have to let him go. He desperately needed this. He needed Blaine.

Chapter Nineteen

When Kurt returned to his home after a morning coffee run, Blaine was still asleep, as were Ella and Aiden. He quietly returned to his bedroom, two cups of coffee in his hands, and settled himself on the mattress beside Blaine.

The other man stirred slightly, glancing up at Kurt through heavily-lidded eyes. He smiled up at him, pushing himself up the bed a few inches, forcing himself up on one elbow.

"Good morning," Kurt said softly, offering the coffee.

"Morning," Blaine murmured in response, taking the extra cup from Kurt. He murmured a quick 'thanks' before taking a long sip. "Mm, you're the best," he said and he turned slightly, resting the cup down on the bedside table.

"So I've been told," Kurt responded teasingly. He paused for a moment, twisting his cup in his hands. "What are you doing for Christmas?" he asked.

Blaine hummed, closing his eyes. "Probably watching '*The Enchanted Christmas*' with Ella, like we did last year, and Cornish hens for dinner. She *loves* the idea of having her own little bird to eat." He opened his eyes, tilting his head and glancing up at Kurt. "Why do you ask?"

Kurt took a deep breath. "Well, my dad and Carole are on some holiday cruise this week to relive the honeymoon they never really had, or something of the sort," he said carefully. "And Finn and Rachel are leaving for San Francisco tomorrow to celebrate a late Hannukah with her dads, since she and Finn celebrated Christmas last year."

Blaine nodded before suddenly catching on. "Did you... did you want to...?"

Kurt licked his lips hesitantly. "If you didn't want to—"

Blaine pulled the coffee from Kurt's hands, placing it on the
contents

bedside table beside his. He shifted closer to Kurt, smiling at him and placing a hand on one of his rosy cheeks. "Of course I want to spend Christmas with you," he said simply, smiling up at him. He pulled Kurt toward him, and the brunette smiled in return, leaning in to press a gentle kiss to Blaine's lips. "Did you have anything special in mind?"

"Not really," Kurt conceded. "Something traditional. I still think I've had my share of Jewish Christmases of Chinese food and movie marathons when Rachel and I lived together. And I know that Aiden's getting old enough where he's going to actually remember the holidays, not just from photographs and videos. I'd like to think that maybe he'll have better memories than me." He sighed. "My first holiday memory is being too sick to walk down the stairs, and throwing up on about six pairs of pajamas..." He shut his eyes tight. "And I remember so clearly the first few Christmases after my mom died. I don't want Aiden to look back at these times and his first thought to be about losing his dad."

"It won't be," Blaine assured him quickly. "We'll make sure of that. I promise."

Kurt stared at him for a moment before closing his eyes tightly once again. "Sometimes I don't understand why you're so *good* to me."

"Because I love you," Blaine said simply and Kurt laughed a little dryly, leaning down to kiss him again. Blaine quickly grasped onto Kurt's forearm, yanking him down so that he fell on top of him. He smiled at the laughter under Kurt's breathing, his hand trailing down the brunette's back as he kissed him forcefully. His hand quickly made it to the back of Kurt's neck again before moving around to the front, fingers quickly finding the buttons on his shirt.

The floor creaked down the hall and both men froze. At last Kurt sighed, pulling Blaine's hand away, but keeping their lips close. "Do you think we can just pretend to be asleep?" Blaine murmured hopefully, and Kurt chuckled.

"I doubt it," Kurt responded, and he pulled away, Blaine groaning childishly as he did so. "Besides, we have important things to do today." He stood up, plucking his coffee from the table and making his way to the doorway. "We'll need a Christmas tree, and I still have to finish wrapping gifts. And now I have to shop for Christmas dinner. Not to mention, I'm sure your niece would like to hear that I finally made a certain admission to you..."

"Wait," Blaine started, forcing himself up into a sitting position once more. "What was that last part?" Kurt merely raised his eyebrows and the other man narrowed his eyes. "Did you tell Ella you loved me before telling me?" he asked in mock offense.

"Please," Kurt responded indignantly. "You know her. She's eerily brilliant. I'm fairly certain that she knew it *long* before I ever did."

As the evening on Christmas drew to a close, Kurt definitely felt as though Blaine had kept his promise, helping him create the perfect Christmas for Aiden, and of course Ella as well. And after the presents and dinner and cleaning, Kurt and Blaine were finally settled on the sofa while Ella watched *Beauty and the Beast: The Enchanted Christmas*, sitting on the floor in a princess dress and holding a new doll, Aiden fast asleep on the floor beside her with a new firetruck in his arms like a teddy bear.

Blaine turned to Kurt with a smile, the man's pale skin illuminated only by the glow of the television. Kurt turned to him to offer a grin before looking back to the television.

"Can I give you your gift now?" Blaine whispered into Kurt's ear, and the brunette turned to him again, raising his eyebrows slightly.

"You already did," he responded. "An Alexander McQueen scarf? You act like I don't know how expensive that is..."

Blaine smiled at him, and tugged on his hand, pulling him away

from the living room and up the stairs and into the man's bedroom.

Kurt raised his eyebrows slightly. "If you're about to make a reference to an old Saturday Night Live skit featuring Justin Timberlake, I'd like to remind you that there are two children downstairs," he said in a low voice.

Blaine laughed. "Nothing like that," he assured him as they sat beside each other on the bed. He carefully pulled out a tiny box from his pocket, holding it between him and Kurt.

Kurt licked his lips, glancing between Blaine and the box. "Blaine..." he murmured slowly, taking the box in his hands. "This is too much," he breathed out. "The McQueen was too much, already. I—"

"It isn't too much. I've been holding on to this for quite a while, now," Blaine told him quickly, staring at the box. "I've been waiting for the right Christmas to give it to you." He paused slightly, looking up at Kurt again. "It's something I *wanted* to give to you thirteen years ago." Kurt froze, staring at the box with uncertainty. "Open it," Blaine quickly urged him.

Kurt slowly opened the box with a small *pop*, staring at the item within silently. Sitting on the small cushion was a beautiful golden hummingbird, with wings of pearl and a sapphire eye. "From the Elizabeth Taylor collection," Kurt murmured.

"I know it wasn't the emerald pendant you used to mention," Blaine said quickly. "But—well—if you don't like it—"

"I love it," Kurt told him breathlessly, looking up at him wondrously. "How on *earth* did you—?"

"The original buyer had passed away, and her son was selling off her massive jewelry collection," he said. "I recognized it immediately. I couldn't believe nobody else had."

"How could you possibly afford it?" Kurt asked.

"It was a few years back," Blaine said simply. "All the money I'd saved for Europe was sitting my account because my dad got sick so I

never went, and then I saw that brooch—"

"We weren't even dating then," Kurt reminded him in a low voice, and Blaine merely shrugged.

"It didn't matter," he said. "I just... I knew that I had to get it for you."

"It's too much," Kurt repeated.

Blaine shook his head. "He practically gave it to me," he assured Kurt. "I didn't even spend remotely close to the original amount."

Kurt lurched forward, roughly grabbing Blaine's face and kissing him hard on the mouth. "You're too good for me," Kurt muttered against his lips.

"You've said that before," Blaine breathed. "And I still don't believe you."

"Maybe if I'm lucky, you never will," Kurt whispered, closing the tiny gap between them once again.

Blaine pulled away slightly. "I love you," Blaine told him simply, brushing some of Kurt's hair out of his face. "Merry Christmas."

Kurt smiled softly at him. "Merry Christmas, Blaine."

Chapter Twenty

“You have my number, of course,” Kurt said. “And Blaine’s.”

“Yes,” Rachel assured them once again. “And you’ve already been over the timeline a dozen times: the five o’clock revival showing of *Chicago* at the local theater, and then a dinner at the downtown bistro, followed by a nice quiet evening to yourselves at your house.” She flashed him a suggestive smile. “And then, you’ll be back here tomorrow morning to pick up Aiden and Ella. Trust me, I have *everything* under control.”

Kurt still looked slightly nervous, rubbing his hands together, and Rachel took his hands in hers. “It’s only one night,” she assured him. “And if you want, you’re always welcome to come back here and check on them.”

“He won’t,” Blaine told her with a smile. He glanced at Kurt. “You need this.”

“We need this,” Kurt amended with a nervous grin, and Blaine smiled more widely, placing a hand on the other man’s shoulder.

“Now *go*,” Rachel urged them. “Finn and I have this perfectly under control, and you’re going to hardly have any spare time as it is. Get going!”

An hour later, Kurt and Blaine were settled in their seats, the theater dark as Roxie was sent to the Cook County Jail. The familiar introduction to ‘*Cell Block Tango*’ started playing and Kurt couldn’t help but smile to himself (because honestly, it was indisputably one of the most amazing musical numbers to be on Broadway). He shared a glance with Blaine, sitting to his left. Blaine smiled, giving Kurt’s knee a small squeeze with the hand he’d been resting there. Kurt returned the smile, leaning slightly toward the other man so that their

shoulders were touching, and the singing began.

It was at some point during '*squish*' that Kurt suddenly realized Blaine's hand had left his knee, and his fingers were now rested on his inner thigh, his thumb gently brushing over the front of his leg. He gave his leg another light squeeze, then shifted so that his palm was pressed flush against the joint of his leg. Kurt stared at him breathlessly, his eyes wide, completely ignoring the fluent Hungarian speech now coming from the stage. Blaine however, still seemed to be utterly invested in the performance. He took a deep breath, turning back to the stage.

Fine, he thought desperately, *if Blaine wanted to play this game...*

However, at some point between '*I Can't Do it Alone*' and '*My Own Best Friend*', Blaine's hand had shifted once again, and Kurt couldn't prevent the tiny gasp of shock from escaping his lips. Kurt clenched his jaw, fingertips digging into the arm of his chair, suddenly finding himself anxious for the intermission.

When at last the lights went up, Blaine quickly and smoothly removed his hand and pushed himself up out of his seat. He flashed Kurt a smile, telling him that he was going to head to the bathroom.

Perfect.

Kurt carefully waited a few minutes before making his way to the restroom. He quickly spotted the other man washing his hands at one of the sinks, then drying them off. He glanced up at Kurt with mild surprise as he dropped the paper towel in the trash can.

Blaine opened his mouth to say something but Kurt was shoving him roughly against the wall, pinning his shoulders against the cold tile. Blaine's breath hitched slightly, and Kurt moved dangerously close to him.

"You're despicable," he muttered, and he pressed his mouth to Blaine's neck, eliciting another gasp as he sucked lightly on the skin there. "Completely evil."

At last Blaine regained control of his thoughts, letting his hands
contents

find Kurt's hips and jerking him closer so that their bodies were flush against each other. He quickly captured Kurt's lips with his own, kissing him desperately, hot and open-mouthed. He at last managed to push against Kurt, turning him so that his back was against the mirror. Kurt only let out a small whine, muttering something vaguely about 'completely filthy' and 'disgusting', Blaine pinning his wrists against the glass.

"I think—*mmm*," Kurt gasped out as Blaine's lips moved along his jawline, teeth scraping slightly against his skin, leaving the skin slightly raw. "We should—we should—*nnggh*—skip dinner. We can always—always order in—"

"God yes," Blaine breathed out, his voice intoning the same desperate neediness as Kurt's.

"We should probably get back to our seats," Kurt murmured, and he couldn't help but smile at the small noise of dissatisfaction that Blaine made.

"Yeah," he sighed, though he still stared at the brunette for a moment longer before pulling himself away, straightening his collared shirt as Kurt quickly smoothed his hair in the mirror. He watched as Kurt left the bathroom before him, smirking over his shoulder as the door swung shut behind him. Blaine swallowed thickly, confident that the second act would be painfully long.

In the brief moments of more lucid thoughts that Kurt had, he was rather amazed, but none-the-less pleased, that they had managed to actually make it back to his house, and hadn't resorted to anything desperate in the back of his car; because *god*, they weren't in high school anymore, despite what they occasionally acted like.

He knew that at some point they'd collect the clothing they had carelessly discarded on the way to the bedroom, maybe after they ordered dinner. He smiled vaguely, sinking lower into the hot bath

water, letting the bubbles tickle his skin. He glanced up as the bathroom door opened, Blaine smiling tiredly at him as he shut the door again. He slipped out of his boxers again and Kurt leaned forward as the other man slid into the tub behind him. Blaine pulled him to his chest. Kurt settled himself between his knees, his head back on Blaine's shoulder.

Kurt hummed in contentment as Blaine maneuvered them slightly, finding access to the soft skin of Kurt's neck and sucking a dark purple mark there. He hissed slightly as the skin stung, but Blaine ran a thumb gently over the bruise, somehow managing to ease the pain.

"I was thinking maybe we could order Greek," Kurt told him softly, Blaine hummed in response.

"Delicious," he muttered against the skin of Kurt's shoulder, causing the brunette to shudder slightly. "Want me to wash your hair?" he offered, and Kurt nodded against him. He grabbed the bottle from the side of the tub, squeezing a small amount into his palm before massaging it into the brunette's scalp. Kurt sighed contentedly.

He rinsed his hair and leaned back into Blaine's chest once more as the man rinsed his own curls, when the silence was broken by the familiar ringing of his cell phone. He sighed frustratedly, picking up the phone from the toilet seat and seeing Rachel's name on the screen. His heart stopped for a moment as he answered the call, quickly climbing out of the tub and snatching up a towel.

"Hello?"

"Kurt?" Rachel asked nervously. "*Oh thank god.*"

"Everything all right?" he asked quickly. "Aiden, is he—?"

"*No, no, Aiden's fine,*" Rachel quickly went on. "*It's Ella. Blaine's phone is off, I tried several times, but couldn't get to him.*"

Kurt turned to Blaine, who was looking at him concernedly. "Your phone is off?" he asked, and Blaine furrowed his brows, climbing out of the tub and wrapping a towel around his waist. He picked his

phone up from the sink, hitting the button to turn it on, but it was dead.

"*We're driving to the hospital right now, Kurt,*" Rachel continued.

"The hospital?" Kurt hissed, his eyes wide. He glanced back at Blaine whose expression was one of horror. "What—?"

"*I—she broke her arm,*" Rachel explained. "*Kurt, I have no idea how it happened, one minute she was fine and then she was suddenly crying—*"

"We'll be there in ten minutes," Kurt assured her, and he quickly hung up the phone. He turned back to Blaine, taking a deep breath to make sure his voice was steady. "Get dressed. Ella broke her arm. We're meeting them at the hospital."

"Kurt, Blaine!" Finn quickly called to the two men, and they quickly made their way to him in the hospital waiting room. "She's right down the hall, Rachel's with her and Aiden..." He trailed off, furrowing his brow. "Dude, why do you guys both have wet hair?" Kurt glared at him and Blaine ran a hand through his wet curls anxiously, Finn's eyes widening comically. "*Ohhh...*"

"Right, I'm gonna—" Blaine gestured down the hall, and Finn nodded.

"Room 212," Finn told him. He turned his attention back to Kurt. "So..." he murmured awkwardly.

Kurt rolled his eyes, settling himself in a chair and glancing at the magazines laying on a coffee table, though nothing caught his eye. He tilted his head slightly trying to ignore his stepbrother and simply wait for Rachel and Blaine to reappear with Ella and Aiden.

"*Dude!*" Finn hissed, plunking down on the chair next to him and staring at him in disbelief. "Is that a *hickey*?"

Kurt's hand jumped to his neck, flushing slightly as he glared at the other man. "Could we not do this right now?" Kurt snapped quietly.

"I just—I mean, you both come here out of the shower and you've got a hickey—" He broke off. "I mean, are you two... *you know...*?"

"It's none of your business," Kurt told him.

"I'm just... I dunno... I guess worried—"

"And I'm worried about the Blaine's niece, who broke her arm under your care," Kurt said vehemently. Finn shifted awkwardly in his seat, and Kurt sighed, pinching his the bridge of his nose. "Look, I know it wasn't your fault. I'm sorry for snapping."

"I'm sorry for prying," Finn told him in response.

"And I suppose we'll talk about things later," Kurt grumbled.

Finn smiled once again. "Great."

Chapter Twenty-One

Kurt loved waking up beside Blaine.

It was something they had rarely had the chance to experience together as kids; Burt always enforced the "no sleeping over" rule, even after they'd turned eighteen, with the argument that it's "still my house". And Kurt could understand it, of course, but it still irked him. He honestly *did* just want a few nights of falling asleep with their arms wrapped around each other, and a few mornings waking up with shy and sleepy smiles.

They had tried when they were both in New York. But then, it almost seemed more difficult, always trying so desperately hard to just find a *moment* for each other.

And he knew that was how they fell apart. How they had quietly agreed that, maybe, someday, just... just not *then*. They weren't meant to be together *then*.

He reasoned with himself that he had always thought it would be Blaine. Him and Blaine. It was just something in the back of his mind that he'd think about occasionally, even when he and Blaine barely had time to speak to each other.

And then he met Alex. And suddenly, everything changed. He fell in love all over again, and he didn't really mind as each day, the image of that future with Blaine started to disappear. He was very much believing that he was getting his own happy ending different that he had imagined.

And then he lost it all.

Slowly, over the last several months, he started to gain his life back. And with it, he gained a little of that image back, every day.

Kurt liked that these moments with Blaine weren't comparable to anything else. There were no times when he thought about things being the same as with Alex. It wasn't even the same as the moments they'd shared before. No, everything was different. And Kurt loved it.

With their conflicting hours, Kurt and Alex rarely had the chance to awake together, slowly and comfortably. Instead there was the usual dynamic of Alex giving him a kiss goodbye, and Kurt attempting to pull him back into bed for 'just a few more minutes'. When they did have the opportunity, it was with Alex's cheek pressed into Kurt's shoulder, the brunette's arm always numb, wrapped underneath Alex's body.

Waking up with Blaine often found their hands intertwined, their bodies facing each other, one's forehead occasionally leaning into the warmth of the other's neck or area right below collarbone.

Kurt couldn't explain it. He just really liked it.

And that was how he had decided on the idea for a 'gift' for Blaine for Valentine's day, as the holiday quickly approached.

Even with knowing exactly what he was going to do for the holiday, Kurt had agreed to help Finn with a present for Rachel. Mercedes was also coming along, hoping to find the perfect something for Sam as well.

Kurt was finding the day successful, even though Finn and Mercedes hadn't yet bought anything as they entered their third store. Still, Kurt had managed to talk Finn out of buying a positively *hideous* scarf for Rachel. Finn had even come in handy as Mercedes sought out her gift, reminding her of the collectible geekery that Sam already owned when she wasn't so sure.

"What are you buying for Blaine?" Mercedes asked him, and Kurt turned to face her.

"Well," he responded slowly, "I gave it a lot of thought and I'm not buying him anything." Mercedes raised an eyebrow. "I suppose it's not actually a physical gift, but..."

"Or is it *actually* a *physical* gift?" she asked him slyly, and he rolled his eyes, jerking his head slightly toward Finn to remind her of the presence of his step-brother, though he didn't seem to catch the joke anyway. She coughed slightly. "Anyway... go on."

"I was going to ask him to move in with me," Kurt said, flushing

contents

slightly, but smiling at her the same. She positively beamed at him.

"Seriously?" Finn asked, and Kurt looked at him, frowning slightly. "Dude—I mean, just... *seriously*?"

"Yes, *seriously*, Finn," Kurt snapped in response. "Why shouldn't I be serious about it?" The question hung in the air for a moment, and Mercedes didn't hesitate to point out something on the opposite end of the store, leaving the two brothers to themselves.

Finn sighed. "Like I said before, I'm just worried about you, bro."

"You have no need to be," Kurt told him furiously. "If you're going to be like this every time I say anything about my relationship, then I'd honestly rather you just stay out of it."

"You don't think you're moving too fast?" Finn pressed on.

"No," Kurt told him immediately. "I don't. And before you go on to say that you do, can I remind you that our parents moved in together after dating for less than half the time that Blaine and I have been dating? At least he and I have known each other for almost fifteen years, and we've dated before."

"Yeah, but you know that that whole living arrangement hardly lasted," Finn said.

"Not because of them," Kurt said, turning his attention to a shelf of adorable stuffed bears, picking one up absent-mindedly. "Because you called me a fag."

Finn's face fell slightly. "Kurt, I—we talked about that. You know I'm *still* sorry, and you know why I said it."

"Despite what other people seem to think, me having a very misguided crush on you was never an excuse," Kurt told him, his tone still even. "It never made it okay."

"I'm *sorry*," Finn repeated desperately. "I fucked up a lot in high school. You're one of the people that knows the full extent of it." He sighed. "I'm just trying to look out for you, like I promised I would back then. I don't want you hurt, and I don't want Aiden to be either."

And suddenly it clicked. He turned to Finn, understanding that

the problem he had was the same problem he'd had when their parents had first started dating. Not with him, but...

"I'm not replacing Alex," he said quietly. "I wouldn't—I couldn't do that. And Aiden knows that. I know you never got asked your opinion about it all, with Mom and Dad, but that was the first thing I did. The moment I thought it was even a possibility, I talked to Aiden about it." He sighed. "I know you're trying to look out for me, Finn, but it's *killing* me. I'm an adult, I can live my life, and that's what I want to do. I had a pretty awful year and a half after Alex died, and I just want to move forward. I feel like this is an honest step that could help me with that." He looked at Finn closely, hoping to find some hint of him comprehending his words, though the other man still looked a little hesitant as he nodded.

"I trust you," Finn said. "I just... I'm here for you, man. I'm sorry if I've come off a little crazy overprotective. I just don't want to see you as broken and messed up as you were after Alex."

Kurt nodded in understanding. "I know," he said. "And thank you for that." He smiled. "Though you're right, you were a bit on the crazier side of protective brother." Finn smiled at him in response. "Now, I say we go back to the jeweler and you buy Rachel the necklace. With her pregnant, anything else for her to wear simply won't do. And she's told you before she could always use more *'bling'*."

Kurt slid the tiny box across the table, and Blaine raised his eyebrows.

"I thought we agreed on no gifts," he said, smiling through his accusatory tone. "You're breaking the rules, Mr. Hummel."

Kurt grinned. "It isn't what you expect," he assured him. He gave him a look, nodding his head and twirling his hand to indicate that he should go on and open the box. And with a smile, Blaine did.

However, after looking at the contents, he tilted his head slightly and looked at Kurt, nonplussed. "A key?" he asked hesitantly. "But—I already have a key to your—"

"It's not to my place," Kurt told him, and Blaine glanced at it again, knitting his eyebrows together in bemusement.

"This is the key for my place," he said slowly. He looked back up at Kurt, then back to the key, turning it over in his fingers. "But, why—?"

"I thought maybe I wouldn't need it anymore," he said casually. "And that maybe you wouldn't need yours either." He licked his lips nervously as Blaine stared at him again. "I thought maybe you could move in," he said. "You and Ella with Aiden and me." Blaine looked at him wordlessly, and Kurt swallowed tightly. "But... you don't... you don't have to, if—"

"No," Blaine said quickly, finally remembering himself. "No, I... yeah—yes. Kurt, I want to. I—I'll need to talk to Ella, but if she says yes, then... then yes."

Kurt couldn't help but grin at the man before him, feeling the sensation of excitement swelling in his chest and stomach, and Blaine intertwined their fingers together across the tabletop.

Perfect. For Kurt, things were suddenly absolutely *perfect*.

"Ella, sweetheart?"

The young girl looked up at Kurt from her snack, her legs folded up beneath her so she could achieve the perfect height at the table. Her left arm was still sporting the lime green cast she'd gotten just a few weeks before. She smiled, sliding another apple slice into her mouth as Kurt sat beside her.

"I have a big question for you," Kurt said. "And remember that I want you to answer completely honestly. No matter what." Ella

nodded quickly, and Kurt drew in a deep breath. "I was wondering how you would feel about you and your Uncle Blaine coming to live here with Aiden and me."

Ella froze, staring at the man in front of her. She shifted slightly. "You want us to live here?" she asked in an uncharacteristically tiny voice.

Kurt licked his lips, a little perturbed by her tone. "Yes, I do."

She nodded slowly. "Would I get my own room?" she asked, next, and Kurt nodded. She paused for a longer period of time. "Can I paint it?"

"Of course," he told her, still perplexed. "Any color that you like."

Suddenly, Ella was crying, clutching the apple slice in her hand so tightly that it was taking the shape of her palm, leaking juice onto the table. "Even p-p-purple?" she asked through her tears, Kurt's eyes wide as he reached out to her quickly, smoothing her hair down comfortingly.

"Of course," he repeated. "I—Ella, what's—?"

"M-my o-old room was purple," she told him suddenly, gasping and crying. "B-but I c-couldn't paint my room at—at U-Uncle B-Blaine's because i-it w-wasn't really h-his!"

And suddenly Kurt understood, pulling the girl into his arms and onto his lap, holding her tightly as he rubbed small circles on her back. He gently tried to quiet her. "It's all right," he cooed. "Sweetheart, it's all right."

Never before had he seen her cry about her parents, or about the life she'd had with them before. And it was amazing how the simple idea of Blaine renting his home so she couldn't have a room that was truly her own brought her to tears.

But Kurt could understand. He didn't remember crying a lot after his own mother died, but he could remember the way his life changed. He remembered having to be on his own more while his father worked, remembered eating nothing but peanut butter

sandwiches and fast food for months until his father forced himself to start cooking. He remembered the first time his dad attempted the make the chicken and rice dish his mother always made when Kurt was sad or sick, his favorite meal. And maybe it had been far from perfect, but it still made him feel better. It made him feel at home again.

And he knew that Ella's bedroom was the same way.

"You can make your room look however you want," he told her softly, her crying finally reduced to sniffles as she rubbed her eyes.

"I-I just w-want t-to go home," she said. "When I'm at U-Uncle Blaine's, too, sometimes. I know I-I'm h-home but I still feel like I-I want to g-go home. I j-just feel it in m-my tummy." She looked at him. "If I l-live here, c-can this be my h-home?"

"Of course," he told her. "This can be your home for as long as you want it to be." He smiled softly at her, brushing her curls out of her face. "This can *always* be your home."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Weeks later, after Ella's room was painted purple, after Blaine's things were neatly organized in a few of the drawers in Kurt's bedroom, and the florescent green cast on Ella's arm had been removed, the four had slowly settled into a routine.

To some part of Kurt, it was still strange, the ways in which his life had changed. The way that he still felt as though he was constantly struggling to make things all right again. Yet, he was doing just that, and rather successfully at that.

It was a couple of weeks into March, a month after the move-in, that already a problem seemed to crack the surface of that new-found sense of normalcy. Kurt watched the clock on his dashboard as five, then ten, then fifteen minutes passed. The cars in the school parking lot had, for the most part, all left, and Kurt's stomach churned slightly as he unbuckled his seatbelt, checking his cell phone once more. However, there were no missed calls from the school, and Kurt pocketed the phone, climbing out of his car and making his way up to the school.

He froze as he reached the front doors of the school, the bottom of his stomach completely dropping out as he was certain he recognized the sound of crying. The sound of *Ella* crying, he was sure of it. He quickly followed the sound around the corner of the building. And sure enough, there she was, sitting at the bottom of a tree, her face hidden in her hands, another small figure close beside her, tiny arms wrapped around her.

He slowly approached the two children, quickly recognizing the boy as Mike and Tina's son—Mikey, he was pretty sure was what he went by. Kurt frowned, kneeling in front of them, resting a hand on Ella's arm.

"Ella, sweetheart?" he asked carefully, but the girl merely continued to cry, and Kurt helplessly looked to Mikey.

"Andrew Cooper was saying mean things about her Uncle Blaine
contents

again," he said, and Kurt's frown only deepened. "I tried to tell, but Miss Davenport wasn't really listening..."

Kurt nodded slowly, almost feeling worse when he wasn't surprised by the boy's words. "Come here, baby," he said gently, taking Ella in his arms. She clutched at him tightly, continuing to snuffle in his shoulder as he stood, holding her close. "Is your mom waiting for you, Mikey?" he asked the boy, and he shook his head quickly.

"I usually take the bus, but Ella was so upset..."

"Come on, I'll take you home," he told him, and Mikey uttered a quick 'thank you', snatching up his and Ella's backpacks, following Kurt to the parking lot.

The ride home was quiet. It was bad enough before they reached the Chang house, Mikey sitting in the back of the car with Ella, clasping her hand in his until he was dropped off. But after he left, Ella sat, still sniffling, her forehead pressed up against the cool glass of the window, and Kurt wished more than anything that he could simply say something to make it all better.

After they finally arrived at the house, Kurt carried Ella to her bedroom, tucking her into bed and setting his laptop to play *The Little Mermaid* while he waited for Blaine to get home in their room, because this wasn't trivial or easily amendable. Not that it ever had been, he reasoned with himself, but suddenly he was filled with the sneaking suspicion that this was a common occurrence, and Ella was keeping it a secret from the both of them.

"Hey." Kurt glanced up at the sound of Blaine's voice, offering him a weak smile. "It's so quiet in here. I almost thought nobody was home." He padded across the floor of their bedroom, sliding beneath the blanket to sit beside Kurt.

"Ella's taking a nap," he told Blaine softly, "and Aiden's still over at Jamie's house."

Blaine nodded. "Everything all right?" he asked, suddenly sensing the atmosphere, and Kurt sighed heavily.

"Some kid at school is giving Ella trouble," Kurt told him, closing his book and setting it aside.

"What for?" Blaine asked quickly, and Kurt was quiet, shifting slightly. He opened his mouth to respond at last, but Blaine cut him off. "For me," he said knowingly. "Because I'm gay."

Kurt swallowed thickly. "Blaine, I—"

"No," Blaine said, shaking his head slightly, pinching the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. "I... I figured—sooner or later..." He sighed. "I suppose I should talk to her."

Kurt nodded. "I thought maybe we could meeting with her teacher as well," he said. "Or, at least, you could—"

"No, you're a big part of her life now," Blaine told him. "You should come, too." Kurt nodded slowly, and Blaine drew in a deep breath. He snaked his arms around Kurt, pulling him close. "I'll talk to her when she wakes up," he said softly, and Kurt nodded again. Again, he felt that aching desire to be able to find the words to just make things okay.

It was a few days later, the just an hour or so before the scheduled teacher conference that Kurt's phone rang. He recognized the school's number and he answered quickly, expecting to hear some disappointing news about their meeting being rescheduled, or something of the sort.

Instead, Kurt's heart dropped and he grabbed his keys and immediately headed for the school, his mouth dry and his stomach churning.

Because, god, he hadn't expected *that* call.

"I suppose that it's just as well we had our meeting scheduled for today," Miss Davenport sighed, adjusting her glasses slightly as he sat down across from Kurt and Blaine, Ella sitting between them,

hanging her head and staring at her hands folded on her lap.

"Is she going to be in a lot of trouble?" Blaine asked warily, glancing from his niece to the teacher. The woman frowned.

"Obviously we can't *not* punish her," she said slowly. "Andrew's nose didn't seem to be broken, but he was bleeding rather badly." Blaine groaned at this, burying his face in his hands. "But I do understand that he's been giving her quite a bit of trouble..."

Ella didn't speak the entire meeting, while they discussed the repercussions of her actions, as well as the assurances that Andrew wouldn't go unpunished either. Miss Davenport assured Kurt and Blaine that she wouldn't be suspended, but she would be expected to serve detention during recess and after school (separately from the other boy, of course).

It wasn't until they returned home that she said a single word.

"I'm sorry," Ella said in a tiny, broken voice. She looked up to Blaine. "I'm sorry, Uncle Blaine. I just didn't want him to say those things anymore."

Blaine sighed, kneeling down in front of her. "I know, sweetie," he told her softly. "But—but doing... *that*... that doesn't make you any better than him."

She nodded slowly. "I know," she said. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry I was bad, Uncle Blaine." She sniffled slightly, swatting at her eyes. "Does that mean I can't go to Mikey's birthday party this weekend?"

Blaine took a deep breath and brushed some of the curls out of her face. "You can still go," he told her softly. "Just promise me you won't do something like this again."

"I promise," she said, nodding violently.

"Good," he said. "Now get up to your room. We'll talk again in a bit." She nodded, running off, and Blaine stood, walking with Kurt into the kitchen. He sighed, running his hand over his face, leaning against the counter. "Sometimes I just feel like I'm doing this all wrong," he said, helplessly staring at the ceiling. "Like, I sit back and

just look at the job I'm doing with Ella and just think—you know—*god*, what the hell am I doing?" He laughed bitterly. "I always thought that... not that it would be *easy*, but at least maybe I wouldn't be this terrible at it." He licked his lips, glancing at Kurt. "When my brother and Julia died, Taylor, Julia's sister... *god*, she threw a fit. Tried to get custody of Ella any way that she could. Tried to say that I'd be an 'unfit' guardian or whatever. Sometimes I wonder if Ella would be better off with her. At least she might have a better clue about all of this."

"Blaine," Kurt said quickly, leaning up against the counter with the other man, quickly slipping his hand into his. "You're wrong." Blaine glanced up at him, and Kurt sighed, shaking his head. "You're so wrong. You're doing such a fantastic job with Ella. I was older than her when I lost only one of my parents, and to see her coping as well as she is..." Kurt took a deep breath. "You didn't sign up for this whole... single parent thing. At least in my position, I... I always knew there was some possibility it could be just me and Aiden. I never wanted it to be, but I knew that the worst could happen. You were just thrown into this, at what was already a miserable point in your life. You've done a far better job than I would ever expect of most people. Definitely better than you would see any of those poor fools in rom coms..."

Blaine smiled weakly at him. "Sometimes I just wonder if she's right, though. Julia's sister, I mean," he quickly clarified. "She said that I would be making Ella's life harder because of who I am and my choices, or some bullshit like that."

"Well," Kurt said slowly, "you've already acknowledged that that's bullshit. And, given that she said that, would you honestly rather your niece be raised by a narrow-minded bitch?" He raised an eyebrow at the other man.

"Definitely not," Blaine assured him. He sighed. "But what if what she said *isn't* bullshit? What if she's right? Because given the fact that Ella's currently sitting in her bedroom after beating up a boy who called her uncle a faggot, I'm not sure anymore."

"Do you think I'm an unfit parent?" Kurt asked, a slightly cool edge to his voice.

"Kurt—god, *no*—"

"No, Blaine, I'm not... *insulted*," he went on with a sigh. "I just... Do you think that I don't worry about Aiden having to continue fighting my battles?" He shook his head. "I'm terrified of it, and it isn't fair. Because I *know* that I'm a perfectly capable father. More capable than most of the *straight* mental cases in Hollywood that claim to be parents. But still, when Alex and I were starting the adoption process, I paused for a second because I had to think if I thought it fair to possibly put my child through the prejudice that I knew was still out there. And when I was younger, I used to wonder if it was fair to do that to my father." He squeezed his eyes shut. "But the realization that I came to was that I just had so much love I could give to a little boy or girl. And maybe that would be enough. It *should* be enough. Even if it isn't for some people, it's enough for me, and it's enough for Aiden and Ella, and it should be for you, too."

Kurt felt as Blaine placed a gentle hand on his cheek, pulling him in for a small kiss. "It is enough," he said, pulling away. "You're right. You always are."

Kurt smiled slightly at the other man. "Well, I suppose I can't argue with that..."

"Feels like you and Ella both are always talking sense into me, lately," he said with a grin.

"You've done the same for me countless times," Kurt reminded him. "I just don't want you to ever think that Ella's better off without you or whatever similarly ridiculous thoughts that cross your mind. Because it isn't true. You told me so long ago that you needed her, but the truth is she needs you even more than that." He smiled. "She's lucky to have you. And so am I."

"Thank you," Blaine said, pressing another swift kiss to Kurt's mouth. "I'm pretty lucky to have you, too."

Kurt hummed in response. "I was going to tell you not to sell
contents

yourself short, but I thought you might assume I was making a tasteless joke," he admitted, and Blaine laughed.

"Thanks for avoiding that one," he said.

"I figured it was for the best," Kurt assured him, smirking. "Now, go up there and talk to your niece, and give her all the love you've got. Because not only is that what matters, but it's what she needs right now."

Chapter Twenty-Three

By April, Kurt found himself planning Rachel's baby shower.

"I don't know what the hell I'm supposed to do," Finn had told him exasperatedly. "I don't even know if I'm supposed to go to it. Is that wrong? For the dad to go? Is that like the guy going to the bachelorette party or something?"

Kurt had sighed, rolling his eyes. "We'll just make it a New Directions affair," he had told him simply. "That'll be a fine solution."

Kurt honestly didn't know what *he* was supposed to do in planning, either. Weddings were one thing, but baby showers? He hadn't exactly been too any in New York, and he'd missed Tina's when he'd just returned to Ohio. He'd done some research online, but had been rather turned off by some of the ideas for games and the like (guessing the size of the mother-to-be's tummy just sounded like an invitation for violence if someone named a number too large, and pinning the sperm on the egg seemed just so tasteless and tacky that honestly, Kurt couldn't believe it was actually '*a thing*').

Instead, he decided to just keep it simple. Besides, his friends were known to keep themselves entertained. He didn't need to plan too much.

He found himself immensely pleased, however, when the shower turned out rather successful. He had to admit, he was even a little surprised.

Rachel was absolutely *thrilled* with the gifts she'd be given for the baby, all the different odds and ends that she didn't even think about needing until she'd received them, and Kurt felt rather proud of his friends for what they had done. And he always couldn't help but feel a sense of satisfaction when his friends were so loving and supportive of each other, no matter how much they complained and fought and yelled in high school.

Even the children were having fun, Mikey and Ella and Aiden off

playing in the backyard, Mike holding their younger daughter in his arms as Blaine and Puck cooed at her, making faces and winning a few tiny giggles.

"Maylin has gotten so big!" Rachel said, grinning at Tina.

The other woman laughed. "She's a whole mess of trouble, too," she said, shaking her head slightly. "We can't leave her alone for a second. But she's definitely a daddy's girl, because the way her face just *lights up* with Mike..."

Kurt hummed in response. "I was definitely my mother's child," he said with a smile. "My father never fails to remind me of that."

"Mikey is the same way with me," Tina told him. "But I can assure you that in a few years, he won't want anything to do with me *or* Mike..."

"Every kid does it," Kurt said with a shrug.

There was a pause as they glanced at each other. "God, listen to us," Tina said, laughing again. "We sound *just like* our parents."

"What happened?" Kurt asked, chuckling. "I always promised I'd never sound like this."

"Please," Rachel said, rolling her eyes. "You've heard the things I've been saying, and he isn't even *born* yet!"

"Have you and Finn figured out a name?" Tina asked, and Kurt smiled.

"Ohh, yes!" he exclaimed. "Do tell, if you have!"

Rachel's smile faltered after a moment. "Actually... I wanted to talk to you about that," she said slowly, and Kurt raised eyebrow at her. She glanced at Tina fleetingly, who nodded, walking off toward Mike and the others, only confusing Kurt further as he took a seat. Rachel sighed, reaching across the table to take the man's hand in hers. "When Finn and I found out that it was going to be a boy, I think we pretty much immediately knew what we wanted to name him. But... but I just wanted to run it by you first."

"What are you talking about?" he asked her slowly.

She took in a deep breath. "We want to name him after Alex." Kurt stared at her blankly. "We just—we thought it would be such a great way to honor him and his memory. We both just *knew* that it was what we wanted to do. But it wouldn't be right to not ask you, and I needed to make sure that you would be all right with it. I don't... I don't want to make you uncomfortable about it." She watched him warily. "Kurt? Please say something."

He swallowed thickly. "What do you want me to say?" he asked in a tight voice.

"Are you all right with the idea?" she asked hesitantly. "It's all right if you aren't. That's... that's why I wanted to ask first."

Kurt averted his eyes, directing them instead to the tabletop. His gaze unfocused, his mind racing, he briefly wondered what he could possibly say to Rachel at that moment. Licking his lips, he looked back up at Rachel. "Can I... get back to you on that?"

Kurt traced shapes on the countertop with his forefinger, his other hand wrapped around the warm mug of coffee. His head was aching, his eyes stinging from tiredness, but he couldn't bring himself to go back to bed.

"Kurt?" He glanced up as Blaine walked into the kitchen, rubbing his eyes tiredly. He yawned, stretching his arms so that t-shirt rode up, exposing a few inches of his stomach. "It's not even five o'clock. What are you doing up?"

"Couldn't sleep," Kurt murmured, and Blaine hummed, sitting down beside Kurt.

"I figured, when I woke up and you weren't there," he said. "And then didn't come back for about twenty minutes."

"I'm sorry," Kurt sighed. "I didn't mean to keep you up." He offered Blaine a weak smile. "Why don't you go back to bed, and I'll be

up in a minute?"

"Or," Blaine offered, "you could tell me what's bothering you." He pointed at the mug Kurt was holding. "That's coffee. You're not going back to sleep."

"Caught red-handed," Kurt mumbled, and Blaine smiled sleepily.

"I know something's up," he went on. "You've been a little off ever since the baby shower."

Kurt took a deep breath. "Well, I guess I can't hide anything from you, can I?" he asked, swirling the coffee in his mug a few times, then pressing the porcelain to his lips and taking a long drink. "They decided on a name for the baby," he told him, hoping that it sounded like an off-handed comment.

"Oh?" Blaine asked. "What did they decide on?"

Kurt licked his lips, staring down at the liquid in his cup. He glanced back up at Blaine. "Alex," he said tightly. "They want to name him Alex."

"Oh," Blaine said lamely.

Kurt nodded. "*Oh*."

"And what do you think of it?" Blaine asked, covering Kurt's hands in his. "And be honest. I really want to know exactly what's going on in your head right now."

Kurt sighed. "I don't know," he said slowly. "It's such a lovely thought," he admitted. "I mean, I love Rachel for wanting to 'honor' Alex that way. But I just... I *don't know*." He closed his eyes, breathing deeply. "I'm not sure how I'll be able to handle seeing my godson when he carries that memory of Alex. By no means do I want to forget Alex, but I'm not sure if that constant, blatant reminder is something that I want, either." He looked at Blaine apologetically. "I'm sorry."

"Why are you sorry?" Blaine asked, utterly bewildered.

"Because I'm sitting here talking to my boyfriend about my ex-husband," Kurt said, grimacing. "I hardly feel as though that's proper

etiquette."

Blaine's hands tightened around Kurt's. "Okay, no," he told him forcefully. "Just no." He sighed. "First off, Alex is not your *ex-husband*. You're a widower, not a divorcee. He's your *late husband*." He looked at Kurt pointedly, and the brunette nodded. "And as for me, you hardly need to worry. I know very well just how we got where we are. I know where I stand. And I *don't mean like that*," he quickly amended at the look on Kurt's face. "All I mean is that... well, it's not like I go around every day pretending that Alex never existed or something like that. I know that you married him and you adopted a son together and you loved—hell, that you *love* him. And there isn't anything wrong with that." He smiled softly. "If I love you as much as I say that I do, I will be supportive of you and listen to whatever you say. And I do love you that much, so I'm going to do just that."

Kurt gave him a small grin. "Thank you," he said.

Blaine pulled one of Kurt's hands up, kissing his knuckles. "Now, you were saying that you weren't sure about how to feel?" he pressed on, and Kurt nodded. "You're allowed to tell Rachel no."

Kurt licked his lips. "I don't think I can," he said. "I mean, even if I really didn't want them to... it wouldn't be right for me to say that. Even if I felt some... discomfort or whatever, it just wouldn't seem right." Blaine nodded, and Kurt sighed heavily. "I suppose I just wish it wasn't something I even had to think about, I guess."

"Mmm," Blaine hummed, nodding. "I can understand that."

"I just have this worry that I won't be able to look at him," he said. "That I won't be able to look at the little boy that's going to be the son of my best friend and my step-brother, my own godson. I'm scared that it'll hurt and that my heart will stutter every time someone says his name."

"That's going to happen anyway," Blaine told him. "For a while longer, at least. Sometimes I still feel that way when I hear Coop's name, or Julia's, or my mother's."

"I still feel that way when I hear my mother's name," Kurt

whispered.

"But at the same time," Blaine told him slowly, "maybe it'll be good for you. Maybe you won't have all these scared and hurt and sad feelings when you see Rachel's baby. Maybe instead you'll be able to think of something so wonderful when you hear Alex's name instead of only a sense of loss."

Kurt nodded, taking a shuddering breath. "I think I want that," he said breathlessly. "I *do* want that." He swallowed, smiling weakly at Blaine as a few tears fell down his cheeks. "I want them to name their baby Alex. It would be perfect. Beautiful. Maybe it will hurt, but... maybe you're right. Maybe it will be just what I need."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Blaine had big plans for Kurt's thirty-first birthday.

It would start in the morning (which Blaine was thankful to have off, as it was a Monday) when he would wake the man with a back rub and kisses, and see where that took them. At eleven o'clock would be brunch with Kurt's parents, followed by a trip to the museum where Blaine had noticed there was a fashion exhibit that Kurt would love. Burt and Carole were picking up Aiden and Ella after school, so that would allow the couple to see a movie and get a nice romantic dinner before returning home. There, Burt and Carole would be ready with the children and a homemade cake.

It was perfect, Blaine was sure of it, and Kurt would absolutely *love* it all.

And then Blaine woke up that morning to find the other side of the bed empty. He frowned, turning onto his back to stare at the ceiling, when he faintly recognized the sound of retching. There was only a brief moment's pause before he was throwing off the blankets and bolting to the master bathroom. He pressed the door open, spotting Kurt clutching the sides of the toilet as he continued to empty the contents of his stomach. Immediately Blaine was at his side, one hand rubbing his back comfortingly while the other pulled the brunette's bangs off of his sweaty forehead.

"Are you all right?" Blaine asked him gently.

Kurt coughed a few times. "Just peachy," he croaked in response.

"Stupid question," Blaine sighed, and at last Kurt straightened himself slightly.

"Water?" he asked weakly, squeezing his eyes shut, and Blaine nodded, jumping to his feet and turning on the tap. He took a plastic cup and handed it to Kurt, taking up his kneeling position beside him and rubbing his back once again.

"God, Kurt," Blaine sighed. "This isn't exactly the birthday I'd had

planned for you."

"Really?" the other man snapped. "Because this was the most fun that I could think of. Today's going to be just dandy." He glanced at Blaine apologetically after a moment. "Sorry."

"I don't care if that's a sign of what's to come today, I'm still taking care of you," Blaine told him.

Kurt made an attempt to roll his eyes but gave up halfway through, leaning back against the side of the bathtub. "I don't need to be taken care of."

Blaine raised his eyebrows. "Can you even stand up?" he asked. At this, Kurt glared at him, turning slightly to grasp the side of the tub in an attempt to push himself up. Quickly Blaine was on his feet, placing a steadying arm around Kurt's waist, offering him one of his hands.

"Thanks," Kurt mumbled. "But I don't want your help," he insisted. "I have no desire to get *you* sick."

"You're not getting rid of me so easily," Blaine told him in turn. "You're lucky I'm not carrying you right now." At this, Kurt sighed, leaning heavily on Blaine as they inched their way back into the bedroom.

"You'll have to forgive me, then, for looking so incredibly unattractive," he murmured. "This isn't exactly the stunning outfit I had planned for today."

"Please, you look fabulous as always," Blaine told him with a grin. "So fabulous, in fact, that I'm changing your clothes." Kurt looked at him questioningly. "We're dressing down for the day. I'll see what I have that you can wear..."

"But I like my pajamas..." Kurt protested sitting down on the edge of the bed, and Blaine raised an eyebrow at him.

"You want to wear silk when you're violently throwing up?" he asked him, and Kurt grimaced, shaking his head no after a pause. "Then you can spend one day wearing a t-shirt and sweatpants."

It only took Blaine a few brief moments of sorting through his contents

drawers to find appropriate wares for Kurt. Then, he returned to the bed, sitting beside the other man. Gently he undid the buttons of Kurt's shirt and slid it off, the material clinging slightly to his back from sweat. He handed Kurt the fresh shirt, and Kurt pulled it over his head slowly. He helped Kurt lay back against the pillows before handing him the sweatpants, tossing Kurt's pajamas into the hamper as Kurt wrestled with the sweats. Blaine couldn't help but smile at how child-like Kurt looked in his clothes, the pants a little short, riding up above his ankles, the Dalton t-shirt rather baggy. He fetched the brunette a cold washcloth and the waste basket from the bathroom, setting the latter beside the bed.

Blaine leaned forward, pressing a gentle kiss to Kurt's forehead. He groaned. "If you get sick, it's your fault and I'm not taking care of you," he mumbled to Blaine, who chuckled.

"That's only fair," Blaine said with a grin. "But don't worry, I don't get sick."

Kurt grumbled in response and Blaine smiled, leaving the room quietly to wake up Aiden and Ella for school.

"I can't see him?" Aiden asked Blaine sadly as he chased his cereal around his bowl with a spoon. "I wanted to give him his birthday present..."

"And I've been practicing singing '*Happy Birthday*' with Auntie Rachel," Ella huffed, drinking her orange juice.

"Tonight," Blaine assured them, placing their respective lunch boxes beside each of them. "I promise, when he's feeling a little better tonight, you can both see him." He picked up Ella's empty bowl. "Now, hurry up, Aunt Mercedes has agreed to take the both of you to school in ten minutes."

He saw the two of them off, giving his thanks again to Mercedes as she waved it off. "Just tell Kurt to get better," she told him with a smile. "Give him my love."

Blaine nodded and waved goodbye as Mercedes pulled out of the driveway. Quickly, he returned inside the house, stepping carefully

along the path in his bare feet until the hardwood was beneath his feet again. He quickly climbed the stairs again, only to find the bed empty. Frowning, he quickly moved to the bathroom, where Kurt was once again hunched over the toilet, retching.

Blaine didn't hesitate, crouching beside Kurt and squeezing his shoulder, pushing his bangs back. He felt his heart tug painfully as Kurt wrapped his arms around himself, crying slightly. Quickly Blaine pulled him close, running his hand over the back of Kurt's hair.

At last, Blaine managed to get Kurt back to bed, pressing a fresh cold cloth to Kurt's forehead.

"I'm sorry, I know this isn't fun for you, either," he whispered.

"It's not about *fun*," Blaine told him gently. "It's all about making you feel better." Kurt hummed quietly in response. "Why don't I make you some ginger tea? My mom always said it settles the stomach. And then maybe we can have a movie marathon."

"Sounds perfect," Kurt replied quietly. "Laptop's downstairs."

Blaine nodded and left the room, returning ten minutes later with a mug of ginger tea for Kurt, a cup of coffee for himself, and Kurt's laptop bag slung over his shoulder. He gently handed Kurt the mug, setting his own on the bedside table. He sat himself beside Kurt, flipping open his laptop.

"Such a great way to start my thirty-first year," Kurt mumbled, resting his head against Blaine's shoulder.

"I don't know," Blaine said, wrapping an arm around Kurt. "I wouldn't mind spending my birthday in bed with you, watching movies in our pajamas."

Kurt smiled weakly. "Hopefully spending your birthday in bed will involve less vomiting."

"And more of other things," Blaine said suggestively, and Kurt chuckled softly, putting his mug to his lips and taking a long drink.

He shivered slightly. "God, I hate the taste."

"But if it works, maybe the entire day won't be lost," Blaine

reminded him, pressing a kiss to his hair.

After *My Fair Lady*, half-way through *The Sound of Music*, Kurt was fast asleep, his head in Blaine's lap as the latter gently ran his fingers through his hair. At one point, Blaine had made to change the movie (having seen it a few too many times for his liking, but how could he argue when it was one of Kurt's favorites?) though the other man had sleepily mumbled he was still watching. Blaine had smiled and rolled his eyes, waiting until the very end to switch on *Moulin Rouge!* The hours passed slowly, after Blaine had regretfully texted Carole that Kurt was too sick to make it to brunch. Blaine was just happy that Kurt was getting some rest, even if his legs were successfully numb from lack of circulation.

It wasn't until late afternoon that Kurt was awake again, deciding that he was ready for a shower. He rolled his eyes as Blaine made him promise (repeatedly) that he would get back into pajamas after.

And an hour later, Kurt was sitting in the kitchen (in his sweatpants and t-shirt, as per Blaine's request). Just in time, Blaine thought, as they heard the front door open.

"Daddy!" came Aiden's voice, the young boy hurdling into the kitchen and flinging himself at Kurt. He smiled gently, picking up his son and setting him on his lap.

"How are you, A?" Kurt asked.

"I'm fine," Aiden said quickly. "Are you better? I hope you're better. I made you a present and I wanted to give it to you."

"Calm down, A," Burt said affectionately, clapping a hand on his son's shoulder. "How are you feelin', kid?"

"I've been better," Kurt allowed, forcing a smile.

"Well, I have a remedy for that," Carole said, coming through the door with a large pot in her hands. "Homemade chicken noodle soup," she told him. "Finn and Rachel wanted to come over, but since you're sick—"

"The baby," Kurt said quickly, nodding, bouncing Aiden up and

down on his knee. "It wouldn't be smart, I totally get it."

Carole nodded. "Well, I'm going to put *this* on the stove," she said, indicating the pot of soup. She leaned in to press a quick kiss to Kurt's temple. "Happy birthday, sweetheart."

"Thanks," Kurt said with a smile. "How is Rachel doing, by the way?"

Burt sighed. "Right now she's at that stage where she's torn between wanting the baby outta her *right now* and terrified that she's only got a month left," he reported.

"Sounds about right," Blaine said. "I remember Cooper telling me that Julia was the same exact way right before Ella was born."

"Elizabeth was, too," Burt said fondly, giving Kurt's shoulder a slight squeeze.

"Aiden?" Carole called, poking her head from the kitchen. "Why don't you run and get your daddy's present? I only need to warm this up a bit, and we're all ready for dinner."

Aiden nodded quickly, extricating himself from Kurt's grasp and hopping onto the floor. He bolted for his bedroom.

"I hafta get my card!" Ella quickly told them, following Aiden as fast as she could.

After Kurt watched them go, he turned to his father. "What did he make me?" he asked in a hushed tone, but Burt shook his head.

"Can't ruin the surprise, can I?" he asked, grinning as Kurt pouted slightly.

Minutes later, as Carole was placing bowls of hot soup on the table, Ella and Aiden returned, Ella with her card clutched to her chest, Aiden holding whatever it was behind his back.

"A told me to go first," Ella told Kurt excitedly. She quickly went to stand right in front of him, and Kurt didn't hesitate to place his hands under her arms and pull her onto his lap. She smiled as he did so, and then held out the construction paper card. Kurt took it in his hands and Ella leaned into his chest, looking on.

"You're quite the artist," he told her, looking at the drawing on the front, clearly what was a crayon version of himself, dressed as a prince, with herself as a princess holding his hand. "And I have to say that I look rather fabulous." She giggled at this, and he opened the card, where it read *Happy Birthday Kurt! I hope it is as amazing as you!* He smiled broadly at the message, surrounded by pink and purple hearts and covered in glitter. He pressed a tiny kiss to Ella's hair. "Thank you sweetheart."

"Has your day been good?" she asked him quickly. "Do you feel better?"

"Much better," he assured her and she clapped her hands together before throwing her arms around his neck for a hug.

"Now A's turn!" she said, climbing off of Kurt and pushing Aiden forward. He quickly took up Ella's vacated spot on Kurt's lap, Blaine picking up Ella in his arms and resting her slightly against his hip.

Aiden pushed the crudely wrapped gift into Kurt's hands, and Kurt carefully removed the paper from it, gasping a little when he saw the gift.

"I made the frame myself," Aiden told him proudly, indicating the rectangle made of blue craft foam, with two yellow star and two red hearts in opposite corners. Written along the bottom of the frame in black marker was *MY FAMILY*.

And taped to the back of the frame was a photograph taken just a few weeks before. It had been while Kurt, Blaine, Ella, and Aiden had been visiting with Burt and Carole, a photograph taken of the four of them. Kurt and Blaine were grinning broadly, holding a laughing Aiden and Ella respectively, the spring flowers in Carole's garden just behind them.

It was perfect. So incredibly perfect.

"Thank you," Kurt said breathlessly. His eyes stung a little, but he did his best to blink back the tears. "I love it." He showed the picture to Blaine and the other man looked at it in awe for a moment before breaking out into a wide grin.



"Don't cry Daddy!" Aiden said quickly, but Kurt shook his head, pulling his son impossibly close to him.

"I just love it," he told him again. "I mean it. Thank you so much."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Kurt had come to dread late-night phone calls. There was something about them, as though they could only bring bad news. It was a late-night call to his cellphone while he was still sharing an apartment with Rachel in New York that had informed him about his great aunt finally passing. A late-night call from Rachel told him about the death of Blaine's mother, years later. It was a late visit to his apartment that had told him of Alex's death, and Rachel had made a series of calls that night to inform everyone of the news. Kurt himself had called her, and called his parents, that night.

He *hated* those calls in the middle of the night.

When the phone rang past three o'clock in the morning of June 17th, he felt his heart jump to his throat as he fumbled for his glasses and his phone, immediately thinking of the worst.

Because *Blaine*, he was at some *stupid* teaching conference in Columbus for the week, and his mind was only on *him*, thinking of what could have possibly gone wrong. Because phone calls late at night were never, *ever* a good sign.

That's why he felt a sense of confusion upon seeing not Blaine's name lighting up the screen of his phone, but Finn's.

"Hello?" he said, noting that his voice sounded surprisingly awake for the time of night.

"*Kurt*," Finn responded, and he sounded incredibly breathless. "*Hey, I'm sorry I didn't call sooner, this is the first chance I've had. I'm at the hospital.*"

Immediately Kurt's heart began thumping painfully against his ribs again. "Oh god," he mumbled. "What happened? What's wrong? You—wait, is dad—Rachel?"

"*What?*" came Finn's confused response. "*No, dude, everything is fine,*" he assured him quickly. "*It's the baby.*" A pause, and he clarified. "*That is, Rachel's having the baby.*"

Kurt took a moment to breathe, reveling in the fact that everyone was all right. Then, the news seemed to register somewhere in his brain. "Wait—seriously?"

"Yeah, dude," Finn told him. *"I've been here for hours—it's just been so crazy—I didn't have the chance to call before."*

"Yeah, no," Kurt said slowly. "I totally understand."

"Well, she wants you here," Finn continued. *"Keeps asking for you. Best friend and godfather and all that."* There was a pause. *"You don't have to rush down or anything, though, man. I mean, this whole 'miracle of birth' thing isn't exactly all it's cracked up to be."*

Kurt rolled his eyes slightly. "I've just gotta get someone to watch Aiden and Ella," he reported. "I'll see if Mercedes and Sam can come over."

"Right," Finn responded. *"Forgot Blaine's outta town. But I'll call you if anything else happens. Otherwise, I'll see you soon, 'kay?"*

"See you soon," Kurt responded, and he heard the click indicating that the call was ended. He sighed, waiting for the call time to stop flashing before flicking through his list of contacts to call Mercedes.

Half an hour later, as it neared four o'clock, there was a knock on the door, and Kurt was hurrying to it, letting Mercedes and Sam slide past him. They were still in their pajamas, though Sam had a bag slung over his shoulder, which Kurt could only assume contained clothes for them later.

"Thanks again for this," Kurt said breathlessly.

"Not a problem," Mercedes assured him. "We're happy to watch the little ones. But you *make sure* you call me the *moment* that little baby is born. The moment non-family visitors can come by, I'm *there*."

Kurt chuckled. "I'll make sure you know," he told her. "Now, I better be off. *You* call me if there are any problems?"

"Of course," she said, pressing a kiss to his cheek. "Now go. And tell me how adorable the baby is—no wait! Pictures! I want pictures!"

Text them to me!" she called after him as he made his way down the driveway.

Fifteen minutes later, Kurt found himself being led to the waiting area. "Someone will come out as soon as they're ready for you," the nurse assured him, and he thanked her quietly. He took a seat, leaning back in the chair and resting his head against the wall.

Maybe, he thought, just maybe, if he was lucky, he could catch a little bit more sleep...

He wasn't sure how long he drifted off for. All he knew was that suddenly, he was being awoken by the sound of Finn's voice. He jolted slightly, blinking in confusion at his step-brother.

"Oh my god, dude, you have to see him," Finn said breathlessly, a look of awe on his face. "I'm sorry you were here waiting so long—I don't know, some nurse was telling me that first-time mothers are usually in labor for sixteen hours on average, or something like that. So I guess it wasn't *that* long. But, you know. Well, he's—god, he's *perfect*. Come on, you have to see."

Kurt nodded, still a little out of it, getting to his feet and following Finn into the room.

Rachel was sitting in the bed, looking completely exhausted, the tiny bundle in her arms. She looked up at Kurt, smiling weakly at him, but instantly returning her eyes to her baby.

Finn pushed Kurt into the chair right beside the bed, moving to the other side of the chair to stand right beside his wife.

"He's beautiful," Kurt told her in a tiny whisper, and she completely beamed at the compliment.

"He's so *tiny*," Finn said.

"How big is he?" Kurt asked.

"Seven pounds, eight ounces," Rachel recited, "seventeen inches long."

"At least he didn't take after Finn in the size department," Kurt teased. "I don't think you'd be quite as fond of a twenty pound baby."

"Hey," Finn said defensively, "I'll have you know that I was only *half* that when I was born."

"And I still pity your mother," Kurt sighed, sticking his tongue out. "Speaking of, where is Mrs. Hudson-Hummel?"

Finn shrugged. "I called right before I called you, but I haven't been able to get a hold of her since," he said. "I figured that she must have had an emergency at the hospital. I was going to check in to see if she was here, but I didn't want to bother her if she was busy."

Kurt nodded. "But you left her a message?" he asked, and Finn nodded. "Then I'm sure she'll be here whenever she gets a moment. Dad will, too."

"Mr. and Mrs. Hudson?" The three glanced up as the nurse entered the room. "I just needed the name to put down on the birth certificate, if you were ready."

There was silence, and Kurt sensed as Rachel and Finn were glancing at each other. Then, Rachel closed her hand around Kurt's.

"Kurt?" she asked, hardly audible, and he glanced up at her.

"I told you," he said calmly. "Yes. It's fine."

She nodded, and looked up at the nurse. "Alex," she told her. "Alexander James Hudson."

The nurse smiled at them, scribbling the name down. "Lovely," she told them with a smile. "I'll leave you be."

The nurse left, and Rachel grinned down at the tiny baby in her arms. "We figured we could always call him AJ, too," she informed Kurt. "So it's not just... *Alex*." Kurt nodded. "Did you want to hold him?"

"I—oh, I don't know..." he mumbled, but suddenly Rachel was pressing the bundle of blankets into Kurt's arms.

Kurt couldn't remember the last time something so tiny and delicate was in his hands. Even Aiden was vaguely older when they had adopted him. But here was this tiny child, entrusted in Kurt's care, not even a few hours old.

It felt completely unreal to him.

"Alex," Kurt whispered to the baby, brushing the tiny wisps of hair off of the baby's forehead. "You're really something special, you know that, little one?"

Finn pulled up a chair beside his step-brother, watching as he interacted with his son. Suddenly, a ringing filled the room and Kurt jumped slightly.

"God, I'm sorry," he mumbled, and Finn quickly held his arms out for the baby. Kurt handed him over and quickly extricated his phone from his pocket. "It's Mom," he said, glancing at Finn.

"Go on, answer it," Rachel told him. "Tell her where we are. We'll be here."

Kurt flashed a smile, taking his phone and walking briskly out of the room. He quickly clicked the button to answer.

"Carole!" Kurt greeted breathlessly. "Hey, Finn and I have been trying to get a hold of you. You *have* to see the baby, he's—"

"Kurt, honey," Carole said slowly. "*I'm at the hospital.*"

"Yeah, me too," he responded. "Where—?"

"No," Carole cut in, and she sighed. "*Sweetheart, I'm here with your father. We're in the ER.*"

"What—?"

"*Your father's had another heart attack,*" she told him, and Kurt felt his heart plummet. It felt like all of the air had been taken from his body. "*It—I... Honey, it really isn't good.*"

The phone fell from Kurt's hand, smashing onto the linoleum floor. Because no, *no*, this simply couldn't be happening. Not now—not *ever*.

And at one o'clock in the afternoon, the realization struck Kurt that bad news could come at any moment, completely oblivious to the time of day.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Kurt sat in the rocking chair, holding the tiny baby in his arms.

"You're amazing," he mumbled to the child. "You know that? You are seriously something completely and utterly wonderful in this world right now. There's so many *terrible* things going on every single minute but here *you* are, so tiny and perfect. So pure. Innocent."

Kurt sighed, running his thumb along the baby's tiny cheek. "I'm jealous of you," he muttered. "You don't even know what's happening right now. I wish that I didn't, either." He licked his lips. "I guess that's why I'm here with you. I'm playing pretend. Just making believe that everything's okay right now..."

"But it's not." He shut his eyes tight. "It's not okay, little one. I wish it was. I wish that you could be born into some fantastic world where everything is as perfect as you. I wish that you didn't have to know all the hurt and pain, like Aiden has... I wish that I could keep you and him and Ella safe, protect you from everything so incredibly terrible the world has in store for you. I want to," he assured him. "I want to so badly. I just... I can't." He offered a weak smile. "I'll try my best, though."

"Kurt?" Kurt didn't glance up at the sound of Rachel's voice, hearing as she shuffled along the floor in her slippers. She sighed. "Kurt..." She kneeled down in front of him, looking at him with concern. "You shouldn't be here right now."

"Can't I visit with my godson?" he asked her in a dangerously sweet voice.

"Kurt..." Rachel drew in a deep breath. "You should be down in the ER with your dad and Carole." Kurt was silent. "The way they're talking—*god*, Kurt—I'm scared. The things they're saying and the terms they're using... it's scary. It really is. And Carole asked about you. She wants you there. She—"

"I *can't* Rachel," Kurt snapped. He squeezed his eyes shut, taking

a deep, steadying breath. "I just can't be there. Not right now. I can't be sitting there, useless, when they refuse to even let me see him." He looked at her, feeling the stinging sensation in his eyes preceding tears.

"Kurt..." Rachel said consolingly, taking his hand in hers. "They will."

Kurt's grip on the baby tightened slightly. "I wasn't there when Alex died," he muttered to her. "Part of me was thankful that I didn't have to sit and wait there and watch him suffer. But what I always wish is that I could have just been there, with him. I wish that he didn't have to die alone in some disgusting alley. There was no one there to hold his hand or tell him that it was going to be okay, even though it wasn't. And just... the idea of him laying there hurting and alone makes my entire soul ache."

"Don't want to be there, to avoid the same feeling of guilt should you lose your father?" Rachel said.

"I just want to see him," he said desperately, getting to his feet and placing the baby gently back into the small glass casing with blue blankets, the name '*Alexander Hudson*' labeling it. "To actually see *him*, to be *with* him... But at the same time, I... I'm terrified. How do I survive another loss?" he asked, turning back to Rachel. "This might be the point where it's just too much, Rachel."

The door to the ward opened, and Kurt glanced up, feeling his pulse quicken as the man scanned the room. Immediately the intruder's eyes fell upon Kurt and his face softened.

"Blaine," Kurt breathed out.

"Oh god, Kurt," Blaine responded, quickly crossing the room and taking the other man into his arms. He held him painfully tight, holding him as closely to him as was possible. "Kurt, Kurt, *Kurt*..."

"But—Columbus..." Kurt mumbled into Blaine's shoulder, clutching handfuls of the other man's shirt in his fists. "How did you—?"

"Finn called me," Blaine said. "The second he found out. He

figured that you'd need m—that—well..." He trailed off slightly. "That you'd need someone."

"You didn't have to do this," Kurt said, but it wasn't even a half-hearted argument.

"I did," Blaine responded. "You said that when you were sixteen, you felt so alone. I couldn't let you feel that way again."

Kurt felt his heart clench slightly at Blaine's words, and suddenly he felt Rachel's gentle grip on his upper arm.

"You can do this, Kurt," she assured him. "I know that it's going to be hard and I know how much it might hurt, but you're strong." She gave him a watery smile. "You're so strong, and clearly, you're not alone."

He nodded at her, offering her a similarly forced smile. "I know. I'm ready," he murmured to Blaine. "Just... don't—"

Blaine quickly pressed a kiss to Kurt's forehead. "I won't leave your side."

"I hated the way he looked like this back then, too," Kurt murmured vaguely to Blaine, clasping onto his father's hand. "He looks so sick, so weak... But he isn't weak. He's so strong. He just has to make it through. He promised he wouldn't leave me then and he isn't allowed to break that promise now, either."

Blaine's grip on Kurt's shoulder tightened slightly. "Your dad's a man of his word," he assured Kurt softly, and the brunette nodded absently.

The door swung open, and Kurt glanced up to see his step-mother entering the room. He stood quickly, letting go of his father's hand as the woman pulled him into a tight hug.

"Thank god you're here," she said in a hushed tone. "Just—thank god. I thought... for a moment I was afraid—maybe that you

wouldn't—"

"I'm here," Kurt told her reassuringly. "I just couldn't bear *not* seeing him. I mean—he's my *dad*."

"Sweetheart, I know," Carole sighed, pulling him to her chest once again. "I know how hard this is. And it's not even two years after Alex—"

"I know," Kurt cut across in a small voice.

"He would... he would be so glad that you're here right now," Carole assured him.

Kurt choked a little at her words, shaking his head. "Please, just... *please* don't talk about him like he's already gone."

Carole nodded, a few tears falling down her cheeks. "Right," she said quickly. "No, of course not, sweetheart, but..."

"But you don't think he's going to make it," Kurt supplied for her, almost inaudible. "Don't let him hear you say that, Carole," he added, half-heartedly attempting to tease her, but the smile dying on his lips immediately. He squeezed his eyes shut. "You don't think he's going to make it. And you're a nurse. You actually have some idea..."

"As a Hummel man, I have no doubt in my mind that he will do absolutely everything possible to pull through," Carole assured him, her voice fighting to stay strong even when it was thick with the sound of tears. "But from a medical standpoint, I just..." She swallowed tightly. "I just *can't*."

"He'll do it," Kurt said with false confidence. "He did it before, he'll do it again, Carole."

Carole didn't respond again and Kurt found it a little disconcerting.

Suddenly, a few nurses were filing into the room, hovering over Burt and taking his vitals and scribbling a few things on a clipboard. Kurt looked to Carole in concern and she closed her eyes for a moment. "They're taking him into surgery in a few moments," she muttered to him. "Bypass surgery."

"Is that—"

"If he makes it, it could make a world of difference," Carole told him quickly. "But I won't pretend..."

"You're a nurse, Carole, and I'm an adult," Kurt told her shakily. "Just tell me."

She sighed. "There are risks," she said plainly. "There are with any surgery. I mean, if you want me to just list them... there's the usual risks of clotting, infection, and bleeding out, or it could cause memory loss, problems with his heart rhythm, another heart attack or a stroke, kidney failure, lung failure..."

Kurt swallowed thickly. "But if he does make it?"

Carole looked at him softly. "Usually they try to give the heart more time to heal after a heart attack," she told him. "But in emergency cases..."

"He'll make it," he told her without hesitation. "He has to."

"Can I get you anything?" Blaine asked him gently. "Coffee? Water? Anything?"

Kurt shook his head. "Just stay," he murmured, and Blaine pulled Kurt more closely to him, kissing the top of his head.

"I promised I would," Blaine said. "I meant it."

Kurt closed his eyes as he rested his head against Blaine's shoulder. He felt so tired. He was just so incredibly tired of feeling this way, all the hurt and pain and hopelessness.

He threaded his fingers together with Blaine's. Blaine, the man that he felt so lucky to have. He wondered where he would be without Blaine, sometimes.

"I love you," he whispered suddenly, and Blaine pressed another kiss into his hair.

"I love you, too," he responded, squeezing his arm softly.

"You do too much for me," Kurt said. "You're too good to me."

"I disagree," Blaine told him gently.

"I'd be lost without you," Kurt went on.

"And once again you don't give yourself the credit you deserve," Blaine said.

Kurt hummed in response. "I just..." He trailed off, giving Blaine's hand a squeeze. "I just love you. Thank you for being here."

Another gentle, chaste kiss from Blaine.

"Kurt?" He glanced up as Carole came toward them, looking more exhausted than he'd ever seen her.

"What happened?" he asked immediately. "Is—is he all right?"

"He's stable," she told him slowly.

"So he's made it," Kurt said quickly. "He's going to be fine."

"Not yet," she sighed. "He needs to be kept in the ICU for the night, and he still isn't awake. It's still a bit touch-and-go."

"Can I see him?" he asked her next, but she simply shook her head.

"Not yet," she said again. "They're going to come down and let us know the moment we can."

Kurt nodded, taking a deep breath as he leaned back into Blaine. "It'll be fine," he murmured to Kurt. "It'll work out."

Kurt didn't respond, closing his eyes tightly. He wished he could wake up and the nightmare would just be over.

"This is the part I dread the most," Kurt told Blaine quietly, as they stood just outside the ICU. "The waiting. Just sitting there waiting for him to wake up, or to just squeeze my hand or..."

something." He took a deep, steadying breath. "I waited so long before, it felt like it was forever. There were moments I didn't think he would..."

"He will," Blaine assured him quietly, squeezing his hand tightly. Kurt nodded vaguely.

The nurse allowed them in, Carole already taking the seat right beside Burt. Kurt quietly slipped into the chair on the other side, taking his other hand in his.

Suddenly, it was all Kurt could do to wait.

Kurt drifted in and out of consciousness.

He was exhausted, he really was. Carole had already fallen asleep, still seated on Burt's left side. Blaine was dozing as well, sitting in the chair in the corner. Kurt wanted to join them to be able to rest after a long, emotional day (or was it days? He really didn't know anymore), but he simply couldn't. Every time he started to nod off, he swore that he could feel the hand in his twitch.

Suddenly, it occurred to him that perhaps he wasn't imagining it.

He squeezed his father's hand tightly in his and waited for just a few seconds before he felt the fingers beneath his moving again, his pulse speeding up painfully.

"Carole," he croaked, his throat dry. "Carole!"

The woman jolted awake, staring at Kurt startled. He let out a watery laugh, glancing from his father to his step-mother.

"Carole, he's—he's moving!" he told her breathlessly. "He's waking up, he—he's... *he's going to be okay.*"

Chapter Twenty-Seven

"Yeah, chickenpox," Kurt sighed into the phone. "It's my fault, too. I was supposed to take him in for the second dose of the vaccine for months, but with Blaine and Ella moving in, and that whole mess with her at school, and then my dad being in the hospital... not even to *mention* Alexander being born... I completely forgot."

"Please," Mercedes responded. *"It isn't that terrible. I had chicken pox when I was a kid, and it wasn't mentally scarring for the rest of my life or anything like that. Aiden will be just fine."*

Kurt hummed in response. "I suppose," he said. "But I feel terrible. And now Ella's got it, too. She had the vaccine so it's nowhere near as bad, but being in such close contact with Aiden all the time..."

"And how is she taking it?"

"She's the one pitching a fit, honestly," Kurt said with a chuckle. "She was supposed to go over to Tina's for swimming with Mikey on Friday, but obviously that's not happening."

"They'll live," Mercedes told him again.

Kurt turned as Blaine entered their bedroom, carrying a basket filled with laundry. They shared a brief smile. "Well, I better get going," Kurt sighed into the phone. "Aiden's been making a habit of waking up at four in the morning scratching like crazy, so I need to try to get *some* sleep before then."

"You take care, boo," Mercedes instructed.

"I will," Kurt assured her. "And congratulations again." Blaine raised a questioning eyebrow at him at these words, and Kurt held up a single finger, indicating he'd explain in just a moment. Blaine nodded and went back to folding his clothes.

"Thank you!" she said, a tone of excitement evident in her words. *"I hope you realize I really will be enlisting your help, the moment I get to stop and think about things again. Right now my mind is still too fuzzy with excitement."*

"Completely understandable."

"*You're going to regret offering to help, boy!*" she told him, and Kurt smiled at her words. "*I'll talk to you later, sweetheart.*"

"Night, boo."

He ended the call, turning his attention back to Blaine, who was looking at him questioningly.

"Sam proposed to Mercedes," the brunette reported.

Blaine raised an eyebrow at Kurt. "Seriously?" he asked. "That's great."

Kurt smiled, nodding, though it faltered after a moment. "Can I ask you something?" he said softly. "I'm warning you now it's—it probably is a... well, not a touchy subject, but... perhaps not the most comfortable of topics."

"Of course," Blaine responded, glancing back at Kurt for a moment before returning to his laundry. "You can always ask me anything."

Kurt fixed Blaine with a stare, licking his lips a little hesitantly. "Why did we break up?" he asked in a cautious voice.

Blaine stilled completely, clutching a cardigan mid-fold. "It wasn't exactly my idea," he said emotionlessly, not turning around to look at Kurt.

"I know," Kurt responded, his voice sounding so uncharacteristically small. "That's not what I meant, though... I—I know the technicalities of it. I know that it was my idea, my fault, whatever. But..."

"But?" Blaine asked, turning around.

Kurt gave him a sad smile. "But I thought you were going to fight for me." The admittance stung, causing Blaine's heart to ache slightly.

"I thought you didn't want me to," Blaine replied at last, the words sounding strange and forced, as though they weren't in his own voice.

"Why wouldn't I want you to?" Kurt asked him. "Blaine, I loved you. You were the best thing that ever happened to me."

"Then why did you break up with me?" Blaine snapped, the words coming out more harshly than he intended. He paused, taking a deep breath. "I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry," Kurt responded. "I didn't mean to start a fight."

"No," Blaine assured him quickly. "It's fine, I'm not angry. Really." He sighed. "I always figured this conversation would happen eventually, anyway."

Kurt nodded vaguely. He looked up at Blaine with that same sad smile. "I really thought you would come after me," he said.

Blaine sighed, throwing his clothes back into the laundry basket and sitting on the bed with Kurt. "But then why did you break up with me in the first place?" he pressed on.

Kurt shrugged one shoulder. "It really made sense to me at the time," he said, and Blaine couldn't help but feel a small sense of admiration at Kurt's ability to always sound so controlled. "It felt like we were drifting apart. We were fighting more, we almost never had the time to see each other... and then one day, the thought crossed my mind that it shouldn't be that hard. If it was meant to be, it *wouldn't* be that hard. And I just couldn't get the idea out of my head. And so I... I decided that if you wanted it as badly as I did, you'd fight. And I thought that if you didn't, maybe it was too hard on you. That... maybe you'd been having the same doubts."

Blaine sighed. "I had doubts," he admitted. "Of course I had doubts. We were young and naïve, but we still should have known that it wasn't going to be easy. We should have known that if we wanted it, we needed to work hard for it." He sighed, running his hand over his face. He let out a bitter laugh. "I had thought that you wanted space. I thought that I needed to give you space. I was *certain* that if I gave you that space, you'd come back to me. So I just... waited. I waited as days turned into a week, and as weeks turned into a month, and when months turned into a year. You didn't come back.

And so I thought... I thought that you didn't want to."

"I thought that you didn't want *me*, anymore," Kurt told him.

"I always wanted you," Blaine said breathlessly. "I never stopped." He cast his gaze downwards. "By the time I realized I should have fought, it was too late."

"But it was *never* too late—"

"It was," Blaine said firmly. "When you started dating Alex."

But Kurt shook his head. "If you had come back for me, I would have chosen you."

"That's a lie," Blaine said. "And I don't mean it offensively. I just... I *know* you. And I know that you loved him."

"I loved you, too," Kurt insisted.

"I know," Blaine assured him. "But you never have to pretend you didn't love Alex." He smiled wryly. "I loved Christian. Maybe not as successfully, but I did love him."

"I know," came Kurt's similar response.

Blaine watched Kurt as he directed his attention back to the bed sheets, watched as he licked his lips and closed his eyes for a moment. Then, Kurt glanced back up to Blaine, folding his legs up beneath him. A question was still burning in Blaine's mind.

"What brought all of this up?" he asked cautiously.

Kurt allowed himself a small smile. "It's stupid," he told him.

"Obviously it isn't," Blaine responded insistently.

"It is," he said a little too quickly. "It just... It's stupid and embarrassing and I'd rather forget about it."

"Come on, Kurt," Blaine persisted.

Kurt sighed. "I thought... god, I can't believe I'm admitting this." Kurt brushed his bangs out of his face. "I thought Rachel was so ridiculous for the way she acted in high school. I thought she was *insane* and completely rushing into things and I spent so much time trying to be the voice of reason with her and Finn. But, if I'm

completely honest... if you had asked me, I would have said 'yes'."

It took Blaine several moments to make the connection, to process just what implication it was that Kurt was making. His stomach swooped a little the moment he did.

"It was stupid to think it, I know that it was and I even knew it then. I don't know, I almost thought you would ask when I left for New York. But—I mean, we were seventeen, it would have been... irresponsible. It would have been *beyond* stupid."

"Kurt."

The word cut through his babbling and Kurt looked up to Blaine, his cheeks burning from embarrassment. "I'm sorry," he sighed.

But Blaine took Kurt's hand in his. The brunette felt a small sense of comfort. It was like a small push for him to continue, to explain.

"I just want you to know," Kurt told him slowly, choosing his words carefully, yet sounding completely vulnerable as he did so, "that I really did think it was you. *Just* you. I thought you were going to be my future, that you were going to be my *life*."

"But you loved Alex, too," Blaine reminded him yet again. "Which is *more* than acceptable. You're trying to rewrite the past, but... I never asked you to marry me. I never fought for you. You fell in love with Alex and you married him and adopted Aiden with him. And I fell in love with Christian. Christian broke my heart, and Alex was killed." He let out a slow breath. "But that's how it is that we're here *now*. Us. You and me."

"You never think of the lost years?" Kurt inquired in a whisper.

"They weren't lost," Blaine said simply. "They were spent becoming who we are now. I'm not the same boy you met at Dalton all those years ago," he said purposefully. "And neither are you." He placed a hand on Kurt's cheek, winning the slightest hint of a smile from him. "I try not to dwell on what could have been, any more. Because *maybe*, you were meant to suffer a serious loss. Maybe if it wasn't Alex, it would have been me. Only then, you wouldn't have had someone here for you, waiting to put the pieces back together. There

wouldn't be an Aiden, and the beautiful little girl I love more than life probably wouldn't be in my care." Kurt nodded. "I know you don't believe in god, but I believe in the idea that things happen for a reason, no matter how cliché it might be. For whatever reason, things were meant to turn out this way. Maybe breaking up years ago was the right thing for us to do, because maybe we really honestly *weren't* meant to last then. But maybe we are *now*." He sighed, looking at Kurt with an almost apologetic expression. "I know that right now, all you can do is look back at your time with him and just see the pain. At least with Christian, I had the ability to place all the pain and anger that I had *on* him. You don't have that option. I mean, you could, but that's not who you are. But you don't have to just look back and think that it wasn't a worthwhile experience because it hurt you so badly. It was worth so much more, and I know you know that."

"You're right," Kurt responded at last. "I know you're right. I'm just being a bit stupid."

"You're not being stupid," Blaine assured him. "Believe me, I spent a lot of time thinking of all the things I could have done and should have done, on the off chance that maybe my life would be better. But it really just... isn't worth it."

Kurt nodded, and Blaine leaned in, placing a gentle kiss on Kurt's lips. "I love you," Kurt whispered.

"I love you, too," Blaine told him.

"Thank you for easing my mind," Kurt said, and Blaine smiled, sweeping in for another kiss.

"It's my job, isn't it?" he said teasingly, and he felt Kurt smile against his lips.

"Tough job," Kurt responded. "I hope it pays well."

"*Marvelously*," Blaine assured him, resting his hand on the back of Kurt's neck, pressing a line of kisses along the taller man's jaw, forcing him to sigh contentedly. "But I still think I'd do it for free."

"Really now?" Kurt asked him breathlessly, threading his fingers through Blaine's curls. "Because if that's an offer..."

"Maybe not," Blaine conceded. "Because right now, I really don't want to do anything other than kiss you senseless."

"*Nothing* else?" Kurt asked coyly.

"Again, you've caught me," Blaine muttered into Kurt's neck. "I can think of several things I'd like to do to you right now, but they're not very appropriate for me to say out loud."

"I see," Kurt said, letting out a tiny gasp as Blaine nipped at his neck, feeling the tingling pleasure shoot through his spine. "I guess you'll just have to show me, then."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

When Blaine informed Kurt that they were going on a trip for a few days, and they were leaving *that night*, Kurt looked rather scandalized.

"But—school—"

"School starts next week," Blaine reminded him. "After labor day. I've already told the principal I won't be in this week."

Kurt still shifted a little uncomfortably, pressing his lips together in displeasure. "I don't know, don't you think we should have spent more time planning this?" he asked with uncertainty.

"I've been planning this for over a month," Blaine assured him.

At this, Kurt raised an eyebrow at him. "And you didn't think it pertinent to tell me?" he asked, a little snappishly.

Blaine raised one shoulder in a shrug. "You might have said no," he explained simply.

Kurt rolled his eyes. "You think that might have been a *clue*," he deadpanned.

"Pack," Blaine said insistently. "Be happy that I'm giving you *this* long to prepare." He flashed him a charming smile, not the least deterred by Kurt's annoyance.

Kurt muttered something angrily under his breath, his eyes narrowed at Blaine. "Fine," he sighed at last. "Just make sure Ella and Aiden are under control. Aiden especially, he's never packed on his own."

Blaine nodded, leaving Kurt alone in their bedroom.

And then, a couple of hours later, Blaine's car was loaded up and Ella and Aiden were in the back seat (already fast asleep). Blaine ushered Kurt into the passenger seat, climbing in on the driver's side and placing a coffee tumbler in the cup holder.

He was asleep within a half hour, only waking up a few times

throughout the night, merely to shift in his seat or stretch out his legs or reposition his arms.

He finally woke up to the sunlight streaming through the car window, feeling the bright heat on his face and feeling slightly uncomfortable from it. He squinted slightly out the window, glanced around at his unfamiliar surroundings, trying to make sense of them. He peered back to see Ella and Aiden in the back, still fast asleep. He directed his attention to Blaine in the driver's seat once again.

"Where are we?" Kurt asked.

Blaine jumped slightly, looking over at Kurt, obviously still expecting him to be asleep. He offered him a tired smile. "Hey," he murmured. "We're just outside of Port Washington."

"New York?" Kurt whispered, his heart stuttering. Blaine nodded in affirmation. "But... that—that's where—"

"I know," Blaine responded.

Kurt was silent, his heart swelling painfully in his chest. He definitely hadn't expected *this*. He swallowed thickly, adjusting himself in his seat.

"How far out are we?" he inquired at last.

Blaine glanced at the clock between them. "Fifteen minutes?" he said uncertainly. "Give or take."

Kurt nodded absently, his mind buzzing. He stared out the window, vaguely recognizing the surroundings. He'd only been out to this part of New York four times. The first was to meet Alex's mother, months after they'd started dating. Second was visiting her the Thanksgiving after Aiden was adopted. Third was a few months later, attending her funeral. Fourth...

Kurt swallowed tightly, closing his eyes. He had been there just a few days short of two years before. He took a deep, steadying breath, forcing himself to stare back out the window once more. His mind was racing and swirling, but he tried to remain calm. He simply didn't think that *this* would be where they'd be traveling.

"Stop," Kurt said suddenly, five minutes later, grasping onto Blaine's arm. The other man glanced at him in alarm, pulling over to the side of the road. He followed Kurt's gaze, spotting the small set up beside them, a few yards back off the road. Kurt didn't take his eyes off of it. "Aiden wanted to get Alex flowers last year," he murmured, but Blaine understood before Kurt had even uttered the words, remembering the little boy asking him the year before.

Kurt unbuckled his seatbelt, climbing out of the car, his legs still a little stiff from the long drive. He moved to the backdoor, opening it and unbuckling Aiden.

"Hey sweetheart," he said, taking the small boy in his arms. Aiden was blinking into the sunlight, rubbing at his eyes. "I have an important task for you. I need you to pick out some flowers that Dada would have liked."

The little boy nodded and Kurt shut the door behind him, carrying Aiden over to the stand. Blaine watched them for a few moments until at last they returned with a bouquet of daisies. Kurt placed Aiden back into his seat, the little boy still clutching the daisies.

The rest of the car ride was silent. Ella at last woke up when the were just outside of the cemetery, pulling to a stop once more. Kurt climbed out of the car again, taking his son into his arms.

"Are you staying?" Kurt asked to Blaine, as he climbed out of the driver's side.

Blaine shrugged. "If you need me to, I can," he said. "But I assumed that the three of you would need some alone time."

Kurt nodded. "Thank you," he said, pressing a swift peck to Blaine's cheekbone. "Where will you be?" He paused. "Come to think of it, where will we be staying?"

Blaine offered him a smile. "It's been a while since we've seen Brittany and Santana, hasn't it?" Blaine said simply. "I called them up when I was planning this. We're staying with them for the night, then we'll be back on our way tomorrow night."

Kurt smiled softly in return. "You're amazing," he said simply. "Thank you."

"Go on," Blaine urged him. "Send a text when you're ready, and we'll come to pick you up."

Kurt nodded, shifting Aiden in his arms and walking down the path.

"Thank you again," Blaine said, a tired smile on his lips.

Santana shrugged. "You're the one doing all of this for Kurt," she said simply. "Besides, Brittany is completely *in love* with Aiden and Ella. She would have hated me if I told you all to just stay in a hotel."

Blaine hummed in response, glancing at Brittany and Ella, the latter of which was standing on the former's toes, giggling as they spun around in circles, performing a sort of make-shift dance. "How have you two been doing?" he asked.

Santana shrugged again. "All right," she said. "This is the first day Brittany's had off in weeks, I swear to god. She's been practicing for the Rockettes every hour of the day, every day of the week."

"And you?"

"Getting gigs whenever and wherever I can," she said. "I've actually been doing pretty well for myself."

"That's fantastic," Blaine smiled.

"And you?" she asked.

"Well, I'm still teaching, and Kurt's still writing," he said. "He might be in for a promotion soon, actually."

Santana smiled softly at him. "Good," she said. "He deserves it." Blaine nodded in agreement. "Did you want to lay down?" she asked suddenly. "We cleaned up the bedroom so you guys could stay in there. Figured we could set up the air mattress for the kids a bit later,

and then she and I would take the pull-out couch—"

"You didn't have to do that—"

"Don't say it twice or I'll take back the offer," she said, smirking. "Now, go on and lay down. Brittany came up with all these plans to take Ella around the city when you told us the general idea of what was happening. She figured we'd let you sleep while the three of us go on 'an adventure'."

"Sounds amazing," Blaine sighed. "I could really use a nap." He smiled at Santana. "You'll call if there are any problems, though? And then maybe we could get dinner?"

"Already planned," Santana continued smoothly. "I have a gig tonight, and you're all coming."

Blaine grinned at her, albeit a little tiredly. "Fantastic," he said. "I can't wait."

"Well, you'll have to. Get off to bed," Santana urged him, giving him a tiny shove toward the bedroom.

Blaine smiled at her and gave her a small wave. She simply rolled her eyes at him in response. He crossed the room, swooping in to give Ella a tiny kiss on the forehead before hugging Brittany close to him, pressing a kiss to her cheek as well.

"See you at dinner!" she said to him cheerfully. "I'll take good care of the princess, I promise!"

"You'd better," Blaine responded with a wink before moving into the bedroom. He closed the door behind him, not bothering to turn on the light. He moved to the window, twisting the rod for the blinds so that tiny strips of light danced across the ceiling, but ultimately the room was engulfed in darkness. He toed off his shoes, sighing as he dropped himself onto the bed, not even bothering to change his clothes or get under the covers. And still, within a few minutes, he was fast asleep.

Kurt's pulse quickened slightly as he walked down the path, clutching Aiden close to his chest.

"Are we really seeing Dada?" Aiden asked, the daisies still in his tiny hands.

Kurt offered him a small smile. "Yeah, we are," he told his son. "And you get to give him those nice flowers."

Aiden grinned at this. "Good," he said. "I think Dada will like them."

"Me too," Kurt responded. Once they were a few feet away from the grave, Kurt gently set Aiden back on his feet. He gently smoothed out his clothes, still smiling a little tentatively. "Are you ready?" he asked, brushing his son's hair out of his eyes. Aiden nodded, and Kurt took his hand, walking the short remaining distance to the grave.

At the foot of the grave, Aiden stopped in his tracks. Kurt tried to smile at him reassuringly, but Aiden bit his lip. Kurt took another deep breath and stepped forward, closing the distance. He crouched right beside the headstone.

"Hey," he whispered. "I—" He swallowed thickly, closing his eyes and resting a hand on the cool stone. "I've missed you so much, Alex. I'm so sorry it's taken me so long to get here." He licked his lips, letting out a slow breath. He cleared his throat and spoke a little more loudly. "Aiden's here, too. He brought you flowers." He turned back to their son. Aiden slowly approached his father, standing directly beside him before resting the daisies right against the stone.

"Hi Dada," he said. "I picked those out all by myself." He glanced to Kurt again before continuing, staring at the ground. "I wanted to get you some last year but Daddy and I couldn't come, so I gave the flowers to Daddy instead. Blaine and Uncle Finn helped me get those." He looked at his hands, then broke out into a grin. "I started preschool last year," he said excitedly. "I got really good grades. My teacher says I'm really smart. Daddy... Daddy told me that you'd be really proud of me." He paused for a moment, and Kurt placed a gentle hand on his son's shoulder. "I'm really proud of Daddy, too. He

used to be so sad all of the time, but he's so happy now. I know it is hard for him sometimes, but I think he's doing a really good job at everything." Aiden glanced at Kurt, but he frowned slightly. "Did I say something bad?"

Kurt shook his head, smiling at his son as he wiped at his eyes. "No," he assured him quickly. He leaned in, pressing a kiss to his son's forehead. "You said everything perfectly."

Aiden beamed at him. "Can I go climb trees now, Daddy?" he asked brightly. "I wanna show Dada."

Kurt smiled, kissing the top of his son's head. "Go," he told him softly, and watched as Aiden ran off. Kurt turned back to the headstone, running his fingers softly over the engraving, letting his fingers trace the name of his late husband. "He's growing up so wonderfully," he whispered. "I wish you could see it. You would be *so* proud of him." He smiled, though it didn't quite reach his eyes. "I'm scared sometimes that it's not good enough with just me here. All I can think is how badly he needs you in his life, sometimes." He sighed. "I can't change that, though. I can't change what happened... I wish I could, Alex. Wish you were still with me." There was a slight pause, and he closed his eyes for a moment.

"I wanted to hate you, for a while. For leaving me. But I couldn't hate you. I couldn't even hate *them* for what they did to you, there was no way I could hate you. Blaine helped me a lot with those thoughts." He smiled a little more strongly. "You remember Blaine. He was at the wedding. We... you and I... we talked about him a few times." A small laugh escaped his lips. "He was one of those reasons I didn't want to go out with you at first. He was there for me after you... after—after everything. He's helped me so much that I can't even possibly begin to explain it. But you'd understand. You always did." He smiled softly, letting his hand fall from the headstone, glancing back over at Aiden for just the slightest moment before staring back at the stone again. "I love him," Kurt admitted. "If it weren't for him, I—I would be so lost. But he convinced me to pick everything back up and start fresh, to remake my life into something that I could stand

living.

"And I'm... I'm happy. It's taken a lot of work, but I'm happy. And I didn't think there would be a time when I could be happy again, not without you. But I am, and *that's* how I know it's all okay because you told me *so many times* that you just wanted me happy more than anything else," he said. "I think that for two years of time, I've made a lot of progress, all things considered. I still miss you, and I will every day, but... it finally stopped hurting." He smiled, then lifted his fingers to his lips, giving them a peck and then pressing them against the headstone, as though transferring the kiss.

He got to his feet at last, simply staring at the grave for several long moments. He suddenly felt lighter, like a weight had been lifted. That sensation mixed with another, swelling in his chest and stomach; it felt a lot like hope.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Ella really didn't like a lot of the boys in her school. She didn't like that so many of them were loud and gross and rude and mean. She didn't like when they'd take away her drawings and laugh at her, or when they'd steal her glasses when she had to wear them, or the time she and Katie had brought in their princess dolls and they'd taken those, too. Lucky for her, Kurt was really smart, so he was able to get her dollie's dress clean without even messing up her hair. He even polished her little tiara, and suddenly she looked better than when she'd first gotten her from her parents.

Still, the boys in Ella's class weren't very nice. She did her best to not let it bother her.

Because Katie was mostly right. Boys were just kind of stupid.

Except her Uncle Blaine, and Kurt, and Aiden.

And Mikey. Mikey wasn't stupid, either. But, well, Mikey was just *Mikey*.

She couldn't really explain it, so she didn't try.

"You coming, Ella?"

The girl looked up to see Katie, waiting patiently for her, wrapped up in her coat and scarf. It took Ella a moment to realize that the bell must have rung and it was time for recess. She nodded quickly, smiling at her friend, and ran to the back to grab her jacket.

Unfortunately, the swings were all taken by the time Ella and Katie reached the playground. They considered their options for a few moments. Four square was really a game that the boys liked to play, and the sandbox was usually for the younger students.

"We could play jump rope," Ella suggested, but Katie shook her head.

"I left mine at home," she said, frowning. "Do you think we could borrow the hula hoops from the gym?"

Ella shrugged half-heartedly. "What about hopscotch?" she suggested.

Katie clapped her hands together excitedly. "Oooh, yes!" she said, jumping up and down slightly. Ella grinned at her best friend, running over to the play equipment and snatching up a piece of chalk. She hurried back to Katie, and the two linked arms and made their way to an empty part of the blacktop, outlining boxes and drawing numbers inside.

"You can go first," she told her friend, pressing a flat stone into Katie's gloved hands. The girl tossed the stone, which landed on the seven, and carefully skipped through the squares. She picked up the stone and made her way back, handing the rock to Ella.

Then, out of nowhere, Katie was being shoved to the ground.

Ella turned and glared at the boy, a year older than her and Katie. He was a bit taller, too, and laughing meanly with his friends. She was pretty sure that his name was Taylor something, but she wasn't in his class, so she couldn't be sure. She balled her hands into fists.

"Leave her alone!" she shouted at the boy, hearing Katie sniffing slightly behind her. "Just go away!" This only caused the boy to laugh harder. "I said *go away!*"

At this, the boy pushed Ella to the ground too. Her elbow collided painfully with the gravel and she hissed in pain.

"Aww, you gonna cry to mommy, too?" the boy asked, and she glared at him.

"She can't, Taylor," one of the other boys said. "That's Ella Anderson. She don't got a mom no more."

The boys laughed at this, and Ella felt as though she couldn't breathe anymore. The words were stinging more than the pain in her elbow, reaching her heart and making her entire chest ache. *Don't cry*, she told herself, *just don't cry*. She squeezed her eyes shut, hoping that it might prevent the tears. *Just don't cry in front of them*.

"What's your problem?" came an angry voice. Ella's eyes popped

open and she saw Mikey coming over, his cheeks red with fury. "Leave them alone, Adams!"

The older boy sneered at him. "Protecting your girlfriend?" he asked.

"They didn't do anything to you, just go away," Mikey continued furiously.

"Maybe I won't," Taylor said "What you gonna do about it, Chang?"

Mikey pushed the taller boy's shoulders and he stumbled slightly, the smile falling off of his face. He shoved Mikey back with all of his might so that he fell to the ground roughly. Then Mikey was on him, pushing him to the ground and pinning his arms to his side.

"*Say you're sorry!*" he shouted at Taylor. But Taylor pulled his arms free and rolled them over so he was on top of Mikey, holding his first above the younger boy.

"Enough!"

The children looked up as one of the teachers from an older grade rushed over. Immediately she pulled the two apart.

"Taylor," she snapped, "to the front office *now*." She looked at Mikey instead, noticing the few spots of blood staining his jeans. "You, to the nurse."

The boys nodded, both still looking furious, but two teacher's assistants were approaching now. One was taking Taylor by the arm, the other was placing a gentle hand on Mikey's back and directing him back to the building.

There was a strange feeling in the pit of Ella's stomach as she watched them both go. But she couldn't explain it, so again, she didn't mention it.

"Are you okay, sweetheart?" Ella looked up at the teacher, who was addressing Katie, now. The girl nodded.

"I-I'm okay," she said, still sniffing. Ella quickly got to her feet, offering a hand to Katie, and she pulled her up. "Can we just go sit

until we go in?" she asked Ella, and the girl nodded at her best friend.

"Of course," she said. "I don't really wanna play any more, either." She took Katie's hand in hers and they walked off to the edge of the playground, sitting with their backs up against the chain link fence. They didn't really talk, Katie still upset. Ella didn't complain. It gave her time to think.

Once the children were called in from recess, Ella had developed her plan.

"Miss Brady?" she said, addressing the teacher's aid while everyone was putting away their coats. "My tummy hurts. Can I go to the nurse?"

"Of course, sweetheart," the woman said kindly. "Here's a pass." She quickly scribbled Ella's name and destination onto the piece of paper, handing it to the girl. "Feel better, all right?"

"Thank you," Ella said, taking the slip of paper and moving slowly out of the classroom. After all, she had to at least *appear* to be sick. Once she was in the hall, however, she shoved the pass in her pocket and her pace quickened.

She reached the nurse's office, only the nurse wasn't there. Shrugging slightly to herself, Ella proceeded to the back where there were a few beds. She quickly spotted Mikey on one of the beds, swinging his feet that were hanging off over the side. She walked over to the bed and climbed up on it, sitting next to him.

"Hi," she said, and he glanced up, smiling at her.

"Hi," he responded. He furrowed his brow. "Are you sick?"

She shook her head. "I wanted to come see you," she told him.

"Why?" he asked, tilting his head to the side.

"To thank you," she said, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Mikey blushed slightly, looking back down at his feet. "I didn't do nothin'," he told her.

"You *saved* me!" she told him.

"It was just Taylor Adams," he said dismissively, but he still looked rather pleased with himself. "He's not that big of a deal."

"Well, I wouldn't have been able to do anything without you," she said. "They were talking... they said stuff about me not having a mom anymore."

"I'm sorry," Mikey said, and he really did sound like he was. Ella liked that about him.

"You stood up for me," she said. "It *really* means a lot to me."

"Really?" he asked, a little sheepishly, and she nodded, cupping their hands together. "Well, I'm really glad I could help." He grinned widely at her.

Ella took a moment to look at Mikey. She'd seen him countless times, of course, but she didn't often just really *look* at him. But she liked it. She liked the way he smiled, all of his adult teeth in up front, so it looked extra nice when he smiled. His dark hair was a little messy, falling into his eyes, which were a really pretty chocolatey color.

There was this swooping, fluttery feeling inside Ella's stomach whenever she got the chance to look at Mikey like this. It made her feel a little nervous, but mostly just kind of light and happy and excited. She figured that this must be how Kurt and Uncle Blaine felt around each other.

Without another moment's thought, Ella leaned in, giving a quick peck to Mikey's cheek. She blushed furiously as she pulled away again, noticing that Mikey's cheeks were similarly rosy.

"W-what was that for?" he stammered, though he didn't look displeased. Ella's cheeks burned anyway, looking down at her lap.

"Nothing," she told him quickly. "I just... I'm really thankful for what you did for me is all."

"Oh," Mikey said lamely, as though he was almost a little disappointed. He shifted in his seat slightly.

"You're not hurt too bad, are you?" she asked him quietly, and he

shook his head.

"Nah, just my knee and elbow are pretty scraped up, but it isn't too bad," he assured her. "I'm just glad he didn't really get to hurt you."

Ella smiled shyly, looking back up at him. "I was wondering..." she said slowly, biting her lip nervously for a moment. "Well, I wanted to know if you wanted to go trick-or-treating with me."

"Really?" he asked.

She nodded. "I thought... I mean, you don't have to, but I know that *Aladdin's* your favorite Disney movie, and if you wanted to, maybe you could dress up like Aladdin and... I could be Jasmine." She took her bottom lip between her teeth again, biting on it as her cheeks flamed red. "Kurt's really good at making costumes, and he said I could be anything I wanted this year, so..."

"Yeah," Mikey said immediately. "I'd really like that."

"Really?" she asked, disbelievingly.

He grinned broadly and nodded. He quickly leaned over to Ella, brushing his lips on her cheekbone much like she'd done moment before. She felt her heart thumping painfully in her chest, but she knew it was a good feeling. A really good feeling.

And the way he was smiling, how could it *not* be a good feeling? "Really really."

Chapter Thirty

“Kurt?” The man turned around to see the small girl peering into the kitchen sheepishly. He smiled gently at her. “Will you help me?”

“Sure thing, sweetheart,” he responded, drying his hands on the dish towel and placing it back at the edge of the sink. “What do you need?”

Ella took her bottom lip between her teeth. “I need to look extra nice today,” she told him.

“Oh?” he responded questioningly. “Why’s that?”

“Because we’re going to Mikey’s!” she explained exasperatedly.

The corners of Kurt’s mouth quirked up a little, as if to smile. “I see,” he replied. “Well, let’s see what you’ve got, then.”

Ella smiled excitedly, taking Kurt’s hand in hers as she dragged him upstairs to her bedroom. “I knew you could help me,” she told him. “You’re really good at clothes stuff.” Kurt smiled gently at her as she opened her closet doors, though she was still frowning. “I just don’t know what to *wear*.”

Kurt chuckled slightly at her. “Well, one of your dresses is out of the question. Don’t want to get those all messed up when you’re playing, right?” he asked, and she nodded. “It’s too cool for shorts, so how about these jeans?” He pulled a pair out that he knew were her favorites. She nodded quickly. “You have the same coloring as Blaine, so how about some green? It’ll bring out your eyes.”

“Green is Mikey’s favorite color,” she told Kurt brightly, and he grinned.

“Well, then, it’s even more perfect, isn’t it?” he asked, and she nodded. “What about this sweater? It’ll keep you warm, too.”

“And shoes?” she asked quickly. “I don’t want to wear my sneakers...”

“Of course not,” he responded seriously, still smiling brightly at

her. He crouched down, looking at the shoes on the floor. He picked up a pair of brown boat shoes. "How about these ones?" he asked, showing them to her. She nodded.

"I like those," she told him.

"Good," he responded. He stood up again. "And I'll tell you what," he said with a grin, "I'm going to let you borrow one of my scarves for a little extra something."

Her eyes widened. "Ohh, really?" she asked excitedly. "I promise I'll take extra good care of it, Uncle Kurt!"

The man paused slightly as Ella turned to her bed and picked up the green sweater Kurt had placed there. He wondered if she had even noticed how she had addressed him. He wondered if this was close to how Carole had felt the first time he had referred to her as his mother, wondering if Ella now fully accepted him as member of her family. A strange, unconventional family, he thought, remembering the photograph and frame Aiden had given him for his birthday, now sitting on the mantel along with dozens of other family photographs—featuring Aiden, Alex, Kurt, Blaine, Ella, Cooper, Julia, Finn, Rachel, AJ, Burt, Carole, and Kurt's mother in a few different combinations, taken over the course of several years. They were now a part of one rather extended family.

He wondered if it was only a slip of the tongue, so used to calling Blaine her uncle that it merely slipped out as a title for Kurt as well. He wondered if he was over-thinking the name.

He wondered if he was just over-thinking it all together.

He settled for placing a gentle hand on the girl's shoulder and pressing a kiss to the crown of her head. She smiled up at him for a moment before returning to her clothing, and Kurt left the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

An hour and a half later, Kurt sat at the Changs' kitchen table with Tina, a mug of hot chocolate each. The back slider door was open, letting the crisp autumn air in as they watched Mikey and Ella playing in the backyard. Burt was taking Finn and Aiden to a Browns game in Cleveland, and Blaine and Mike were helping Sam with some moving as he and Mercedes prepared for their April wedding and their new home.

"Mikey was telling me that Ella asked him to go trick-or-treating with her," Tina said with a grin, and a smile broke out across Kurt's face as well.

"Yeah," he said. "She asked me to make the costumes."

Tina chuckled softly. "I think it's terribly sweet," she said. "I'm glad that Mikey's got a crush on such a sweet girl as Blaine's niece."

"Me too," Kurt responded. "Though I'm not sure Blaine will be so thrilled when he finally picks up on the signs."

Tina shrugged half-heartedly. "I can't blame him. He's so protective of her, especially because of everything that happened." She set her mug on the table. "But he'll get over it."

"Yeah," Kurt said with a smile.

"Mikey said you're making the costumes?" she asked, and he nodded. "What were you making?"

"Ella asked for Aladdin and Jasmine," he explained, and she laughed.

"Oh god, that's *precious*."

Kurt nodded and grinned. "I figured it might be a bit hard for Blaine to deny Ella's little crush once he sees them," he said. "God, it was only last Halloween the two of them were Ariel and Prince Eric. Blaine's going to *hate* it." He sighed. "And he thought he was doing a terrible job with Ella. He can't even see how much she adores him. Now he's going to feel replaced."

"That poor man," Tina laughed. She took a long sip of her hot chocolate. "By the way, I'd almost forgotten—I have a bit of gossip."

"Ooh, do tell," Kurt responded with a smile.

"Mercedes was telling me that she went over to Quinn's the other day for whatever reason—to talk about something for the wedding, I think—and *Puck was there*. Not even just there, but like... *half-dressed* there."

Kurt raised his eyebrows. "Seriously?"

"Yeah," she continued. "Quinn wouldn't talk about it, though."

"Interesting..."

"You don't think they're together *again*, do you?"

Kurt shrugged half-heartedly. "I don't know. She made a few references..."

Tina quirked a brow. "And you didn't tell me?" she asked him.

Kurt laughed, waving a hand dismissively. "It was back at Finn and Rachel's wedding," he explained. "She just sort of mentioned that he most successful relationship was with Puck."

"I think she has a little bit of a warped sense of things, sometimes."

"I mean, what she said makes sense," Kurt reasoned. "Apparently since she never cheated on him, she thinks he was the one she always cared most about." He sighed. "She had so many ups and downs in life, I can't blame her for wanting to go back to a time when she felt genuinely loved. However messed up it might have been."

Tina nodded slowly. "I can get that."

A lull in conversation fell between them, and Kurt found himself staring out the back door as Mikey and Ella played together, the latter being pushed on the swingset by the small boy. His mind suddenly flitted back to the morning, and the manner in which Ella had addressed Kurt. He still felt as though there were a thousand implications she had made by using that one simple word, and it made him think.

"Kurt?" Kurt looked back at Tina, suddenly certain that his face must have been reflecting his thoughts. "Is everything all right?"

"Yeah," he sighed. "Just lost in thought."

"About?" she pressed on.

He sighed again. "Ella called me 'Uncle Kurt' today," he said.

Tina smiled at this. "Well, that's a good thing, isn't it?" she asked.

"Yes," he said slowly. "And no." He frowned slightly. "I love thinking that she looks at me as a part of her family. But..."

"But?" Tina asked. "Kurt, she's not even eight. She didn't have any ulterior motives in saying it."

"No, I know," Kurt agreed. "It just made me start thinking. I don't know, I'm being stupid."

"No, what is it?" Tina inquired encouragingly. "Tell me what's on your mind, Kurt Hummel."

Kurt smiled at her. "I love that she looks at me as her uncle," he clarified. "She's easily like a niece to me as well, if not like a daughter. But... I'm *not* her uncle. I'm just dating her uncle."

"Ahhh," Tina said, letting out a breath. "So this isn't about you and her, it's about you and Blaine."

Kurt could feel the heat in his cheeks rise. "Blaine and I aren't having any problems," he told her quickly.

"That's good," she assured him. "But that's not what this problem with you and Blaine is."

He sighed. "I give in, then," he said. "What is this problem Blaine and I have?"

"Marriage," she told him simply. Kurt swallowed thickly, the word hanging in the air a little awkwardly. "Do you want to get married to Blaine?"

Again, Kurt swallowed, his voice feeling tight. "I..." He looked at her helplessly.

"All right," she said. "Let me amend that. Have you *thought* about marrying Blaine?"

"Yes," Kurt admitted. "Of course I have. That's... that's only

natural, right?"

"Of course," Tina responded. "You're in a long-term, committed relationship. Thoughts of marriage always come up naturally. Especially now, when Finn and Rachel just got married, and Sam and Mercedes are engaged, and you're working on their wedding." She paused. "So what do these thoughts usually involve?"

Kurt shifted slightly. "I don't know," he told her. "There are times when I think that I'd like to marry him, but not yet. And it's so hard to explain because part of my mind is screaming at me that I've only been dating him a year and Alex has only been gone for two... and then part of me can't figure out what the problem is, because I love him and we're mature adults and we've known each other for fifteen years, and dated for a third of that time, so why not?"

"It is okay if you want to marry him," she reminded him.

"I know," he said. "But... I don't know that I do." He paused. "No, I mean... I *think* I do, I just... I don't know that I'm ready."

"That's completely fine, too," she said with a smile.

"But what if I'm not ever ready?" Kurt asked her, frowning. "What if that's what Blaine wants but I just... *can't*?"

"It's still a big step," Tina said. "And you suffered a huge loss. You don't have to ever be ready again. There is no right or wrong answer to these sort of things."

"But what if Blaine—"

"I can't promise a lot about your relationship, but I am a hundred percent certain that he would not leave you or anything of the sort if you're not ready," Tina told him. "He loves you, and you two have a great, honest relationship. You always have. You stay honest with him, and he'll understand."

Kurt sighed. "You're right," he said. "I'm just... letting myself get carried away, aren't I?"

Tina smiled. "Happens to the best of us."

Chapter Thirty-One

The first thing that Blaine noticed, as the weather continued to cool and October ended, transforming itself into November, was that Kurt was exhausted. It was well past the usual 'tired' he exhibited on occasion during busier weeks. He supposed that it had something to do with the number of hours he'd spent perfecting Halloween costumes for Aiden, Ella, and Mikey, and his carting the former two around everywhere when Blaine suddenly caught some mysterious bug from school and had to take an entire week off, all of which was around the same time of his promised promotion at work.

For this, Blaine had promised that the four of them would celebrate, but Kurt shrugged it off.

"Maybe when things slow down a little," he had said with a smile.

Blaine had agreed. There was no point in arguing over something like this, after all, no matter how much he knew that Kurt deserved the night off. He assumed that Kurt was right, and that in a few weeks things would settle and they'd finally be able to *make* time for some personal affairs.

After all, Blaine was swamped as well, after getting roped into working on the middle school's musical production. The 8th grade teachers had decided on *Beauty and the Beast*, which Blaine worried might be a little bit beyond the skills of some of the 11- to 13-year-olds there, but he didn't even bother arguing. Instead, he started dedicating a few after-school hours to the production, playing piano and helping students learn their parts.

So, he told himself, it was natural when, that Friday, he saw the circled date on his desk calendar at school and paused slightly. He frowned at the month of November, the day of the 11th circled, and suddenly it hit him.

November 11.

He picked up his phone a little frantically, fumbling with the

buttons and flipping through the screens. Well, Kurt hadn't said anything, no missed hints that had simply gone over his head. That was good, right? And he realized with three days to prepare, so really it wasn't a complete and utter catastrophe. He could still make some reservations for dinner, ask someone to watch the kids, see what movies would be playing, and buy some flowers. It wasn't as well-thought-out and planned as he wanted, but, *hell*—where had the last year gone, anyway?

"Mr. Anderson?"

He glanced up at the student at the door of his office and smiled softly at her, shoving away his phone and thoughts. He'd take care of it all later.

Three days later, Blaine was feeling rather proud of himself for planning such a romantic evening on such short notice. After school he'd dropped Aiden off with Burt, and Tina had taken Ella home with her and Mikey. He'd then run to the store and picked up a bouquet of flowers for Kurt, confirmed his reservations for dinner, and then adjusted his bow tie in the mirror before walking up the driveway and into the house.

However, when he at last walked up the front steps and into the house, he realized how eerily quiet it was. Usually there was at least some soft music playing, the quiet clicking of keys as Kurt typed away on his laptop.

Blaine set his bag down in the kitchen, then moved into the make-shift office they'd set up for Kurt in half of the dining room.

There he found the brunette man at his desk, his head resting in the crook of his elbow and his breathing soft and even. Blaine couldn't help but smile gently at him, sighing softly under his breath. He knew how worn-out Kurt must be, but still he fought against Blaine's protests of him working too hard and long. Blaine had lost track of

the number of nights when he'd gone to bed and woken up to find Kurt still working away, without a wink of sleep.

Blaine worried that Kurt was starting to work himself to death, but Kurt just waved him off.

Blaine placed a gentle hand on Kurt's shoulder, and the man jerked awake. He sat up straight, pressing the heels of his palms into his eyes.

"You fell asleep on your desk again," Blaine murmured gently.

"Must have dozed off," Kurt muttered. "I'll be done this report shortly... just another hour or two..."

"Kurt—"

"I'm sorry, but this needs to be done by Wednesday, and—"

"But—"

"Soon," Kurt repeated in a soft, tired voice.

Blaine frowned for a moment, then was struck with an idea. "Is that saved?" he asked conversationally.

"Of course," Kurt responded off-handedly. "I save every two minutes. Why?"

But Blaine was crouched down on the floor, examining the wires. Suddenly, finding the right one, he yanked it out of the socket.

At this, Kurt shouted. "Blaine!" he yelled, rounding on the other man. "Why would you—" He broke off, finally taking in the man standing in front of him, the bouquet in his hands. Blaine extended his arms, presenting Kurt with the flowers. "What—what are these for?" he asked, his demeanor suddenly softer, and somewhat perplexed. "Oh—*no*..." He glanced over to his desk again, looking at the calendar displayed there, then back down to the flowers. "It's the 11th." He swallowed tightly, then looked back to Blaine. "I..."

"Would it make you feel better if I admit I only remembered about two or three days ago?" Blaine offered, and Kurt nodded vaguely.

"I'm sorry," he breathed out. "I don't know what's gotten into me lately. I—"

Blaine cut him off by leaning in and giving him a brief kiss. He moved to pull away, but Kurt quickly gripped his shoulder, forcing him to stay still. Kurt kissed him again, deeper this time, and when Blaine finally pulled away, standing up straight, both were smiling.

"I'd planned a dinner and all that," Blaine admitted. "But... maybe we could just stay in."

Kurt nodded. "I'd like that," he smiled. "I can cook. No—I'm cooking. It's the least I can do." He pressed another kiss to Blaine's lips. "No objections."

"Well, if I'm not allowed to argue..." He smirked. He offered Kurt his hand, the brunette took it, the couple walking into the kitchen. Blaine went straight for one of the cabinets, pulling a vase down from it and filling it with water. He pulled the plastic from the flowers and placed them in the vase, moving them to the kitchen table and smiling thoughtfully.

Ten minutes later, a delicious dinner was cooking, and Blaine pulled Kurt onto his lap. The slightly taller man smiled down at him, then pressed a kiss to his temple.

"I suppose it's a little late to ask about the kids?" he said, smiling wryly.

"Ella's over at Mike and Tina's, and your dad is spending some quality time with Aiden," Blaine told him, running his fingers over Kurt's back, tracing the line of his spine.

"I figured it would be something like that."

Blaine hummed in response, pressing his cheek against Kurt's shoulder. "Ella's been spending a lot of time with Mikey lately," he said, and Kurt could feel him frowning slightly.

"I hadn't noticed," Kurt responded, though he could feel the corners of his lips twitching as he tried to suppress a smile.

"Do you think she likes him?" he asked.

Kurt shrugged half-heartedly. "She could," he said. "Or they could be friends."

"I think she likes him."

"Well, is that really such a bad thing?"

"She's *seven*," Blaine sighed.

Kurt rolled his eyes. "*Please*. I had my first crush was when I was four years old."

"Who was it?"

Kurt laughed. "No," he said. "No, no, no. We're not talking about that."

"Why not?" Blaine asked with a grin.

"Because I will *never* hear the end of it," Kurt said. "You'll laugh because it is *terrible*."

"I promise I won't," Blaine assured him.

"I just—it's not like it was based on appearances or anything, just the voice," Kurt quickly told him. "And mind you, I was only four years old. But I had this tape-cassette of the Lion King soundtrack..."

"Oh god, please don't tell me..."

"I think it was his rendition of '*Can You Feel the Love Tonight*,'" Kurt sighed. "At my young, impressionable age, that seemed to be the height of musical talent."

"*Elton John*?" Blaine asked with a grin. "It explains so much."

Kurt smacked Blaine's arm. "I was *four*," Kurt repeated. "And after I wore that tape out, my mom introduced me to '*Candle in the Wind*' and '*Your Song*', and with songs like that, can you really blame me?"

"Just... Elton John... wow."

"After that it was Billy Joel, until I was about six or seven," Kurt admitted. "And then Paul McCartney... I'm not sure that I ever quite got over him..."

"Really?" Blaine asked. "Not Ringo?"

"Oh no," Kurt responded. "Ringo Starr was cute, but Paul McCartney was just plain dreamy. And his voice..."

"So you only love your men for their voices," Blaine commented. "I see."

"Well, who was your first big crush, then?" Kurt asked. "Since apparently mine are so terrible to think of."

Blaine sighed. "When I was eight or so, my mom brought home *Sweet Home Alabama* and, well, I remember because Coop kept going on about how hot Reese Witherspoon was."

Kurt smiled thoughtfully. "She had it so terrible in that movie... having to choose between Josh Lucas and Patrick Dempsey..." He looked back down to Blaine. "So tell me, which were you rooting for, then?"

"Oh, I wanted her to get back with Jake," he assured Kurt. "But only because I thought that Patrick Dempsey was the most attractive man to ever exist. And, well, if Melanie didn't want to be with Andrew, that was fine by me because then I could."

Kurt pressed a kiss to Blaine's temple. "How precious," he said with a smile.

"Now you're making fun of *me*."

Kurt shrugged half-heartedly, sliding off Blaine's lap and going to the stove, stirring a few pots and flicking on the oven light so he could check on its contents. "It'll never be as bad as Finn," Kurt assured him. "Nobody can be."

"Who was his first crush, then?"

"Baby Bop."

"As in... the dinosaur?" Blaine asked slowly.

Kurt nodded. "Eventually he moved onto the pink Power Ranger, which is an improvement just because she's *human*, not even getting into the fact that she's a Power Ranger. God, that was a wonderful show... Tina and I used to always have serious discussions about whether Jason or Tommy was better looking. I was personally a fan of

Jason. I always thought Tommy looked like a bit of a sleaze." He paused slightly, turning back to Blaine. "How on earth did we even get on this topic?"

Blaine laughed. "Ella liking Mikey."

"That's right," Kurt said, nodding. "Well, I wouldn't worry about it. She's young. Crushes at this age don't go past holding hands and sharing lunch. And be thankful that it's Mike and Tina's son, and not someone else. They've raised their kids wonderfully, so I completely trust Mikey." Kurt set a spoon back down on the counter, then crossed the room to lower himself into the chair across from Blaine.

"You still look exhausted," Blaine said concernedly. "You're going to make yourself sick."

"Probably," Kurt conceded. "I suppose I could bare to cut back a little. They'd probably let me."

"We'll get to bed early," Blaine told him, "so you can have at least eight full hours of sleep. Maybe more, to try and catch up on it."

"*That* really sounds wonderful," Kurt said as Blaine ran his thumb along his knuckles. "Just between work and planning Sam and Mercedes' wedding, and all the time I've been spending at my dad's the past couple months, just to make sure that he's taking care of himself when Carole isn't looking..."

"It's a lot," Blaine said. "But you can't let it get like this. When you're taking care of everyone else, don't forget to take care of yourself, too." Kurt nodded. "We'll have a nice, calm evening," Blaine assured him. "Nothing crazy, just... us."

Kurt smiled. "I like that idea," he said.

Chapter Thirty-Two

"I've been telling you about this trip for weeks, Blaine," Kurt said shortly, zipping his garment bag up around a few of his suits. He turned back to the other man. "Months, actually. They've been planning this trip for me since just after the promotion. I told you about it then, and I've reminded you at least fifteen times in the past two weeks alone."

Blaine folded his arms across his chest. If he thought back really hard, he was sure that Kurt was most likely right. There were probably dozens of times Kurt mentioned the trip since November, and that was easily three months ago. But right now, he felt nothing but a stab of annoyance.

"So... you can't come," came his equally clipped response.

"No," Kurt said, and he looked genuinely apologetic. "This is so important, Blaine. You know that. If I make a good impression, our website could get national attention. Hell, maybe even worldwide. At the very least, it would open the door to it. I need to get this right." He sighed. "If you wanted me at Ella's parent-teacher conference so badly, you should have rescheduled it a month ago when you got the email in the first place. Now it's too late, and there's nothing I can do."

"This is important, too, Kurt," Blaine insisted. "They asked for both parents or guardians to be there for—"

"I'm not even her guardian, Blaine!" Kurt snapped. He stared at the blank expression frozen on Blaine's face. Instantly Kurt felt a pang of guilt at his words. He swallowed thickly. "I... I mean, I love her like she's mine, Blaine, but... realistically? I'm nothing to her. You know that." He let out a nervous sort of laugh. "It's not like—" He broke off, taking his lip between his teeth and hoping that Blaine might ignore his last half-statement.

He wasn't so lucky.

"It's not like *what*, Kurt?" he pressed on, and his tone was still angry. "Go on, then. What?"

"It's not like we're married," Kurt said, his voice tiny, his eyes unable to meet Blaine's.

There was a moment of silence. "You're right," Blaine said at last, and his voice was so devoid of emotion that it worried Kurt slightly. "Legally, you're not anything to her. But I thought *you* of all people would understand the importance and meaning of an unconventional family. I guess I was wrong."

"Blaine—"

"You're going to miss your flight if you don't head out now," Blaine said coolly.

Kurt nodded once and took his bags and walked out of the room. Less than five minutes alter, Blaine heard the front door close. Immediately he felt a sickening feeling of guilt and loss.

He was too harsh. He knew that. He was blowing things out of proportion and Kurt *had* told him repeatedly about the business trip. And, he reminded himself, it wasn't as though this was a regular thing. He sometimes wondered if he were to sit down and tally it up, he'd find out that Kurt was there for Ella more than he was.

Maybe *that* was why it bothered him. Blaine hated the sensation of stumbling through this whole "parenting" thing. Luckily, Kurt had come into his and Ella's lives at the perfect moment. He was more help than Blaine liked to admit sometimes. He was that assurance Blaine needed. Kurt was such a natural father, and Blaine hated that he wasn't.

And then, how many times had Kurt reassured him about that? That he was doing a magnificent job, that most of what he himself possessed in the parenting department was learned, practiced, and perfected skill, not natural-born talent.

God, why had he been so hard on Kurt? He bit his lip as he sat down on their bed, wringing his hands slightly. He quickly snatched up his phone, tapping away the hurried text message.

'I'm sorry. I love you.'

He waited a few anxious minutes before checking his phone again, clicking the message he'd sent.

There, in tiny letters, it read, "**DELIVERED: NO**". He cursed under his breath, realizing that Kurt had already switched his phone off for the flight. That meant a minimum of two hours for a response, assuming there were no delays and Kurt turned his phone back on the moment he touched down in Boston.

Blaine sighed as he switched off the bedroom lamp and pressed his face into his pillow, settling himself for what was sure to be a sleepless night.

Blaine awoke the next morning to find himself hopelessly clutching onto Kurt's pillow. He blinked confusedly in the bright Monday morning light for a moment before remembering his situation. Immediately he reached over to the bedside table, groping around for his phone, not even bothering to put on his glasses.

2 NEW TEXT MESSAGES.

He hurriedly clicked to view them.

'I know. Me too.'

He quickly clicked to view the next one.

'Just got in. I'll call the first chance I get, and I'll see you Wednesday morning.'

He frowned slightly. It wasn't anything negative, sure, but still. He looked at the time stamp. **3:48 AM**. Well, that made it more understandable. He knew Kurt was already struggling with constant exhaustion. Getting in so late... it wasn't Kurt being angry or hurt. He took a deep breath and got up. Time to get on with his day.

He managed to get Ella and Aiden up, ready, and to school without any incident. Even though it was purely out of hope, he kept his phone on the entire school day, should Kurt have the chance to call.

He didn't. Blaine knew it was silly to hope.

At 2:45, he packed up his things and headed to the elementary school. Within fifteen minutes, he had left Ella and Aiden in the gymnasium with the rest of the after school children, a few of the teachers' aids watching after them.

"Behave?" he requested quietly and Ella and Aiden both nodded quickly. He gave them both swift kisses to the forehead before making his way down the hallway to sit outside of Ella's classroom. Within a matter of minutes, a young brunette woman waved him inside.

He closed the classroom door behind himself, looking at the two young women who were standing before him.

"Mr. Anderson, I'm Mrs. Wells, and this is Miss Brady, our aide," said the slightly older woman with blond hair and glasses.

"Right, it's nice to meet you," he said quickly, shaking each of their hands in turn. "I'm sorry I wasn't able to meet with you earlier in the year."

"It's not a problem," Miss Brady quickly chimed in.

"We know most of our students' parents work," Mrs. Wells said. "I understand that you teach at the middle school?" Blaine nodded. "I heard that this year our conferences were poorly timed with yours. That probably didn't help. Anyway, go ahead and sit down." She motioned to the almost comically small chairs. Blaine seated himself awkwardly in the yellow plastic chair, as did the two women.

"This won't take long," Miss Brady assured him. "Usually, with students as wonderful as Ella, we don't have much to say. It usually boils down to concerns we have."

Blaine nodded. "Well, it's good to hear that she's done nothing bad."

Mrs. Wells nodded. "I heard that last year she had some problems with bullying," she said. "Because of..."

"My sexuality," Blaine said tightly, shifting uncomfortably. There was an awkward moment of silence, and Blaine cleared his throat. "She's... better now, though?"

"She's wonderful," Miss Brady quickly told him. "She's very well-adjusted, considering where she was just two years ago, with the loss of her parents."

Blaine nodded at this. "That's great to hear."

"I suppose your husband couldn't make it?"

Blaine stared blankly at the woman. "I'm sorry?"

"Ella's always talking about her Uncle Kurt," Mrs. Wells explained. "We were rather looking forward to putting a face to his name, as well."

"Kurt," Blaine repeated lamely. "We're uh... we're not married."

"Oh," Miss Brady responded. "I'm sorry, we just assumed—"

"No, it's fine—"

"Mr. Anderson?"

The three turned to see the young man entering the room, looking a little frantic. "Yes?" Blaine responded, thankful for the interruption.

"You're Ella's guardian?" he asked, and immediately he was on his feet.

"What happened?"

"You need to come quick," he urged him. "She's having trouble breathing, and—"

Blaine was running before he could finish his sentence. He was in the gym in seconds, pushing past the teachers and students that were circled around his niece.

"Ella?" he asked, brushing the girl's hair out of her face as he heard her gasping and wheezing. "Ella, sweetie, just breathe... nice and slow..." He turned to one of the teachers near him. "What happened?"

"I think it's an asthma attack," the woman quickly explained. "Mr. Leech called an ambulance, they should be here any moment."

"Come on, baby," Blaine cooed, turning his attention back to Ella. "Just relax, sweetie."

It was a blur as the paramedics came, putting Ella in the back of the ambulance with Blaine, who was holding Aiden tightly in his arms. They were quickly rattling off facts to him, giving him information about what was happening and what they were doing, but none of it was making sense. Nothing was making sense.

"She's going to be just fine," one of them told him eventually, once they were in a pediatric ward, Ella's breathing slow and steady, and she was talking to the doctor about what had happened. "My son has asthma, too. It's scary, but... as long as you're careful with it, she'll be healthy and fine and normal."

Blaine nodded vaguely, still clutching onto Aiden a little too tightly to be comfortable. Aiden didn't object, however, and so Blaine made no move to let him go.

"Mr. Anderson?"

Blaine looked up at the doctor, and entered the room, watching as Ella was smiling, swinging her legs over the end of the table. He was amazed at how she was suddenly so *fine*, when just a half hour ago, she was struggling to get a single breath.

The doctor smiled at him, handing him a small box. "It's an albuterol inhaler," he explained to Blaine. "Ella does in fact have sports-induced asthma, so that's to be taken as needed. Just before she does any running or anything like that, make sure she takes two puffs. The same can be done when she has an attack. And I've showed her the right way to do it. She's got the technique down great."

Blaine nodded again. "Thank you," he said weakly. "She's fine now?"

"She's prefect," he assured him. "Just need you to sign a few forms and you're good to go. I'll find a nurse, and she'll get them for you and get you signed out."

Thirty minutes later, the three were at home again, Ella and Aiden sitting down to a movie in the living room. Blaine watched them from the hall, pulling his phone out of his pocket and licking his lips. Kurt was busy. He knew that, but... *fuck it*, he couldn't stand the thought of

not talking to him right now. He still felt as though his heart hadn't settled to a regular rate since the entire ordeal, and all he wanted was one ounce of comfort from the man he loved.

He clicked on Kurt's contact information, and sent the call. It rang only twice.

"Hey," came Kurt's voice, in a sort of breathy sigh. Just that was enough to almost send Blaine over the edge, and he took a deep shuddering breath, turning into the entrance hallway of the house, leaning against the front door. *"I'm sorry I had't called yet."* He took in a few more unsteady breaths, and this time Kurt caught them. *"Honey, are you all right?"*

"No," came Blaine's answer. "I'm so sorry I fought with you. You're just so much better at all this parenting stuff. *You* would have known what to do today, you would have kept your head—"

"Hey, hey," Kurt quickly cooed. *"Slow down. What happened?"*

Blaine took a deep, steadying breath. "Ella had an asthma attack and I just—*god*, Kurt, I was so scared, and—I mean, I know this isn't her first trip to the hospital, but—she wasn't *breathing*—I thought—I thought that—"

"And you think I would have handled something like that well?" Kurt asked him softly. *"Do you not remember the sort of wreck I was when Aiden had to have his appendix removed?"* He sighed. *"Honey, you're fine. You can't always beat yourself up over these things. They're out of your control, and you are a wonderful guardian to Ella. I'll keep telling you that until you believe it."*

Blaine was quiet for a long while, trying to clear his head once again. "I just wish you were here."

He listened as Kurt took in a deep breath. *"Go on, then,"* he said. *"Open the door."*

Blaine blinked for a few moments, then turned peering out the front window, where he saw Kurt stepping out of his car. He quickly fumbled with the lock, opening the door and staring at the brunette man as he hung up his phone and slowly made his way to the porch.

"How did you—"

"The moment I got the Boston, I realized that the place I really should be was the one I'd just left," Kurt told him.

"You just sort of quoted Harry Potter, you know," Blaine told him in a small voice. Kurt rolled his eyes at this, a faint grin on his face.

"Sometimes you are the most ridiculous person on the face of the planet," he told him.

"How did you get out of your meeting?" Blaine asked him.

Kurt shrugged. "I was at lunch with the two women I was meeting with, and one of them asked why I wouldn't eat," he told Blaine. "I mentioned I was worried because I left things a little poorly at home. They insisted I leave on the next plane to Ohio."

"Is that..."

"It was a good thing," Kurt assured him. "They liked me, and they were so insistent that they didn't want to cause problems. They respected how much I cared about my little unconventional family and how much I wanted to set things right with you."

Blaine pulled Kurt in close to him, kissing him harshly on the mouth. "I'm sorry," he murmured when he drew back.

"Me too," Kurt told him. "I love you. I'm sorry I wasn't here with you today."

"You're here now," Blaine responded, pressing his forehead into Kurt's neck as the brunette rubbed his back softly, in slow, calming circles. He reveled in the sensation of just how immensely calming it all was. "That's what matters."

Chapter Thirty-Three

Sam and Mercedes's wedding was planned for May the 4th, 2025. Sam had picked the date, and Mercedes had agreed under the condition that having it on National Star Wars day did *not* mean they were having a Star Wars-themed wedding. In fact, they were not having a themed wedding at all. It would be "a big, beautiful, classic wedding", in her words.

He'd worn her down, though, into an agreement that their cake toppers be super-hero themed.

The rest of the planning was left to Mercedes and Kurt. Mercedes had opted for a wedding at her old church, followed by a short reception there. Afterwards, the entire New Directions clan would be heading back to Kurt's, for a small continuance of the celebrations.

Most of the planning went smoothly. Though the details had taken a backseat for some time, the moment Kurt had returned from Boston, the two had spent six straight weeks planning everything to the final detail.

The final thing on their list was to purchase the dresses and suits for the bridesmaids and groomsmen. It made Kurt antsy, to wait so long, but Sam and Mercedes flip-flopped so many times on numbers and colors and all the other details, that it was very nearly necessary.

"Is five bridesmaids too many?" Mercedes asked Kurt uncertainly for the hundredth time. "I mean, I know some people have like... *twelve*, but I don't want to go too overboard."

Kurt shrugged. "It's your wedding," he said. "You can have whatever you want."

Tina pulled out a purple dress. "What about this one? It would go really well with your colors."

"I'm not sure about the neckline on that one," Mercedes said thoughtfully. "I was thinking of more of a sweetheart neckline."

"I think I saw a few of those back there," Kurt said, waving to the

other side of the store. "And what about Sam? Has he picked out who he wants for his groomsmen?"

"Yep," Mercedes responded. "He came up with five, too."

"Finn, Puck, Artie, Mike," Kurt rattled off, then paused. "Is Rory able to get a flight in from Ireland?"

"No, silly," Mercedes said with an eye roll. "You're number five."

Kurt blinked at her, stopping in his tracks while Tina and Rachel continued to the other wall of the shop, browsing through the assortment of dresses. "I'm sorry, what?"

"*You*," Mercedes repeated. "Sam wants *you* to be one of his groomsmen."

"I assume you had something to do with that?" Kurt asked uncertainly. "Because I really don't—"

"I had nothing to do with it," Mercedes assured him. "He wanted you. Is that so hard to believe?"

Kurt frowned a little. "I don't know," he said. "He and I just aren't... you know... super close, and this is *his wedding*. He shouldn't want me because I'm one of your friends."

Mercedes rolled her eyes again. "Boy, he *likes* you," she said. "You helped him out a lot in high school. When his family was broke, and then when you let him live with you. He never forgot that."

"I never forgot when he took that black eye for me, when things with Dave were at their worst," Kurt admitted. "That's not what I *wanted*, but... it meant a lot."

"So you'll do it?" she asked brightly.

Kurt sighed. "Sure," he said. "Just... he knows that he doesn't have to do this, right?"

"Of course he knows," Mercedes said. "Again, his choice. Completely."

Kurt sighed as they approached Tina and Rachel once more.

"Where is Quinn today, anyway?" Tina asked Mercedes. "I

thought you said she was coming."

"She told me she was," Mercedes said with a shrug.

Rachel bit her lip, and Tina raised her eyebrows at her. "If you know something, you better tell us now."

"Okay," Rachel said quickly. "But you can't tell anyone." She took a deep breath. "She told me this morning that she couldn't come because she's running away with Noah."

"*Running away?*" Mercedes repeated.

Tina's eyes widened, and she shared a glance with Kurt. "As in..."

"*Eloping?*" he asked in disbelief.

Rachel nodded slowly.

"You had it right, Kurt," Tina said. "You knew those two were involved."

"We all sort of had our ideas, didn't we?" Kurt asked.

"I more or less walked in on it..." Mercedes murmured, and they all laughed.

"I, for one, am happy for her," Kurt said. "I mean, maybe they've always had a weird, dysfunctional, on-and-off relationship, but... I can understand her reasoning for believing he's 'the one'."

"If she's happy, I'm happy," Mercedes agreed, and Tina and Rachel nodded. She laughed. "God, I'm pretty much the last to get married, aren't I?"

"Artie isn't married yet," Tina pointed out.

"He's been on and off with his rockstar girlfriend in Hollywood for *years* though," Mercedes said. "And I mean of *us*. Hell, even Brittany and Santana have a common-law marriage."

"That's still not the case," Rachel said. "There's—" she broke off, looking a little abashed. She shook her head. "I'm sorry, I don't know what I was thinking."

"Who?" Tina pressed on curiously.

Rachel looked at Kurt apologetically. "I was going to say you,
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but—I'm sorry, I really don't know what I was thinking! I guess... I *wasn't* thinking, to be honest. Because—because I *know*—"

Kurt smiled a little tightly. "It's fine," he assured her quickly. "I mean, I'm *not* married."

"But..."

"Rachel," Kurt sighed, "now is *not* the time to talk about me. Or even Quinn and Puck, for that matter. We're here shopping for Mercedes's wedding."

"That's right," Mercedes said cheekily. "You all best be talking about me for the rest of the day." The four laughed at this. As Rachel and Mercedes began moving down the rows of dresses again, Kurt hung back for a moment, as did Tina.

"You okay?" she asked him softly.

He smiled in return. "Of course," he assured her.

She sighed. "I know that it's a bit of a touchy subject as of late," she said to him, but he shrugged it off.

"The truth of it is that I'm *not* married," he said simply. "I was, to a wonderful man, and he was killed. Now I'm with Blaine, and I'm just *not* ready for that with him." He sighed. "I love him, but it still hurts to think of that loss..."

"I'm sorry," Tina said. "I can't possibly begin to understand what you've been through and are going through. And it must really suck to have a bunch of crappy friends like us who can so easily *forget* on occasion."

Kurt shook his head. "I don't want Alex's death to be the thing that defines me," he said. "I don't want people to look at me and the one thing they think is, 'oh, that's Kurt, his husband died, feel sorry for him'. My husband died, but I turned things around. I picked up the pieces. As hard as it was, I moved on. I don't want everyone to have to feel like they're stepping on eggshells around me."

"We could still be sensitive," Tina insisted.

Kurt merely shook his head again. "It's *fine*."

Tina paused for a moment. "Have you and Blaine talked about it at all?" she asked.

Kurt rolled his eyes at this. "The only time the subject was brought up was during that ridiculous fight before I left for Boston. And you know how that went."

"So you don't know his feelings on the matter?"

"Not really," Kurt sighed. "Should I talk to him about it?"

Tina shrugged. "I don't know," she admitted. "I mean, he doesn't talk about it with Mike. I don't know if he does with any of the other guys. Maybe it's not something that he's thought about too much. He could still be hurting from his wedding. He could be too afraid to ask."

Kurt nodded, feeling a twisting feeling of guilt in the pit of his stomach. "You're right," he said.

"I know you'd never do that to him," Tina assured him. "I think he knows that, too. He has to."

"He was just so hard to read during that fight," Kurt told her with a sigh. "I couldn't tell if he was upset about *us* or about our relations to the *kids*. You know?"

Tina nodded thoughtfully. "Have you thought about what you'd do if he proposed?" she asked.

Kurt sighed. "Probably tell him what I've told you," he said. "That I'm just not ready for that sort of thing, and I don't know when or if I will be."

Tina nodded, then smiled softly at him. "I know that things aren't perfect, but I am really glad that the two of you found each other again," she said.

He smiled again at her. "Me too," he admitted. "Come on, let's see what they're picking out."

The day of May 4th, it rained.

"It's good luck," Kurt told Mercedes with a smile. "You should be *glad* that it's raining."

She nodded, though she still looked a little anxious.

"You're not getting cold feet, are you?" he asked her as he zipped up the back of her dress for her. "It's okay—"

"No," she said forcefully. "Just... nervous. But a good nervous."

"Completely understandable," Kurt said with a smile. "Well, you look stunning. Sam is lucky to have you."

She beamed at him and pressed a swift kiss to his cheek. "Thanks, Kurt," she said. "For everything."

He smiled and nodded in response. "Thank you, too," he said, and she grinned.

"Now go on," she said suddenly. "You still have to get ready, too!" She quickly shooed him from her room.

He found Blaine waiting just outside. "Hey there," Kurt said with a smile. He pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Are Mikey and Ella all ready?"

"Yep," Blaine responded. "Tina's holding onto the rings until right before. And Ella is, once again, the perfect flower girl." He smiled. "I see you're still not ready."

Kurt waved his hand dismissively. "*Please*," he said. "Have you been in the room with the other groomsmen? They're all in their suits playing video games which, believe me, is *much* worse. I am right on schedule."

"You figured out the precise moment to put on your suit and have no wrinkles, then, I presume?" Blaine asked with a grin.

"You doubted that I would?" Kurt asked with a quirked brow, folding his arms across his chest. Blaine laughed and pressed a chaste kiss to Kurt's lips.

"Well, I suppose I should let you get to it, then."

"Wait," Kurt quickly said, and without another moment he pulled Blaine into his arms, holding him impossibly close. "I love you."

"I love you, too," Blaine responded, and Kurt could hear the slight confusion in his voice. "What—?"

"I'm just..." Kurt swallowed tightly. "Tina said something when we were picking up the dresses, and all I could think of since was your wedding."

"Kurt..."

"I should have been there," Kurt told him desperately.

"You were—"

"I didn't have a reason not to go," Kurt insisted.

"You did," Blaine said. "You were on some business trip, and—"

"No," Kurt cut him off. "Alex was on a business trip." He swallowed thickly again. "I had *no* reason not to go."

Blaine looked at him, confused. "I don't... I don't really understand."

"Well, I guess I had a reason not to go," Kurt told him uncomfortably. "But it was stupid, I just—I let Rachel get into my head, and—"

"Kurt," Blaine said gently. "It's fine. I promise, it's so long ago, it's not like I'm upset or anything. Just... tell me."

Kurt nodded, and the two sat down on a bench tucked against the wall, between two doors. "I wanted to talk you out of getting married to him," Kurt admitted. "When I first found out about it, I told Rachel I didn't think it was a good idea. I thought it was rushed and insane and so unlike you." He paused. "She told me she didn't think it was a good idea, that it wasn't my place to say anything, because I'd broken your heart."

Blaine sighed, exasperatedly. "Kurt..."

"No," Kurt said quickly. "I just... she told me then that you'd still loved me when I started dating Alex. And when she told me that, I

just... I just figured she had to be right. And I just realized that I had no part in your life, anymore. Maybe you and I were still close friends, but... god, I just felt like the biggest jerk in the world. I had no place in telling you my opinions, and I really had no place at your wedding." He shook his head. "She said all these things about old wounds and... well, I just thought she was right. And I'm not even trying to pass blame off on her. I just completely convinced myself that I should *not* be there at your wedding. It would be tactless and uncomfortable. I don't know why you came to *my* wedding. I was with Alex and happy and all that, and I still couldn't stand the thought of being at yours.

"And then Rachel told me about everything that happened, and I just—I knew I'd made the wrong choice. Because I should have just pushed through any uncomfortable feeling and just *been there for you*, as my friend. And I wasn't, and I regret it more than anything. Especially when you were there for me, again, after Alex died." He squeezed his eyes shut, feeling the tears rolling down his cheeks.

"None of that," Blaine told him softly, cupping his face in his hands, brushing the man's tears away with his thumbs. "Come on, Kurt, don't cry."

"I'm just so sorry, Blaine," he breathed out. "I love you so much, and I'm just so sorry for not being the same selfless friend you have been to me."

Blaine leaned in, kissing Kurt softly. "I love you," he told him. "And I've told you before that it's for the best you weren't there. I shut everyone out. Even Coop and the guys from Dalton. I needed to be alone.

"And Rachel was right," he continued. "Not about things not being your place, but... I still loved you, then. At the time, it was probably for the best that we separated ourselves more. If I'm honest, I didn't want you as a friend then, because it would have probably just hurt more."

Kurt nodded a little in understanding. "You'd have pushed me so much further away, and we wouldn't be here now, would we?"

Blaine smiled weakly. "Probably not," he said. "And that's what matters, when it comes to us. That we're here now." He took Kurt's hand in his, and pressed a kiss to his knuckles. "Now come on, no more tears. You've gotta get ready. I've probably upset your entire schedule."

"I'll manage," Kurt told him, offering a watery smile. He quickly rubbed at his eyes and cheeks, taking a deep breath. "I'll see you at the reception," he promised, getting to his feet.

"It's a date," Blaine responded with a smile, and with one final kiss to the back of Kurt's hand, he walked off towards the nave of the church. Kurt watched him go, and then let himself into the room where the rest of the boys were getting ready.

"About time, dude!" Puck shouted the moment he entered.

"Cut him some slack," Sam responded, punching Puck lightly on the arm. "He was helping my bride get ready!" He turned his attention back to Kurt, noticing his red eyes. "Hey, everything all right, man?"

"Fine," Kurt said, waving his hand dismissively.

"You sure?" Mike asked in turn, and Kurt nodded.

Sam put a hand on Kurt's shoulder. "Seriously, if there's anything you need, just let me know," he said. "I can't thank you enough for everything you've done."

"You didn't have to do this," Kurt told him, and Sam grinned crookedly.

"You're not still on about that, are you? I *wanted* to."

"Come on, dude," Finn said. "We've got your suit and everything."

"We've got fifteen minutes," Artie reported.

"More than I need," Kurt assured them. "Are you ready?" he asked Sam.

"Couldn't be more ready," he said. "I've been waiting for this for *ages*."

The wedding was beautiful, and the reception was, admittedly, the most fun that many of them had had in a long time. It was easy to look forward to the New Directions party to follow.

The rain had cleared by the time they arrived at Kurt and Blaine's home. The backyard was a little muddy, but after the children had changed into their play clothes, they were permitted to play around in the grass, a few of the adults sitting on the back deck, drinking and chatting and laughing and watching over the children. The remainder stayed inside, the outside air still thick from the rain, and the air conditioning far more comfortable. Either way, Kurt liked it. It was like old times, with all the days they spent together before they started graduating.

When the doorbell rang at a little past five o'clock, he was confused, but Blaine quickly assured him that he could get it. Moments later, he returned to the living room.

"Who was it, Blaine?" Rachel asked curiously.

"What've you got there?" Sam asked, and Kurt noticed the manilla envelope in Blaine's hands, and the papers he'd removed from inside.

Then, he noticed the expression Blaine's face.

"Blaine?" he asked cautiously, approaching the man quickly. "What's wrong? What is it?"

"She can't be doing this," he said, looking at Kurt with an expression of pure heartbreak. "I—she—she *can't*—"

The entire room was painfully quiet.

"Who can't be doing what?" Kurt asked softly, gently. "Honey, what—"

"Julia's sister," Blaine explained weakly. "She's suing me for custody of Ella."

Chapter Thirty-Four

“Hey.”

Blaine looked up from his spot on the floor, his laptop set up on the coffee table, as Kurt placed a cup of tea next to it, then settled himself on the carpet beside Blaine.

"I got some books from the library today," he told him quietly. "Most of them seem to be more about custody in divorce cases, but I figured they could still be of some help." Blaine didn't answer. "My dad gave me the number for his lawyer, too. I called him today, and he said he'd meet with us tomorrow." Still no answer or acknowledgment. "And CPS is coming at the end of the week."

At this, Blaine slammed his first onto the coffee table, and Kurt lunged for the cup of Blaine's tea, making sure it didn't spill. "Child Protective Services?" he asked furiously. "Are you *serious*?"

"They have to, Blaine," Kurt told him quietly. "Taylor's said you're an 'unfit parent'. They'll see that it's not true the moment they walk in the front doors, but they still have to check. If we don't cooperate, it's only going to make things so much worse for us, and better for her." He sighed. "And think of what's best for Ella. If we don't work with CPS, they could put her in foster care or something until all of this is over with."

"I fucking *hate her*," Blaine growled, snapping his computer shut and propping his elbows up on the table. He let his face fall into his hands. "I *hate* that no-good homophobic—"

"Blaine..."

"No!" Blaine snapped, turning to Kurt. "How could she do this? How could she think this is okay? I wrote off everything she ever said to me when I was appointed guardian as just being emotional and irrational, but this is a whole new low. I have done *nothing* to ever hurt Ella. When Cooper died, my entire life became about her."

"I know," Kurt said softly.

Blaine pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes. "I can see why she'd do it," he said bitterly. "Any problem Ella's had since I was appointed legal guardian was because of me."

"How is that true?" Kurt asked. "She had an asthma attack. That's a perfectly natural medical condition that thousands and thousands of children have. She broke her arm. You weren't even the one watching her at the time! And it was all because she was playing some stupid kid's game with *my* son."

"And the bullying?" Blaine asked. "That was because of me. Because of who I am."

"Ohio is never going to be the height of acceptance, Blaine."

"Exactly," he countered. "How do I know that whatever judge we get isn't going to be another homophobic bastard who will take her away from me because he sees eye-to-eye with Taylor? He could take one look at me—at *us*—and just decide like *that* that I'm unfit to be her guardian. He could look at me with the same hatred and prejudices that she does."

Kurt looked at him sadly. "I'm sorry, Blaine," he said. "You're right about one thing: this shouldn't be happening. But I have hope. You *won't* lose Ella—we won't lose her."

Blaine dropped his hands to the floor, leaning back against the bottom of the sofa and squeezing his eyes shut tightly. "And what if I do?" he asked. "What do I do if I lose her?"

"You won't," Kurt repeated.

"But I *could*," Blaine argued. "And she's... she's so much to me. She helped me through such a dark time, and she's kept me going when I haven't wanted to. When I feel like I'm not a good enough parent, it's not because I think I'm *bad*, I just... she deserves everything that the world can give her, and I feel like I always need to be doing more for her, to keep her safe and happy. I want to give her so much more."

"I know that, Blaine," Kurt assured him. "Any parent feels that way."

"And what if I lose her?" he asked. "Then what? It's not like Taylor would let me see her. And I don't know how I can go on each day knowing that she's out there, and I'm not allowed to go near her." He was quiet for a long moment. "She's all I have left of Coop. But she's more than that. She's just... she's this part of my life that I never knew I was missing. I don't even want to imagine life without her." He let out a low breath. "I *refuse* to lose her, Kurt."

"I'll do everything I possibly can to make sure you don't," Kurt told him firmly. He pulled the other man close to him, wrapping his arms securely around him. "We'll make it through this. Everything will work out in the end."

Blaine nodded weakly against Kurt's chest. "I hope so," he said.

"It has to."

"Mr. Anderson?"

"Kurt Hummel, actually," Kurt corrected the older woman. She was dressed very nicely, her slightly greying hair pulled back. "Blaine is in the living room right now."

"Right," she said kindly and quickly, "I'm sorry about that. I'm Vivian Sheppard. I'm with Child Protective Services."

"Of course, come in," he responded, allowing the woman to enter. The two walked into the living room, and Kurt offered her a seat.

"Vivian Sheppard," she said, extending her hand to Blaine. Blaine took it.

"Pleasure to meet you," he said. "I'm Blaine Anderson, Ella's guardian."

"Nice to meet you," she responded. "You have a lovely home."

"Thank you," he responded. "It's—well, it's Kurt's, technically speaking."

"We've been living together for over a year, now," Kurt explained, and the woman smiled warmly at them.

"So it's the two of you and Ella, then?" Mrs. Sheppard asked.

Kurt shook his head. "No, I have a son, as well," he told her. "From a previous marriage. My husband died a few years ago."

"I'm sorry to hear that," she said genuinely. "What's your son's name?"

"Aiden," Kurt told him.

"And he and Ella get along well?"

"Marvelously," he assured her. She grinned at this.

"Would I be able to see Ella?" she asked.

"She's in her room," Blaine told her.

"Perfect," Mrs. Sheppard responded. "We can see her there, then?"

Kurt gave Blaine's knee a quick squeeze, and the three adults ascended the stairs. Blaine knocked on the door, and then opened Ella's bedroom. The tiny girl was coloring on her bed.

"Ella," Blaine said, sitting down on the bed beside her, "this is Mrs. Sheppard."

"Hello," Ella said in a tiny voice looking confused.

"She's here to ask some questions about how you're doing," Kurt explained to her, and Ella seemed to relax slightly.

Mrs. Sheppard pulled the chair from the desk over to the bed, and she took a seat. "Hi, Ella," she said kindly. "What are you coloring?"

"Ariel and Flounder," Ella told her. "Uncle Blaine and I just watched *Little Mermaid* last night. It's my favorite."

"You like living with your Uncle Blaine?" she asked.

Ella nodded vigorously. "He takes really good care of me," she told the woman. "Kurt does, too. And I like being a big sister to Aiden."

The questions continued for a while, and Kurt comfortably held onto Blaine's hand through the entire exchange. Admittedly, they were both rather happy when it was over. The three adults closed Ella's bedroom door again and went back downstairs.

"Honestly," Mrs. Sheppard said, "I see no reason that Ella can't stay with you, at least until the court makes their decision. She's the epitome a well-adjusted, happy, healthy child. I apologize for having to intrude like I did, but naturally we have to check up for every case like this. You shouldn't worry, though."

"Thank you so much," Blaine said, relieved.

Mrs. Sheppard smiled, then furrowed her brow after a moment. "If you don't mind me asking, why are you being sued for custody?" she asked tentatively. "Normally there's at least a case of misunderstanding or something of the sort. But with Ella, I simply can't figure it out."

Kurt and Blaine shared a glance. "Would you like the documented reasons or the *real* reason?" he asked her a little dryly.

The woman's face fell into an expression of indignation. "Oh, you *can't* be serious," she said. "I swear, every time this nation takes a step forward towards true equality, there's a handful of people that take five steps back. That is *ridiculous*."

"It's wrong," Kurt agreed. "But it's what's happening."

Mrs. Sheppard shook her head. "I'm so sorry, especially knowing that *that* is the real reason I was sent here today." She sighed. "I wish the both of you the best of luck, Mr. Anderson and Mr. Hummel."

"Thank you," Blaine said again, shaking her hand again as she left. The moment she was gone, the two embraced tightly.

"I knew it," Kurt breathed out. "I knew they'd let us keep her."

"For now," Blaine reminded him. "But, oh, just... *thank god*. Thank god, Kurt!"

Kurt could hear Blaine crying softly from relief and held the man a little tighter. "Did you hear her, Blaine?" he said softly. "She's on

our side."

"I know," he murmured.

"Doesn't that give you hope?" he asked, squeezing him slightly. "I mean, maybe this is a sign of what's to come. My dad keeps saying we've got to treat this like we're going to win it." He sighed. "I think we can—we *will*, Blaine. I think we can really do this."

"God, I hope so, Kurt," Blaine responded softly. "I really need to."

"I know," Kurt assured him. "Me, too."

"I just..." He swallowed thickly. "How long can we keep her out of this?" he asked. "I'm scared that she's going to get dragged into court and all the questions and everything will traumatize her. She's... she *just* turned eight on Tuesday. She's having her birthday party in a week, and... God, Kurt, I don't know what to do about this."

"We'll talk to her," Kurt told him. "After the party. Just... let her have fun and be happy next week. We'll talk to her about it after that. Or... *you* can..."

"No," Blaine quickly said. "I... I want you there. I need you to be."

Kurt nodded. "I'll be here. For *every* step of the way."

Blaine squeezed Kurt a little more closely. "Thank you, Kurt."

The following Sunday came too quickly.

It was all that Blaine could think of during Ella's birthday party. He and Kurt both put on their biggest smiles and celebrated the day with Ella's friends from school, but still Blaine's mind couldn't escape the thoughts of what was happening.

He felt like there was an hourglass somewhere, and the sand was slowly draining to the bottom. He desperately wanted the chance to flip the hourglass over, to gain more time, but instead the idea that time was ticking away was looming over him.

It made his stomach churn.

His worry for Kurt was growing, too. Kurt had vowed to do everything in his power to make sure that they won their case, but the amount of research he was doing, and all of the meetings he was taking with their lawyer, was wearing him down even worse than before. Blaine had started to make a routine of going downstairs in the middle of the night, just to carry the other man's sleeping form back upstairs to bed. After the first two nights, Kurt stopped questioning it, and neither acknowledged just how tired the both of them were.

They sat Ella and Aiden down on Sunday night, and they shared a glance before Kurt took a deep breath.

"We have to talk about some serious things, right now," he said, carefully choosing his words.

"Is everything okay with grandpa?" Aiden asked quickly.

"Everything's fine with him," Kurt assured him. "This is about... us. Our family."

"Did we do something wrong?" Aiden inquired.

Blaine shook his head. "No, of course not."

Kurt paused for a brief moment. They'd practiced the conversation, just what they would say, but it still felt wrong, purely because the conversation *should not* be happening. "Ella... do you remember that lady that came by last week?" he asked.

Ella nodded. "She was nice," she said. "But she asked weird questions." She frowned. "Does it have to do with that lady?"

Kurt nodded slowly, then looked to Blaine.

"Sweetheart," Blaine said slowly. "Your Aunt Taylor wants you to come live with her instead."

Ella frowned. "But I don't want to live with her. I want to live here."

"I know, baby," he told her quickly. "We want you to, too."

"So I don't have to go, right?"

Blaine turned back to Kurt, desperately. "Ella, your aunt wants to *make* you live with her."

"But *I* want—"

"I know, sweetie, but—"

"She can't *make* me!" Ella said forcefully. "I don't *want* to, she can't *make* me!"

Blaine frowned. "Ella—"

"No!" she shouted. "I won't! I don't want to!"

Blaine reached forward, placing his hands on Ella's shoulders. "Ella, please—"

"No!" she cried, her shoulders heaving with her sudden sobs. "I won't go!" She wrenched herself from Blaine's grasp and bolted up the stairs, her bedroom door slamming shut behind her.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Kurt placed a hand on Blaine's shoulder. "I'll go talk to her," he said softly, and Blaine nodded warily.

Kurt climbed the stairs slowly, at last pushing open Ella's bedroom door.

"Ella, sweetheart?"

"Go away!" came her muffled voice, her face buried in her pillow.

He sighed, sitting down at the foot of the bed. "Please talk to me," he said. "Your uncle Blaine is worried about you."

"No he's not!" she shouted, sitting up to face Kurt. "He hates me! He doesn't even want me!"

"That is *not* true," Kurt told her firmly. "He wants you more than *anything*. He hasn't spoken about anything else since all of this started. I promise you that."

"Then how could he let anyone t-take me away from him?" she asked, sniffing, wiping her eyes on her shirt sleeve. "If he loved me, he would n-*never* leave m-me!"

Kurt took a deep breath, choosing his words carefully. "Sometimes, you can do everything in your power, but the people you love are taken away anyway. You know that your parents loved you. They loved you with all of their hearts, but they got taken away from you. And I know that Aiden's daddy loved the both of us, but he left, too." He sighed. "I know it's not quite the same, but sometimes things are out of your control. Sometimes, no matter how badly you love someone, you don't get to keep them, and it's not fair."

"It's not fair," she agreed.

"Please understand that we are doing *everything* we can," Kurt told her. "Your uncle Blaine and I both want more than anything to keep this family the way that it is, and that means you staying right here." He smiled softly at her. "You trust me, don't you?" She nodded. "Then I'll make you a promise."

"Pinky swear?" she asked, and he chuckled.

Kurt smiled a little weakly. "Of course." He held out his pinky, and she linked it together with hers. "I promise you that I will not let them take you away."

She hiccuped slightly. "Can you r-really keep that promise?"

"I'll make sure that I do," he said. "For both your sakes, I will do *anything* I possibly can. No matter what it takes."

Ella launched herself into Kurt's arms. "Th-thank you, Uncle Kurt," she said, still sniffing. "I know you mean it." She rested her forehead against Kurt's shoulder. "I'm sorry I got so upset. I love Uncle Blaine." She paused. "And I love you, Uncle Kurt."

Kurt felt a tiny ache in his chest, and he found himself desperately hoping that he could just follow through with his promise. "I love you, too, Ella."

The following weeks, as May rapidly disappeared into June, were detrimentally exhausting for both men. The hearing was rapidly approaching.

A constant feeling of nausea was settling itself in Blaine, along with a never-ending headache. Kurt reprimanded him, reminding him that he couldn't allow himself to get too stressed. If he did, it would only makes things worse.

That seemed to be slowly becoming the only thing that mattered in day to day decisions: don't do this, it'll make things worse; do this, it'll help out. But it would be over soon. And that concept was both relieving and terrifying for Blaine. He couldn't believe that so much was riding on a single day in court. Every once in a while, he'd realize that this was *everything*.

And then the feeling of nausea set in again.

The morning of, he just felt numb.

"Remember everything we talked about," Kurt told Blaine softly, brushing off the shoulders of Blaine's simple black suit. "Thanks to my dad's lawyer, we know already she's going to fight dirty. Don't let it get to you. It'll just make her look like a crazy bitch, and you like a calm, collected, suitable guardian."

Blaine huffed slightly. "It's hard to not let it get to me," he sighed. "Every single time we went to the hospital, when she got in trouble with the school for sticking up for me... Christ, she's bringing up *us*. That not only are we *gay*, but apparently it's all that much worse because we're living together. Most of the country still won't let us get married, and now she's using the fact that we *aren't* against us. How does that even make *sense*?"

Kurt sighed. "I'm sorry," he murmured, itching to lean in and give him a quick peck, but knowing it wouldn't be the right time or place.

"Blaine, it's so good to see you."

The two men turned to see a woman approaching them, her dark hair pulled back. Blaine gritted his teeth at the sight of her, and without ever having met the woman, Kurt instantly knew who it was.

"Great to see you, too, Taylor," Blaine said tightly.

"Is this your pet?" she asked, smiling at Kurt. "So rude of you not to introduce us." She didn't pause for a heartbeat. "I'm surprised you brought your little pet, Blaine," she continued. "He's just going to hurt your case, especially in such a small, closed-minded place like this."

"He's my boyfriend," Blaine bit out. "And his name is Kurt."

Kurt stepped forward, extending his hand with the fakest cheery face he could muster. Taylor grimaced slightly as she took Kurt's hand and shook it. "I wish you the best of luck," he said smoothly. "You should really hope you win. Because if you don't, I will personally make sure that you regret every moment of this for the rest of your life."

She smirked. "Feisty," she said, her tone as close to approving as Blaine had ever heard it. "You should keep him around, Blaine. At least after you lose Ella, you'll have a plaything to keep busy with."

She raised her hand in a sort of wave, and turned to go into the court room.

"Don't let that nasty, psychotic witch psych you out," Kurt muttered under his breath, turning to Blaine again. "You'll do just fine."

"I want you to stay with Ella."

Kurt blinked. "W-what?" he stammered, unable to keep the hurt off of his face.

"I don't—I don't mean because of what she said," Blaine told him quickly. "I just... if these are her last moments with us, I want Ella to be with you, and not Sam and Mercedes. I just..."

Kurt nodded slowly. "I understand that," he told him softly. "I get it. I do. Just... you'll be fine on your own? Are you sure?"

Blaine nodded. "Yeah, I will be," he said, taking a deep breath. "If... if I need you, I'll have someone get you."

Kurt smiled weakly, still uncertain, and pressed the briefest kiss to Blaine's forehead. "I love you," he assured him quietly. "You'll be fine."

"I love you," Blaine responded, his voice equally soft and uncertain. "And I really hope so."

Kurt watched as Blaine squared his shoulders, and walked into the courtroom. He bit his lip nervously, the sudden sensation of helpless washing over him. It was finally sinking in that it wasn't up to them, anymore, and he hated that dreadful feeling of powerlessness.

He drew in a slow, deep breath and closed his eyes. He repeated to himself the same idea that he'd been telling Blaine for weeks now: tears and moping and worrying wouldn't help them, or do them any good. And it *certainly* wouldn't do Ella or Aiden any good.

"Daddy!"

Kurt opened his eyes, turning to see his dad and Carole entering the courthouse, Aiden running from Carole's grasp and into Kurt's

arms.

"Hey, buddy," he said with the same sort of forced smile.

"I know it's probably a stupid question," Carole sighed, "but are you ready?"

Kurt took his lip between his teeth again. "Blaine asked me to stay with Ella."

Burt furrowed his eyebrows. "This isn't because..."

Kurt quickly shook his head. "It's not that he doesn't want me there, it's that he'd rather me be with her," he explained, trying to force himself to sound more convincing. "I can't exactly blame him. I'd want the same for Aiden."

Carole nodded slowly. "If you two are sure..."

"I'm trusting you two to come get me if things start getting ugly," he said, and they both nodded.

"You're gonna win this thing, kid," Burt told him gruffly, patting his shoulder, and entering the courtroom.

"I hope he's right," Kurt sighed, and Carole smiled warmly at him.

"I promise it will work out," she said, swiftly kissing his cheek and following after her husband.

"Daddy?" Aiden said, and Kurt adjusted his son in his arms so he could more clearly see his face. "Is Ella still going to be my sister if we don't get to keep her forever?"

Kurt swallowed tightly. "Of course," he said, bringing his son back to his chest. "We're all a family, and nothing is going to change that."

"I like having her as my sister better than not having her as my sister," Aiden said. "She helped make things a lot happier after Dada died."

Kurt squeezed his eyes shut. "I know, sweetheart."

"Blaine helped too, but I don't think it would be the same if one went and one didn't went."

Kurt willed himself not to dwell on his son's words, worried that

they might take him over the edge if he thought about just how true they were. He did his best not to think of the heaviness of the situation, cloaked in the musings of a six year old. "I know," he managed to repeat at last. "Come on, let's go see Ella."

The tiny room that they were waiting in was not the height of comfort. The antique office furniture made Kurt think of his great aunt's house that he'd only visited a few times as a child, but when he had, he'd been forbidden to touch anything. He wanted to take the two children somewhere, even if it was just outside, where they could play and feel *normal*.

As Ella and Aiden laughed and played despite the situation, Kurt tried to take deep breaths and close his eyes and justify the situation.

That was what helped. That was how things became acceptable. He'd come to pride himself in being able to mentally find the reasons for things, no matter how small. This was how he accepted so many of the deplorable things that happened in the lives of his family and friends, as well as his own life, in high school, college, and even after.

However, after a very long, aching stretch of time, the endeavor proved fruitless. He couldn't find even a dimly-lit side to the situation, nothing that would prove it to all be worthwhile. There would be no growing and changing from the situation, no tiny improvements that would be made to the lives of *anyone* involved, except perhaps that wretched harpy, should she win. And that wouldn't be only impossibly unfair, but wrong.

"Daddy?" Kurt looked as Aiden pulled himself up onto the stiff sofa, sitting beside him. "You know those stories you tell me about Dada when I get sad, sometimes?" Kurt nodded. "I thought maybe you can tell me and Ella some about Blaine."

Kurt looked to Ella a little uncertainly. "Uncle Blaine tells me stories about my daddy, sometimes, too," she said. "When they were younger."

"And, well, you said you knew Blaine a long time ago, too," Aiden said with a smile. "I figured that maybe you can tell us stories, then."

Ella climbed onto the other side of Kurt on the couch. "I'd like that a lot," she said.

Kurt nodded, wrapping his arms around the two children. "What sort of story do you want?"

"A happy one," Ella said. "How did you fall in love the first time?"

"Well," Kurt said slowly. "When I first met him, he was something that I'd never had before. A friend that understood a lot of what happened to me. I wasn't treated well in school, but he'd gone through the same things. He wanted to help me. And I suppose that made me love him."

"And he loved you back?" Aiden asked.

Kurt grinned. "Not quite," he admitted.

"Then how did he fall in love with you back?" Ella questioned.

"It was when I was singing a song," he said. "Sort of like in *the Little Mermaid*." Ella smiled at this. "Then he asked if I would sing with him."

"Did he kiss you?" Ella pressed on, excitedly.

"He did."

Ella giggled at this. The door opened, and they all turned to see Blaine enter, along with a nicely dressed woman that Kurt didn't recognize.

"Ella?" Blaine said gently, and the girl quickly ran to him.

"Uncle Blaine, does this mean—" She broke off, noticing that he wasn't grinning ear to ear, like she'd hoped he would be.

He pressed a kiss to her hair. "The judge has asked to speak to you in private. This lady's going to take you there, okay?"

Ella looked at the woman nervously, then nodded. The woman smiled at her, and the two walked off down the hall.

"Blaine, what—"

"It's normal," he quickly assured Kurt. "Sometimes the judge will ask to speak with the child in question, and might take their wishes

into consideration." He paused. "I mean, it's not definite, but..."

"It's a good sign," Kurt told him with a smile.

"I certainly hope so." He took a deep breath. "We should... we should get in there and wait, I guess."

The courtroom wasn't exactly what Kurt had imagined, thinking more of the *Law and Order* repeats he used to watch with Carole on occasion. Though the atmosphere was probably as tense, it otherwise felt little like he imagined it.

It only took a few moments for the judge to return. Instantly Kurt felt his heart stop, instinctively taking Blaine's hand in his.

The judge settled himself in his chair, and looked down at Blaine and Taylor through his glasses. He took a deep breath. "Taking into careful consideration all of the circumstances and information presented today, and what would be best for the child in question, I have made the decision that Ella Anderson is to remain in the custody of Blaine Anderson."

He was still speaking, saying something more about the results of the trial and his decision, but that was all that mattered. *They were keeping Ella.* Kurt wrapped his arms around Blaine and let out a weak, shaky laugh, Aiden and Ella laughing and cheering, Burt ruffling their hair and assuring them that *he knew it, he knew it, he knew it.*

So maybe things didn't have to be justifiable, because things were going to be all right.

Chapter Thirty-Six

"Aiden?" Blaine knocked lightly on the door, pressing it open slightly. "Are you about ready for dinner?"

The small boy looked up at Blaine and nodded quickly. He was sitting cross-legged on his bed, his toy cars and trucks spread across the sheets next to him. Blaine smiled softly at this. It was a quiet night for the two, with Ella off for a weekend scouts' camping expedition, and Kurt making an over-night trip to D.C. for a convention he was covering for his work.

"I've got a lot of new ones," Aiden told him, and Blaine turned his attention back to him. "Since the last time I showed you, I mean."

"That was a long time ago," Blaine said, entering the room. He took a seat at the foot of the bed, and Aiden nodded, then bit his lip, his brow furrowed slightly. "What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry," Aiden said suddenly, and Blaine tilted his head in slight confusion.

"What for?" he asked.

Aiden sighed heavily, frowning when he looked back up at Blaine. "I didn't like you very much," he admitted. "When I first met you. No, well, not when I *first* first met you. But..." He sighed a little frustratedly, looking at his trucks with his eyebrows knit together. "I didn't want you to take my daddy away from me."

"A..."

"No," he said quickly. He sighed again. "I thought about it a lot lately because when they were gonna take Ella away. And I know that we're a family now, and we didn't always be a family." He looked back up at Blaine. "I just... I'm glad Daddy found you again. Even though I wasn't first. And I'm sorry I wasn't at first."

"It's all right," Blaine assured him. He took a deep breath, looking at Aiden gently. "I know that it's really hard when a parent dies. I may not have lost my dad until I was much older, and we didn't exactly

have... we weren't that close. Still, nobody deserves to lose a parent like that, A. I wish I could go back and fix it for you so that you never had to."

Aiden frowned a little. "But... that would mean you wouldn't be with my daddy."

Blaine nodded. "If that would save the two of you from all the pain and hurt you both suffered over the last three years, I would give that up."

Aiden looked at him thoughtfully for a few long minutes. "If it had to be this way," he said slowly, "I'm just really happy that you were around to help my daddy." He smiled. "You made him smile again after Dada died. You make him real happy now. I like that. So... t'ank you for being here for my daddy."

Blaine smiled back at the boy who was quickly approaching the age of seven. He reached out, placing a gentle hand on the boy's shoulder. "I'm here for you, too," he reminded him. "I care for you a lot, Aiden. And I would never even *think* of trying to replace your dad. But just know that... I'm here for you. Anything you ever need, I want to give it to you if you can."

Aiden grinned broadly at him. He quickly and carefully pushed his trucks aside and shuffled over to Blaine on his knees. A little hesitantly he wrapped his arms around the man. Blaine quickly hugged him back. "T'anks," he said quietly.

"Of course," Blaine responded softly. He released the young boy at last. "Now, let's get these back up onto the shelf, and then have some dinner, all right?"

At half past two in the morning, the creaking of the bedroom door startled Blaine out of his sleep. He and Aiden had tucked in early, Blaine feeling completely exhausted. He quickly pushed himself up

onto his elbow, sliding his glasses onto the bridge of his nose. Slowly, a tiny figure came into focus against the faint moonlight from the hallway windows.

"Aiden?" he said uncertainly. "What's wrong?"

The boy frowned slightly. "I... I had a bad dream and..." He turned his attention to his bare feet. "It's jus' that you said if I ever needed anything, that... that..."

Blaine didn't hesitate, pulling down the sheets on the side of the bed that Kurt usually occupied. "Come here," he told the boy. Aiden quickly crawled into the bed, clutching onto Blaine's arm as though it was a lifeline. Blaine brushed the boy's hair out of his face. "What was your nightmare about?" he asked quietly. "You wanna talk about it?"

Aiden sucked in a breath. "I dreamed about Dada," he said quietly. "And Daddy and you and Ella." He sniffled slightly. "Jus'... jus' don't leave me, okay?"

Blaine wrapped his arms around his boyfriend's son. "I wouldn't dream of it, A."

Aiden nodded against his chest. "I know that it was j-just a dream, but..."

"Dreams can be real scary sometimes," Blaine told him. "And sometimes they seem real." He pressed a kiss to the boy's hair. "But what I can promise you, and I guarantee that your daddy and Ella feel the same way, is that I will never leave you out of choice."

"Dada didn't either," Aiden pointed out in a snuffly voice, and Blaine sighed, giving him a slight squeeze.

"I know, and I'm sorry," he replied.

"It doesn't always hurt this bad."

"When you lose someone, there are always going to be those days where it hurts for no real reason," Blaine told him. "It happens to everyone. But you have to keep pushing through. Just keep going and keep fighting."

Aiden nodded and scooted a little closer to Blaine, reveling in the contents

comfort. "Can I tell you somethin'?" he asked sheepishly.

"Anything," Blaine said.

"But I don't want Daddy to get mad if I tell you."

Blaine furrowed his brow slightly. "I'm sure he won't," he assured him. "Your daddy loves you very much."

Aiden nodded a little vaguely. "I love you." Blaine's eyes widened a little at the words. "I know you're not my dad and I know that you're not trying to be my dad, but you're a lot like a dad and I love you." He paused uncertainly. "Is that bad?"

Blaine shook his head. "No, that's not bad at all," he assured him, feeling his heart swell slightly. He smiled down at Aiden. "I love you, too, A."

"Good," Aiden said, but his smile immediately faltered. "Is daddy going to be upset?"

"Of course he won't," Blaine assured him. "Why would he be?"

"Because I don't want him to think I forgot about Dada or stopped loving him."

Blaine sighed. "Do you think that your daddy forgot about your dada?"

Aiden shook his head quickly. "No, I don't."

"And you know that he will always love him?"

Aiden nodded. "Yes."

"Then I'm sure he can understand the same thing for you," he said. Aiden smiled at this.

"Good," he said. He giggled softly. "I was thinking, and I think that I'm really lucky."

"And why's that?"

"Most people only get one dad," he explained quickly. "And some get two. I used to have two." He paused, looking up at Blaine with a smile that showed his missing baby teeth. "I get three, and they all love me a lot. I think that makes me pretty lucky."

Blaine grinned at the boy, hugging his shoulders and feeling the overwhelming affection towards the boy swelling in his chest. "I suppose it does," he allowed.

Kurt was quiet when he returned in the morning, immediately sensing the stillness in the house and hoping not to wake anyone. He soundlessly dropped his bag in the living room before climbing the stairs. He silently pressed against the door to his son's room, to catch a glimpse of him, but frowned slightly when he realized the bed was empty. Curiosity building, he instead went to the bedroom he shared with Blaine.

Kurt couldn't suppress a smile as he saw Blaine, his hair a mess of curls, glasses still on his face but knocked askew, with Aiden curled up against his chest, the small boy's mouth hanging open and snoring softly. He silently toed off his shoes and climbed onto the edge of the bed. He laid on his side, watching his two men sleeping peacefully.

It only took a few minutes before Blaine shifted slightly, blearily opening his eyes. Kurt could practically see his mind working, registering the weight on his arm, then using his other arm to adjust his glasses. He turned his head slightly, first focusing on Aiden for a moment, then realizing the other man's presence, turned his head completely to the side so that he was facing him.

"Hey," he said groggily, smiling a little goofily at Kurt, who chuckled softly.

"Good morning, sleepy head," he responded. "Rough night?"

"Mm, whenever you aren't here."

"And this little one?" he asked, nodding slightly toward Aiden.

"Nightmare," Blaine said, and Kurt nodded.

"I figured as much." Kurt watched as Blaine scrunched his eyes closed and pressed his thumb and forefinger to his temples. "Are you

all right?"

Blaine nodded. "Headache," he said. "Guess I didn't sleep too well, either. But I'll live."

Hearing the soft voices, Aiden stirred, rubbing his fists into his eyes, then blinking in the soft sunlight that was forcing its way through the cracks in the blinds, creating lines against the ceiling. He turned slightly and broke into a grin upon seeing his father.

"Daddy!" he exclaimed cheerfully, throwing himself into his dad's arms. Kurt laughed, squeezing his little boy tight. "I missed you!"

"I missed you, too," Kurt told him in turn. "I missed you so much, I got you a present because I couldn't stop thinking about you."

Aiden gasped excitedly, pulling back so that he was sitting on his feet. "Really?" he asked. "Can I see it? Where is it?"

"I left it downstairs," Kurt said. "Shall we go find it?"

Aiden nodded quickly, scrambling to pull himself out of bed and pattering down the hall.

Kurt sighed. "I suppose I should go get it for him, then."

"Probably for the best," Blaine responded, leaning in to press a chaste kiss to the other man's lips. "Did you get me a present, too?" he asked teasingly.

"Is gracing you with my presence not enough of a gift for you, then?" Kurt inquired in the same playful tone. "I am deeply offended!"

"You are a completely wonderful gift," Blaine assured him. "But, well, a postcard or a keychain from the nation's capitol? Now how many of those do you think are out there? That's a one-of-a-kind present, there."

Kurt rolled his eyes and smacked him on his arm. Aiden appeared at the doorway again, bouncing on the balls of his feet. "Come on, Daddy!"

Kurt hoisted himself out of bed. "Coming," he said. Then he turned back to Blaine. "At least I know *he'll* appreciate what I've

brought him. You, on the other hand, are completely impossible."

Blaine grinned at him. "Don't you know it?"

After dinner, Kurt finally convinced Aiden to put his present, a beautiful snow globe with the White House perched on a hill inside, on the shelf in his room. At first, Kurt had been delighted to see his son's face light up as he played with it, but as the day wore on and he refused to let the fragile creation out of his grasp wherever he went, he started to worry.

Finally, Kurt had had to make him a deal by giving him a floaty pen to play with instead, watching the boy twirl the pen in his fingers, making the image of the President's helicopter drift from one end to the other, and Kurt was free to take the globe into his son's room and safely display it.

A few hours later, Aiden was fast asleep in his bed, the blue pen on his bedside table between his clock and his lamp shaped like a rocket ship.

After closing his son's bedroom door shut, Kurt ventured off downstairs, finding Blaine sitting on the back porch in one of the chairs. Kurt smiled at him, taking a seat on the other side of the table.

"So you had a good trip?" Blaine asked him, and he nodded.

"It was great," he said. "I'm so glad to be home, though."

"A's happy to have you. As am I, of course."

"Of course," Kurt said with a grin. "What was his nightmare about?"

Blaine let out a slow breath. "About you, me, Alex, and Ella," he said. "He didn't go into details, but... I can assume."

Kurt nodded. "Thank you for taking care of him."

"Of course," Blaine said. "I wouldn't think twice about it. I..." He

trailed off, then smiled despite himself. "He told me he loves me."

"Really?"

"Yeah," he said. "He told me he felt lucky because between you, Alex, and me, he feels like he's got three dads."

Kurt smiled at this. "That... that makes me really happy to hear," he said. "I always wondered how he would cope with things going the way they are. I like that he can think about it that way."

"Me too," Blaine admitted. They sat in a comfortable silence for a few minutes. "I want to marry you."

There was only a brief second of quiet, in which Kurt stared at Blaine, his eyes wide and a little shocked. He swallowed tightly. "What?"

The word was hardly out of Kurt's mouth when Blaine squeezed his eyes shut. "*Shit*." He took a deep breath. "Shit, *Kurt*. *Shit*, I didn't—"

"Blaine..."

"This *really* wasn't I had planned," Blaine breathed out. "I... I had these *ideas*, like taking you to New York and seeing *Wicked*, and we would have a romantic dinner and all that before I'd get down on one knee and ask you. I thought I could be romantic and all that. Perfect. It was supposed to be perfect." He sighed, wringing his hands slightly. "But... there it is. I love you, Kurt. You mean so much to me and you're so wonderful. *You're* perfect. And I know you think you aren't, and I know that you do have your flaws, but even with them, you're so completely perfect. I am so completely, madly in love with you and I want to spend every minute of the rest of my life with you. I want to marry you, Kurt." He took a deep breath and sunk to the ground in front of the other man, resting his weight on one knee. "Will you marry me?"

Kurt stared at him for a moment before kneeling in front of Blaine, resting back against his feet. Slowly, he leaned in and kissed the other man on the lips.

Blaine looked at him with uncertainty when Kurt pulled away. "Does that mean..."

"I'm sorry, Blaine," he said, hardly audibly.

Blaine blinked several times. "Oh." He hastily folded his other leg beneath him, mirroring Kurt's position. "I'm sorry, I..."

"It's not that I don't want—" Kurt broke off and sighed frustratedly. "Blaine, I love you so much. You mean the world to me." He took Blaine's hands in his, smiling slightly. "The way you think I'm perfect is the same way that I think of you, and I am just as eager to spend the rest of our lives together."

"But?"

"But I... I don't think I'm ready for... *marriage*," Kurt said slowly. "And it isn't that I don't want to take that step with you. I do, I just... it terrifies me. After Alex. I can't bare the thought of losing you in any way, but especially as a husband."

Blaine smiled gently at him, cupping the side of his face in his hand, allowing his thumb to trace over the line of the brunette's cheekbone. "You're *not* losing me, Kurt," he said. "I promise that."

Kurt squeezed his eyes shut. "I know for a fact you can't keep that promise," he told him quietly in response.

Blaine leaned in to press a gentle kiss to Kurt's forehead, and the latter let out a tiny, choked-back sob. "Hey, hey, hey," Blaine cooed, pulling him close to him. "I'm here." Kurt clutched onto Blaine tightly, grasping fistfuls of the back of his shirt. He took several deep, shaky breaths before he was able to calm himself again. Blaine rested his cheek against his soft hair, still rubbing soothing circles along his back. "What do you say," he said slowly, his words quiet yet deliberate, "to us just forgetting about all of this."

"Blaine..." Kurt argued weakly. "I didn't want—"

"I don't mean like..." Blaine trailed off and sighed. "Just for now. This obviously isn't the time."

"I didn't want to upset you," Kurt said.

"Neither did I," Blaine responded. "And beside that, how could I possibly be upset? I have the man that I love, and he loves me back. And we don't need a wedding or some silly titles to know that we're in love and we want to spend the rest of our lives together."

Kurt smiled wanly. "We really don't," he agreed. He chuckled softly. "I'm so lucky to have you."

"I feel the same way," Blaine replied with a grin. "Now come on, let's get back inside and head to bed."

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Aiden tiptoed into the garage, his feet bare, clad in the mesh gym shorts and Avengers t-shirt that he slept in. The garage was warmer than the rest of the house, but he was on a mission, so he ignored the slight discomfort. He squeezed around his dad's car, then around Blaine's, making his way to the far wall, where miscellaneous boxes were stored on a shelf: holiday decorations in various clear plastic containers; a few packing boxes of Blaine's filled with things he and his dad didn't need duplicates of in the house; two grey and black plastic filing boxes with documents that Aiden was pretty sure he wouldn't understand.

Then, he spotted it on the bottom shelf—which, he considered, was really just the floor, with the wooden shelves built above it. There was a navy blue Rubbermaid container. Aiden quickly pulled at it, and noticed the silver duct tape on the top. Written on the tape in black permanent marker were four letters that Aiden was looking for: "ALEX". Without hesitation, Aiden yanked at the box, dragging it along the concrete floor a few feet. Then he sat down and popped off the top.

Aiden sifted through the items. A few he immediately recognized as more private things, things that he shouldn't be digging through (most of which was a Polish wooden keepsake box that, when opened, revealed a few folded up letters, computer print-outs, Post-it notes, index cards, and scraps of looseleaf). He gently set the wooden box aside, then continued sifting through the contents. He pulled out a piece of faded and torn blue cloth, unfolding it and revealing a t-shirt. He ran his fingers over the faded circle in the center, the insignia of Captain America. It was completely worn-out, with a few staining marks and loose threads. After a slight pause, he pressed the shirt to his nose.

Underneath the stale scent of the container it was stored in, he could smell the mix of cologne, cinnamon, and grass. He waited for a

moment for it to jog a memory, to suddenly be transported into the past, but it didn't work. Still, he clutched onto the weak and worn, yet soft, t-shirt fabric, knowing very well that he was breathing in the scent of his father.

He draped the t-shirt over his lap, smiling as he ran his hand over his own chest, feeling the stiffness of the print of his own super hero shirt. It was like a small spark, suddenly feeling that tiny connection he was searching for.

He plunged his hand back into the box, freezing as his fingers brushed against a leathery book cover. He pulled the book out and cracked it open on his lap.

He'd seen photographs of his dads together, though most of them were from later in their relationship, after college and more into their adult lives, their wedding and once Aiden had been adopted. Those had all been in albums that were in their living room—one large one that held six photos per page, and two or three others that weren't as wide, with room for only three per plastic sleeve. Still, his heart stammered slightly as he opened the small album, the type large enough to just hold a single photo on each page. He peered down at the first picture, which showed a small boy with short, black hair, squinting and grinning at the camera, his front teeth missing as he stood in front of a glassy lake. Everything was slightly out of focus, and the colors a little dull yet high in contrast, signifying the use of film. Aiden immediately knew this must be his dad, even without a point of reference, no image of his father seared into his brain to easily connect the facial features, even though they were unaged.

But that was it. That was what this was about. He couldn't remember his father—though he tried to tell himself that it was understandable. He'd been just short of four years old when his father had died, and three years had passed since then. He occasionally had short flashes of memory, able to picture his father picking him up or them briefly playing a game, or the three of them eating out for dinner. But it was fleeting, and he wanted something a little more tangible, something that he could grasp onto. Sometimes all he could

remember was that that day in August was the day that everything in his short life changed.

He flipped the plastic page over, seeing a few more images from the lake, which was apparently a family camping trip. Then were several images from the zoo, a trip to Disney, the pool during the summer, a yellow puppy at Christmas, and a carnival overblown by flash. Suddenly, the pictures seemed to skip forward a few years, and Aiden found himself looking at his teenaged father, hair shaggy and hanging over his eyes, grinning at the camera, holding onto a large and equally shaggy golden retriever.

His head shot up when he heard the door open, looking at his other father. He was standing in his robe, overtop his pajamas. He stared at Aiden for a moment before the realization set in. Aiden worried for a brief moment that he'd be scolded for going through things, but he watched as a vague smile spread on his dad's lips, crossing the garage floor and settling beside him.

Kurt glanced down at the album over Aiden's shoulder. "That was Bailey," he told his son. "Your dad had him while he was growing up." There was a slight pause. "I only got to meet him once. He died just before we graduated."

Aiden nodded slightly, flipping the page again, seeing a few more photos of Alex and Bailey. He turned the page over again and once more the photos jumped forward a few years, showing his father in New York City, presumably at the start of his college years. His hair was cut shorter; he looked well-groomed and a bit more stylish. Most photographs showed him with a young woman with long red hair, tight-fitting clothing and Doc Martens.

"Marissa," Kurt said. "They met their first year of school. God, I haven't seen her since your second birthday. She moved to California not long after that. Decided Broadway wasn't quite what she wanted, after all."

Aiden smiled at the photos of Marissa and his father. She looked like a lot of fun, from her big grin to her bright clothes, which seemed

to speak volumes about her personality. He briefly wondered if she would have become a bigger part of his life, had things been different. He had no idea, though, when it got down to it. And really, there was no use dwelling on it.

"You would have liked her," Kurt added, smiling. "She would have spoiled you rotten. She did while you were still a baby. Actually, she did see you since then, she was—" He paused, breaking off suddenly. He took in a breath. "She was at the funeral." His eyes suddenly grew a little sad, before softening again. "I should send her an email, see how she's been..."

Aiden continued to turn the pages of the photo album, and at last he broke into a grin, seeing an image of the man that was sitting beside him, about ten years younger. He was looking at the camera, one eyebrow raised, looking half-exasperated, but also rather amused. He was clutching the strap of his bag, leaning against a building. Aiden could almost imagine his dad rolling his eyes or shaking his head at his father after taking the photograph.

"Before we started dating," Kurt explained with a grin. "You know, I didn't get to see that picture until almost a year later. He had an old manual film camera, and he just seemed to love the idea of it, because he almost never actually *used* it. I'm pretty sure that starting with the ones of him and Marissa, these were all on the same roll..." He watched as his son turned the pages, showing a few more pictures of Kurt laughing, one of his hand trying to cover the lens. "I took this one," Kurt said, pointing to a portrait of Alex. The picture opposite showed Alex pressing a kiss to Kurt's cheek, the latter's face scrunched up in amusement and embarrassment. He took the album in his hands, running his thumb over the plastic enclosing the pictures.

Aiden looked up at his father, who was smiling at the photograph with a mixture of fondness and nostalgia. Aiden couldn't help but smile, and turned back to the photos. Something about them struck him as familiar. Then, it occurred to him, and he took the blue t-shirt in his hands.

Kurt noticed his son shifting, and smiled even more broadly as Aiden held up the Captain America t-shirt. "This is from the pictures, right?" he asked.

Kurt nodded. "I got him that for his birthday," he said. "The second *Captain America* film was the first movie we ever saw together. It was the first time we met, but it was very briefly, just seeing the movie with some mutual friends... Then a few months later we really *properly* met, and, well, I was pretty sure he didn't even remember that. And then on our first date he whipped out both *Captain America* movies, and I realized he actually *did* remember our brief meeting." He smiled. "He used to wear that every chance he could..." He flipped the page of the album again, but the rest of the book was empty. He sighed.

"Do you still miss him?" Aiden asked.

"Every day," Kurt told him, without missing a beat.

Aiden looked down at the shirt in his hands. The fabric felt so used and worn, so *real*, yet all he could remember of the man that had worn this shirt felt like only a dream.

He recalled everything he'd felt when his father had first died. He thought of the sadness at the idea he'd never see him again, the anger he felt not much later at Kurt for forgetting his father, the bitterness he felt towards Blaine after first meeting him. Still, those feelings didn't seem real, didn't seem to stick. He still felt the sadness, the sense of loss. However, he was able to think about the life that surrounded him now, and he felt fairly content. It occurred to him that perhaps the sense of loss he felt wasn't as much missing the father that he'd hardly gotten to know, losing him so young, but at the idea that he would never get to know him.

After all, it wasn't as though there was anything substantial missing from his life. He had a steady home and family, which now included Ella and Blaine. He hadn't had the opportunity to really know his father, but he liked to think that he'd be satisfied with Aiden's own satisfaction in life right now. He hoped that Alex would

be happy that there was someone like Blaine who was happy to step up and fill the void that might have otherwise occurred in Aiden's life. He figured that Alex would be proud of the way he and his dad managed to make the best out of the situation which was initially far from even *passable*.

Life moved on, he figured. That was something his dad told him, and occasionally added that most kids wouldn't figure that out for another five or six years, at least. He knew that it was a double-edged sword that he could grasp the idea at such a young age: while it certainly helped him develop maturity sooner than most others, it was definitely far from a happy circumstance that had introduced him to the concept.

After several long moments, Aiden returned the items he'd set aside, and then at last pressed the t-shirt on top of them. Kurt replaced the small album, and Aiden snapped the lid back onto the box. He looked to his dad with a small smile.

"Hungry?" Kurt asked him. Aiden nodded vigorously. "How about some pancakes?"

"Ooh!" Aiden said excitedly. "With chocolate chips in them?"

Kurt chuckled. "I'll see what I can do," he said. "I'll put this back, you go in and get Ella up for breakfast."

Aiden jumped to his feet and scurried to the door. Halfway there, he turned back around and ran back to give his dad a quick hug. Then, he was off again.

Kurt allowed himself a moment, running his hand over the top of the box. He smiled softly at the container, as though it was an old friend he was saying farewell to, once again. Just for a short period of time, at least.

It had been three years since Alex had been killed. Three years since Kurt left his old life in New York, since he came back to an even older life he'd left behind before then. And who had any idea that he'd be able to find any sort of happiness remotely close to what he'd had before? Yet here he was, not simply gliding through life, but thriving.

Things were good. They really were.

He looked up as he heard the door creak slight and smiled at Blaine. The other man padded across the cement floor toward Kurt.

"Hey," he said quietly.

"Hey," Kurt responded. "Aiden pulled this out, and we looked at a few things."

Blaine nodded. "Need a hand?" he asked through a yawn.

"I'm fine," Kurt assured him. He raised an eyebrow as Blaine tried to stifle another yawn. "Tired?"

"A bit," he allowed. He rubbed his hands across his bare arms, where Kurt noticed some goosebumps. "I'm freezing, too."

"You're not sick, are you?" Kurt asked. "I know you were feeling pretty nauseous the past few days... you don't think it's a stomach bug, do you?"

Blaine shook his head, and Kurt noticed that he stopped immediately, squeezing his eyes shut as though to stop the world from spinning. Still nauseous, then, he concluded. "I'm going to go with stress," Blaine said. "This first week back at school has been *hell*, with all the staff changes, and I think it's just getting to me more than usual." He sighed. "The meetings have been murder. I can't even force myself to focus past the first ten minutes. I'll be so happy when things have settled."

Kurt nodded. "Take it easy," he urged. "We'll just have a nice, calm weekend in. I'm surprised Aiden didn't take the chance to sleep later, today. At least he got a few extra hours of sleep. Better than nothing."

"Mm, I could use a nap already," Blaine said with a smile, and Kurt laughed.

"Later," he said. "For now, help me with some chocolate chip pancakes, all right?"

"Of course," Blaine responded. "I can start on them, you can go ahead and get a quick shower."

Kurt nodded, and after a swift kiss, then returning the box, he did take a quick shower. He chose some of his most casual, comfortable clothes, rather looking forward to a nice, quiet day inside with Blaine, Aiden, and Ella. Perhaps they would watch a movie or two, and order in for dinner if they weren't quite in the mood for cooking. It would be calm and lazy, the sort of relaxing day that Blaine (and Aiden and Ella, he figured) needed after a tiring first week back at school.

He made it back downstairs just in time to flip the last batch of pancakes, letting Blaine deliver two platefuls to Ella and Aiden at the kitchen table. The two of them ate quickly. Kurt switched off the stove and slid the last few pancakes onto a plate. However, as he turned to say something to Blaine, he frowned, seeing the man clutching the edge of the counter so tightly that his knuckles were white, his eyes squeezed tight and his face screwed up in discomfort—*no*, Kurt quickly amended mentally, not discomfort, but *pain*.

Kurt quickly moved to his side, placing a comforting hand on Blaine's back. "Are you all right?" he asked softly. It was quiet, not wanting to draw attention or worry from the children.

Blaine gave one nod, taking in a deep breath through his mouth. "I just—" He broke off suddenly, and clamped his mouth shut as though he might be sick. He took in another deep breath, and grasped one of Kurt's hands with his. He went to lift his other hand, but found himself unsteady. He let his elbow rest against the wall, and pressed the hand to his head. "Kurt," he said weakly, "I think I—"

He crumpled suddenly, his body falling limp, and Kurt quickly scooped him up in his arms as he fell to the floor. Kurt knelt beside him, still clutching his hand, his other arm wrapped tightly around his torso. His eyes were wide, and there was a tight sensation in his chest. *No*, he desperately thought, *no, no, no no no...*

He wasn't even aware of evaluating Blaine's state, but somehow his mind was working well enough that he did. Breathing—Blaine was still breathing. He could hear it, feel it, and even see his chest moving. He gave the man a small, desperate shake, but nothing. He wasn't responding. But he was alive. He was alive, and that counted for

something. That counted for everything.

It could be nothing. Perhaps in a few moments he'd wake up and they'd go lay down...

Yet something felt very wrong.

"Uncle Blaine?" Ella's tiny voice made Kurt's head snap up. The girl was scrambling from her chair, running over to the two men. "What—?"

"Ella," Kurt said, his voice tight. He took another deep breath, doing his best to keep calm, to stay in control. "I need you to go grab my phone."

"Is he gonna—"

"Ella," Kurt repeated, more urgently this time. "Get my phone. Call 911."

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Kurt had no sense of anything. He had no idea how much time had passed. He couldn't focus. He found himself, at one moment, sitting in a chair waiting, then another pacing the floor, and another standing at the end of the hallway, with no memory of traveling from one point to another.

He stopped thinking the moment that he had been told he couldn't go any further, and he'd have to wait outside. He couldn't even remember phoning Finn. He didn't even know why it was that he had chosen Finn to call. He could have called his dad and Carole. He could have called Rachel. But then, maybe he'd chosen against them because they were who he called last time.

Had the situation been less grave, he would have attempted to find humor in it all. After all, there were so many things that were horrifyingly funny, in the way that he would never laugh at, or even find remotely hilarious. Because, no, it really wasn't funny at all. Perhaps if he were a little less mentally stable, though, he would have laughed.

After all, it had been only three years since the police had knocked on his New York apartment door to tell him that Alex, his husband, had been killed. And after all of that, he had managed to fall in love with Blaine all over again—something he had fought *so hard* against, and how many times had he told Blaine he wanted him out of his life because he couldn't handle the idea? It had happened anyway, and they'd come so far. He'd been there for everything—every moment with Aiden, every moment with his family. He'd listened to all the qualms Kurt had about Finn and Rachel naming their baby Alex, come running in when Burt had suffered his second heart attack. He was there and he understood everything and knew the precise things to say. He was wonderful and perfect and Kurt loved him. They wanted to spend their lives together.

And that was the funniest-not-funny bit of it all, wasn't it?

Because it had been about six weeks since Blaine's impromptu proposal. Six weeks since Kurt declined because he couldn't stand the thought of losing another husband. Six weeks since Blaine had told Kurt that he wouldn't lose him.

And here they were: Aiden and Ella fitfully sleeping in the waiting chairs, Kurt pacing and fidgeting and constantly moving, and Blaine laying in a hospital bed while doctors and nurses tended to him.

At that moment, Kurt was pretty sure that he was going to lose Blaine after all.

He jumped slightly at the hand on his shoulder. He looked up. Part of him was afraid of who he would see. Somewhere in his mind he knew that he needed his friends and family there to comfort him and be there for him, but the wound was still too fresh. He was struggling to be consciously present instead of just gliding through the next few hours, or days, or weeks. But that wasn't an option, now. Now there wasn't only Aiden, but Ella, and that meant he needed to be twice as strong.

Still, the idea of talking and being forced to *feel* as he spoke was terrifying. He was thankful when he found Finn standing beside him, as Finn was somehow the ideal person to talk to at the moment. He couldn't bare to face this situation a second time, and talking to his father would put him back to that September three years ago, when he moved back home. Rachel and Carole, he knew, would simply send him over the edge to that breaking point, and he'd never be able to return. No, Finn was able to comfort him without being too emotional himself, able to sympathize but not empathize. Finn was somehow the exact person that Kurt needed at the moment.

Other than Blaine, of course. But he would take what he could get.

The two brothers were silent. Kurt wasn't sure which one of them was supposed to speak first. He half-wanted to say something, anything, but found himself incapable. He simply waited for Finn to talk.

"Can I get you a coffee or anything?" Finn asked at last. Kurt

shook his head. "You should have something."

"I feel like I'm going to throw up," Kurt told him weakly. "But thank you."

"What have they told you exactly?"

Kurt drew in a deep breath. "They said it was something—something about—" He broke off, swallowing thickly. He started over, trying to focus on remembering each word the doctors had said. "Something with his kidneys. I didn't... they were trying to explain that—that they were failing because of... abnormal blood flow and uncontrolled high blood pressure, which were caused..." He let out a breath, trying to again recall just what had been explained to him. "Caused by stresses as well as genetic factors."

"So...?"

"So they're working on him," Kurt continued. For some reason, he found that relaying these facts to Finn was strangely comforting. He wondered if Finn realized that, or if he was just trying to get the information from Kurt. Either way, Kurt was thankful. "They have to treat all the causes in addition to repairing his kidneys. They're trying to stabilize his blood pressure and they're clearing his renal arteries and giving him insulin and when all that's done, they're going to be performing a dialysis."

"He's still not awake, then."

Kurt shook his head. "They're still working."

"But he *will* wake up," Finn pressed on.

Kurt swallowed tightly. "I... I don't know."

"Dude—"

"This is serious, Finn," Kurt said suddenly, turning to his brother. "This has—this has been building up for months. All I can do is think of every little moment, think of every sign that I missed. It's getting in my head, and I *hate* it. All I can think of is every time he said he felt unnaturally tired or said that some part of him was aching, or his head hurt, or he was nauseous." His eyes softened, his lips twisting in

an even worse frown. "I keep thinking of every moment of stress he was caused, especially the ones that were my fault."

"This *isn't* your fault," Finn said immediately. "There's no way—even if his life isn't stress-free, you said that there were genetic things that caused it, too."

"I know," Kurt sighed.

"But it's not like you're going around and making his life super hard and miserable, anyway," Finn said. "He's going to be okay, Kurt. The both of you will be. You're not going to lose him."

The words jarred Kurt's memory once again. He was quiet for a few moments, thinking on the one thing that he had, so far, not shared with anyone. He took his lip between his teeth, biting down on it anxiously for a moment. "He proposed to me, Finn," he said in a tiny voice. "He asked me to marry him, and I said no."

Finn stared at him blankly for a moment. "Dude, are you—are you serious?"

"Yeah," Kurt said, and he let his eyes fall to the floor. "He asked me a few weeks ago... after my trip to Washington. Said he had been thinking about it for a while."

Finn nodded slowly. "But you said no..."

Kurt shook his head. "I told him that I'm not ready," he admitted. "The thought terrifies me."

"Because of Alex?"

"Because of Alex."

"But he's *not* Alex."

Kurt furrowed his brow, looking at his step-brother. "...What?"

"He's *not* Alex," Finn repeated.

Kurt frowned. "Right, I know, but what—"

"Well, it's not really fair to compare it, is it?" Finn asked. "I mean, you don't want to marry Blaine because Alex was killed. You're basically scared that it's going to happen all over again, right?"

"More or less," Kurt allowed.

"But they're different. Everything is different," Finn continued. "You're older and you've both got a kid you're taking care of, and you're living in a house in Ohio instead of New York, writing instead of performing. Everything about your situation is different. The only thing that's the same is that you love him." He took a deep breath. "I understand being scared, but it's not really fair, is it? Because the thing that's stopping you is your fear that the same thing is going to happen all over again."

"I wasn't exactly wrong to be afraid, was I?" Kurt asked. "Blaine might not wake up. They might not be able to save him. He could... he could die, just like Alex."

"Exactly," Finn said, and Kurt knit his eyebrows together, certain now that he *really* wasn't following Finn's train of thought. "Blaine could be dying. But you didn't marry him." Kurt blinked at him. "I mean, it doesn't matter, does it? Life keeps going and what's going to happen is going to happen, even if it sucks. And it really sucks, but Blaine might not make it."

"This is a *really* reassuring conversation, Finn, but—"

"Look," Finn cut across. "Just... think about it. Blaine's sick, and what's the one thing that's bothering you more than anything else? That you said you wouldn't—or couldn't—marry him. Right now, you're convinced that you're right about it all, but you're *wrong*. It's hurting you more, isn't it? Knowing that you denied that chance to both of you. If... if he does die, and I really hope he doesn't, and I don't think he will, then that's going to be the one thing you regret."

"But it'll just hurt so much more if I do lose him," Kurt argued weakly.

Finn shook his head. "Think about Alex," he said. "Why did that hurt?"

"Because he was taken from me," Kurt said. "Because I loved him."

"And you love Blaine," Finn reasoned. "Married or not, it's going
contents

to really hurt if you lose him, isn't it?" He paused. "Do you regret marrying Alex? Do you wish you hadn't?"

Kurt shook his head, feeling a lump forming in his throat. He willed himself not to cry, still fighting so desperately hard to stay strong. Even if it was only Finn, he needed to be strong, for himself.

"You won't with Blaine, either," Finn assured him, squeezing Kurt's shoulder comfortingly. "But if you lose him now, I think you'll definitely regret that decision you made not to."

Kurt's mind was swimming as he mulled over everything that Finn had said. He didn't want to admit it, but everything that he'd mentioned were things that he himself had considered. They had all crossed his mind, especially since arriving at the hospital, his mind free to wander and consider all the horrible possibilities. Still, he'd thought about it long before, since the day that Blaine had asked him that fateful question.

The sickening, twisting feeling in Kurt's stomach was telling him that Finn was so, *so* right, and that it had simply taken someone else to say it aloud for him to realize it, especially to its full extent.

Kurt smiled wanly at Finn. "You're right," he admitted. He swiped at his eyes a little, as though it would somehow ensure the prevention of tears. "I always hate it when you're right, you know."

Finn allowed himself a small grin at this. "Hey, someone's gotta help you keep your head on straight in times like this," he said. "Other than..." he trailed off, and Kurt nodded, knowing that Finn was referring to Blaine without mentioning him again.

Kurt sighed. "I just don't want to lose him," he said. "I can't help but feel a little cursed, sometimes, between Alex and almost losing Dad twice..."

"You're not cursed," Finn assured him. "The people who haven't lost, or almost lost, anyone are just unnaturally lucky."

Kurt considered this and nodded. He didn't know if it was true, but he still took it. For a fleeting moment, he wished that he had been unnaturally lucky in life, too.

It was late into the night when one of the doctors, a younger woman with mousy brown hair pulled back, approached the group sitting in the waiting chairs. Ella and Aiden were asleep again, as were Burt and Finn. Carole was on duty now, checking back with them every chance that she got. Only Kurt and Rachel were awake; the latter was holding her one-year-old on her lap, bouncing her knee as he giggled, blissfully unaware. Kurt was doing his best to let himself get distracted by the small child while nursing a cup of black coffee. He could feel the caffeine tearing up his stomach, but he didn't think on it. He needed the coffee, more so that he would have something to do rather than actually keep him awake. He knew he couldn't sleep, even if he tried.

"Mr. Hummel?" the woman asked softly, and Kurt nodded. He wanted to ask her questions about Blaine's state, but all the words got stuck in his throat. Instead, he waited for her to continue. "We've done everything we can," she informed him. "Everything seems to have been successful. As long as there are no complications in the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours, everything should be all right."

"Is he awake?" Rachel asked.

The woman shook her head. "Not yet," she said. "He's still in a pretty delicate state. There's still always a chance that he might need a transplant, if what we've done doesn't take."

"How likely is that?" Kurt asked warily.

"I can't say," she said. "We've put his name on the transplant list anyway, as it'll probably benefit him in the long-run, and it's never certain how long it will take to get one that matches."

Kurt nodded at this. "Can I see him?"

The woman paused. "Because of his state," she said slowly, "we can only allow immediate family members. I'm sorry, but—"

"They're married."

Kurt glanced at Rachel. She turned her head back to him with a slight smile, and instantly he knew that Finn had shared what they'd spoken about earlier. He felt a strange sensation in his stomach, but still felt the warmth spreading through his body, smiling back at Rachel affectionately. He felt incredibly thankful that she'd lied without second thought.

"Oh!" the woman exclaimed, a little taken aback, and perhaps a little embarrassed. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize—" She smiled warmly at Kurt as she broke off. "Of course you can come and see him, then, Mr. Hummel."

Kurt felt Rachel reach out and squeeze his hand. He gave her one last brief smile before following the doctor down the hall. She opened the door and let Kurt enter the room.

"I'm sorry again for the confusion, Mr. Hummel," she said kindly.

"Don't worry about it."

"If there's any problems, just call."

He nodded, and she left the room. He looked around him, glancing at all the machines and tubes and wires, the beeping indicating the rhythm of Blaine's heart audible. He sat himself beside Blaine's bed and took his hand in his.

It was strange to him. Even when he was in high school and he'd seen his father laying in the hospital bed, it hadn't felt like this. It had hurt him to see his dad so frail and weak, looking so lifeless in the hospital gown, laying beneath white sheets. That was exactly how Blaine looked, only one blaring detail that made it somehow so much worse: Blaine looked so *young*.

Blaine looked younger than he actually was. His curls were a mess; yet, not as bad as the day when Brittany had dubbed him 'Broccoli Head', he remembered rather fondly. Still, they fell all over his pillow and into his eyes, slightly stuck to his forehead from sweat. He looked pale and fragile, and Kurt was vaguely reminded of the days after 'the Slushie Incident' as it had become known as to them. The fear he'd felt then, though, had nothing on what he felt now.

Something he'd always told his friends and family that he'd been thankful for was that Alex had died, more or less, immediately. He couldn't imagine having to sit beside his then-husband, seeing the man broken and battered, slowly watching him die. As much as he would have liked Alex to have not died alone, the image horrified him. It wasn't until then that he could understand why so many people opted against open-casket funerals. He could suddenly comprehend the idea of wanting to remember a loved one as the way they *were*, instead.

But no. He wouldn't think like that. Blaine wasn't going to die. He simply couldn't.

He took a deep breath.

"Hey," he said softly, brushing Blaine's hair out of his face. He searched around for something to say. Suddenly everything felt so insignificant or cliché or just plain wrong. He tried to rid himself of the notion and just voice what he truly thought. "You really need to wake up," he continued quietly. "Ella... she won't admit it, but she's terrified right now. She's been so quiet all day. She isn't herself. And Aiden... he's been getting so close to you. He really cares about you, and he's so scared..." He paused. "And me. I'm scared, too, Blaine. I... we've all lost so much already. You can't... you can't do this. I'm afraid of hurting that badly again, of really losing you. And you—you promised. You promised I wouldn't lose you." He smiled weakly at the man. "You don't break your promises. I know you don't. So you have to wake up. Please, wake up..." His voice broke slightly as he trailed off.

Instead, he forced himself to wait for any small movement, but even though it wasn't coming.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

"Kurt, honey?" Kurt looked up to see his step-mother, still in her scrubs. She gave him a small, sad smile as she entered the hospital room that he had yet to really leave. "I only have a short break, but I wanted to check up on you, see how you were doing." She paused, looking at him with uncertainty. "How are you, dear?"

Kurt looked at her soberly. "All things considered?" he asked.

"All things considered," she said, nodding.

Kurt shrugged a shoulder, turning his attention back to Blaine. He ran his thumb over the back of the man's hand. The hours were dragging on, and though he still had little sense of time, he knew that the sun must be rising soon, just based on the fact that it was about halfway through Carole's shift. In no time at all, a day will have passed. One entire day, and no changes in Blaine's status. Kurt closed his eyes and pushed any doubtful thoughts out of his mind.

"Impatient," he said after a moment. He looked at Carole with a forced smile.

Carole seemed to visibly relax at the hopefulness and slightly teasing nature of her step-son. He was being himself, even during this time of crisis. That could only be a good sign. They both recognized that.

"He ought to know you're waiting for him," she quipped, and Kurt smiled a little more genuinely. "He should know better than to keep you waiting, shouldn't he?"

Kurt nodded. "I'll have some choice words to say to him when he's up," he told her, and she chuckled softly. She watched as his eyes fell back upon Blaine, saddening once again.

She fully entered the room, standing beside her step-son and placing a hand on his shoulder. It had been quite some time since she'd seen the two boys look so young, but they both suddenly were. Blaine, with his curls, looking so fragile underneath white sheets and

surrounded by machines and tubes poking into his skin, and Kurt, trying too hard to appear strong. She squeezed his shoulder gently. "He *will* wake up," she said. Kurt looked up at her, his eyes betraying his vague feelings of uncertainty. "He's so young," she assured him. "He still has so much fight in him, Kurt." She leaned down and pressed a kiss to the top of Kurt's head. "Besides, he's only just got you back, right? He didn't work that hard for nothing." She smiled, softly, and Kurt did so in return. "Don't give up on him. Soon enough, this will be nothing but a memory." She brushed Kurt's hair out of his face and gave his shoulder another squeeze. "I've got to run, sweetheart," she said. "Need anything before I do?"

He shook his head. "I'm fine," he assured her. "Thank you, Carole."

She smiled warmly at him before she turned and left the room. And when Kurt was left on his own, clutching onto Blaine's hand and gently carding his fingers through his curls, he hoped that Carole would prove to be right, and soon enough, it would just be a memory.

Thirty-two hours had passed. Kurt stood just outside the room, watching as Ella spoke to her uncle in a steady rhythm. Kurt could see the expression on her face, one of concern and worry and sadness, and he desperately wished that this wasn't something she had to go through. Not again. She'd lost both her parents; she couldn't lose the one man that was as close to a father as she might ever find.

He swallowed thickly, feeling the pounding in his head as he did so. He probably ought to sleep, but the very thought of closing his eyes and resting wasn't something he could even fathom.

He felt a comforting hand on his back as Rachel joined him. He didn't turn to face her, as something inside him still couldn't bare it.

"I called the school," she said quietly.

Kurt took her words in, trying to comprehend them. After a moment, he gave up. "The school?" he asked, and even he could hear the exhaustion in his voice.

She nodded. "For Blaine," she said. "He's going to need plenty of recovery time once he wakes up, and I figured that calling the school to tell them they need a substitute teacher for an undetermined amount of time is the furthest thing from your mind, right now."

Again, it took a few moments for Kurt to process her words. But once he had, he realized how much he loved Rachel. The wording she'd used hadn't gotten past him: he recognized, and greatly appreciated, how she had said it, completely assured that Blaine *would* wake up, that there was no question about it. Beside that, it really *was* something that hadn't even crossed his mind. He figured that would have only made things worse once the next morning came, had he received a call on his cell and had to explain everything. No, this was much better.

"Thank you," he said softly.

"Not a problem," she assured him. "Anything else I can do?"

Kurt paused, and glanced back at his son, eagerly telling some tale to Finn, who was holding Alex in his arms. He turned back to the room, seeing Ella, rubbing her eyes as she continued to speak to her unconscious uncle. He drew in a deep breath.

"Will you take them home for dinner?" he asked. "They haven't had a good meal, unless you count the hospital food. And... and I think they really need to sleep in an actual bed."

"And you?"

"I need to stay here," he said. He turned to her, and he could see her glaring slightly. "Just for tonight, at least. If... if by tomorrow there's still no change, then I'll go back to sleeping at home. The kids can't miss more than a few days of school anyway, and I have work..."

"You don't have to get right back into everything, if nothing's changed," Rachel said quietly, but he shook his head.

"I do," he responded. "I can't just sit at home doing nothing. It's even worse than being here, just waiting."

Rachel nodded. "Will you at least come back with us for a bit?" she asked. "Take a shower, try to eat a bit..."

"I really should be here..."

"Please, Kurt," she insisted. "You need to take care of yourself, too."

He frowned slightly, knowing that she was right. He sighed. "Fine," he allowed. "I'll shower and change."

"And eat?"

"I'll *try* to eat," he agreed.

She smiled softly at him. "It'll help you feel better, I promise."

When Kurt arrived back at the hospital ninety minutes later, returning to Blaine's side, he had to admit that he did feel a little better. He had a new set of clothes on, his hair was clean, his teeth were brushed, and he'd managed to eat some fruit and toast.

He had allowed himself to hope that Blaine would be sitting up and wide awake when he got back. Still, as he returned to gently stroking Blaine's hand, he knew that that wouldn't have happened.

Besides, he reminded himself, he'd much rather be there the moment when Blaine woke up. It wasn't a completely realistic thought, he knew. After tonight, he'd have to push through and move on, just as the world around him was. He'd go home, he'd cook and clean and make sure that Ella and Aiden were coping. He'd do his best to distract them, with movies and games and anything that would keep them from immediately feeling the pain and worry.

And it wouldn't just be for them, he knew. It would help him, too.

But for now, Kurt found himself mentally tethered to Blaine's

bedside. He didn't want to leave for a moment longer than necessary.

They wouldn't lose him, though. Kurt knew that somewhere deep in his heart. It wasn't just hope. He *knew* it.

The sound of the door opening jolted Kurt awake. He felt disoriented. He hadn't even realized how tired he'd been, but he must have been to doze off. He checked his watch. Thirty-five hours. Maybe it was a bit understandable he'd fallen asleep.

He glanced up at the nurse that entered the room. She offered Kurt a gentle smile.

"Just checking up on him," she assured him, looking at the screens and checking the bag of fluids. "Nothing to worry about." She replaced the hanging bag, and Kurt dazedly watched as it dripped down through the attached tube. "Has he moved at all yet? Woken up for even a bit?" she asked him.

Kurt shook his head, feeling the room spin slightly as he did. He squeezed his eyes shut. He felt suddenly quite exhausted, and a little sick from it.

"Would you like somewhere better to sleep?" she offered.

Kurt smiled weakly at her. "No thanks," he said. "I'd rather stay here."

She nodded. She continued her checking, then frowned.

"Is something wrong?" he asked uncertainly.

She turned to him, opening her mouth to speak, then shut it again. She sighed. "Some of his levels still aren't quite right," she said. "I'll have to go find Doctor Harper, but we might have to perform another dialysis."

"Is that normal?" Kurt questioned.

The nurse seemed to consider her options. "It can be," she said. "I

think Doctor Harper was hoping that in treating some of the underlying causes, his kidney function could either be preserved or improve. It's possible that Blaine could need regular dialysis until he finds a kidney transplant." She saw Kurt's face pale. "But that's not terrible," she assured him quickly. "A bit bothersome to come in and have it done a few times a week, maybe, but it's definitely not as bad as it could be. He's still recovering fairly well."

Kurt nodded, taking a deep breath and steadying his spinning head. He wasn't even listening as the nurse excused herself again, off to find the doctor and discuss what would be done next.

Kurt closed his eyes and concentrated on his heartbeat as it slowed back down to a normal rate. He really couldn't wait for this nightmare to be over.

Just before regular visiting hours ended, Burt came to check in with his son.

Kurt was sitting back in the hallway, nursing another cup of coffee when his father found him. Kurt quickly explained the developments on Blaine's situation, how he was currently undergoing a second dialysis treatment, and it probably wouldn't be the last.

Kurt could tell that his father was doing his best to hold his tongue. After more than thirty years, Kurt learned his father's mannerisms pretty well. He knew that right about now, his dad's first instinct was to be angry at the world because of how unfair it all was. And it was. It was all so very unfair. And Burt just wanted his kid to have a break. Yet every time he seemed to get one, it all fell apart at the seams. And that just wasn't right.

Kurt was happy that his dad didn't say anything, though. He tried so hard to keep himself calm. He just didn't know if he'd be able to keep his own emotions in check anymore if Burt didn't.

When his dad held his hand for the last thirty minutes before the end of visiting hours, Kurt just held his hand back. That was enough.

Kurt kept drifting in and out of sleep. He'd hoped it would be easier when he was this tired, whether or not he was comfortable, curled up in the chair beside Blaine's bed. He'd hoped that his mind would be completely useless from exhaustion, and he wouldn't be kept awake by thoughts that kept flashing in his mind. Instead, his unconscious mind seemed to be working overtime. He found himself dreaming of memories and the future and of Blaine waking up.

He hated the dreams of Blaine waking up. Then his eyes would pop open and he'd steady his breathing and take in his surroundings and realize that it hadn't actually happened yet.

If anything, it was just making him feel worse.

He considered getting more coffee or going for a walk or finding something to read, but he didn't want to do anything but sleep. He'd been up for the better part of two days. He really just needed to sleep.

So he settled for listening to the beeping on the monitor that indicated Blaine's heartbeat, reveling in the small bit of comfort that it offered.

At last, Kurt was able to sleep for a longer period than fifteen minutes. He awoke hunched over against Blaine's hospital bed, his head resting on his arms. His mouth felt pretty dry, and his head still felt a little sore and woozy. He was pretty comfortable in this position, over all, and he considered falling asleep again.

And the hand rested on the back of his neck, just where it met his shoulders, was warm and comforting, which was a welcome change.

It took Kurt a moment to truly process this thought, and he slowly pulled away and sat up. His breathing quickened as he turned slightly and found himself staring into hazel eyes.

And even then, it took him a few seconds to comprehend that *Blaine was awake*.

The other man smiled weakly, still looking incredibly frail and tired. But he was *awake*, and god, Kurt could hardly even think because he'd been waiting for this moment for almost *two days*.

"This isn't me dreaming again, is it?" Kurt asked a little weakly, and he felt a little foolish as he did so. Blaine chuckled slightly at this, rough and breathy. It quickly turned into a fit of coughing and Kurt quickly fumbled for the water that was beside Blaine's bed. He put the straw to Blaine's lips and he drank slowly.

"Thank you," Blaine said at last, his voice gravely and quiet.

Kurt nodded, staring at Blaine softly for a moment. There was so much he wanted to say to him, so many good and bad things. He knew he should explain everything that happened, and what it would mean for the future. Still, he couldn't quite find himself able to fill the silence. Instead, he just watched the other man laying there, now awake, making small movements every once in a while and blinking slowly.

Finally the dam broke, and Kurt found himself crying, unable to stop it any longer.

"Hey," Blaine quickly said, lifting his hand to Kurt's wrist. "No, Kurt..."

"I'm sorry," Kurt choked out. "I just... god, I was so scared, Blaine."

Blaine yanked at Kurt's wrist as hard as he could and Kurt sat at the edge of the bed. Blaine pulled him into his arms the best he could, careful not to tangle or pull out and tubes or wires.

"It's okay," he rasped. "I promise, Kurt. It's okay. *It's okay*."

And they sat like that for a few more moments, with Blaine

repeatedly whispering the words until Kurt believed them.

At last, Kurt insisted he needed to call the nurse, and Blaine released him to do so. Kurt sat quietly as the nurses and doctors worked on Blaine, asking him questions and running more tests. At some point, Kurt disappeared to send off a text to his dad, and a copy to Finn as well, to explain that Blaine was conscious at last.

They still had a ways to go, but at least there was this. It somehow made it all so much better.

Once everything was explained to Blaine, the two men found themselves alone again. Kurt planted himself at Blaine's side again and didn't want to leave. Blaine seemed just as content with the idea.

Again they sat in silence. They knew that in just a few hours, Ella and Aiden would be arriving, eager to see Blaine. Finn and Rachel would be there as well, quickly followed by Burt and Carole. There would be so much to talk about with them, that right now, it seemed all right that they just sat together and existed, happy to be in each other's company.

As precious as time suddenly was, this seemed just as important.

Chapter Forty

It was amazing how time seemed to move so simultaneously fast and slow from the moment that Blaine awoke. Kurt was desperately impatient for the moment that Blaine could return home, but he still found time disappearing quickly, feeling as though only minutes had passed when suddenly it was the end of visiting hours and he'd have to take Ella and Aiden home, where time would crawl again once they'd been put to bed, and Kurt was on his own.

They'd been lucky. Rachel had made quick work of calling everyone in her massive network to see if anyone would be a match for a kidney donation. Less than a week into the search, a donor had been found. The hospital jumped right into preparations for the transplant, performing tests and evaluations over the following month, and even as the doctor ran through a list of things they ought to be aware of, and the things that could possibly go wrong, Kurt didn't have the same sense of dread as anything that had occurred before Blaine had woken again. And, of course, with Blaine's optimism, he couldn't help but be assured that things would work out absolutely fine.

Of course, he pointedly neglected telling Blaine that he'd pretended that they were married in order to see him, and he was thankful that none of the nurses mentioned anything in passing. That was all something he'd just mention later; it was a topic he wanted to push off as a whole. It wasn't out of fear this time, but because if they *were* to decide to take that step, he didn't want it to be tainted by the way things were at the moment.

However, the situation changed rapidly. Before he knew it, the surgery was over and, with the exception of a few follow-up appointments they'd scheduled, Blaine was returning home for good—just in time for Thanksgiving. Kurt had made everyone promise that they wouldn't make a big fuss over Blaine's presence—especially Rachel. Luckily the dinner at his parents' house went

smoothly, and it was an overall enjoyable affair, one that made it seem as though things were at last returning to normal.

They weren't perfect, yet, but they were getting there. Kurt allowed himself to briefly pretend, as he watched Blaine sleeping softly on his parents' couch, the glow of the television illuminating his face, Aiden and Ella curled into his sides and also asleep, that it was normal. He pushed away all thoughts of what had happened recently, ignored that Blaine would probably still be awake if he wasn't still making his slow recovery. Instead he looked at what had become his family and he smiled, taking a moment to be thankful that he'd found Blaine again after everything that had happened.

He glanced to his side as Carole quietly joined him.

"How has he been doing?" she asked him softly.

"Good," he assured her. "A lot better." He smiled. "I just don't want to wake him yet."

"You're more than welcome to stay here," she offered. "We can put Ella in the guestroom and Aiden back in Finn's old room."

Kurt nodded thoughtfully. "If you don't mind, that would be great," he said. "It's just so nice to see him sleeping so soundly. Usually he's dozing on and off..."

Carole nodded. "Let's get the kids up, then," she said with a gentle smile.

Kurt and Carole gently took Aiden and Ella up, carrying them up the stairs and into the empty bedrooms, tucking them in as they slept on fairly soundly. After bidding each other goodnight, Carole went to her and Burt's room, and Kurt made his way back downstairs before settling himself in his father's armchair. He was sure that Blaine would wake up shortly, and then they'd head up to bed.

It felt like only seconds later Kurt was being shaken gently awake, the room dark except for the dim lights of the still-glimmering Christmas tree. He blinked groggily up at Blaine, who was smiling sleeping down at him.

Kurt felt his lips twitch into a smile in response. "Hey," he said softly. "Didn't want to wake you."

"Mm," Blaine hummed in response. "Must have dozed off. The kids are asleep?"

Kurt nodded. "Ella's in the guest bedroom and Aiden is in Finn's old room." He shifted in the armchair so he was sitting upright. "Did you want to go up?"

Blaine smiled crookedly at this. "You can't be very comfortable," he stated.

Kurt shrugged. "If you want to stay, then I will, too."

Blaine rolled his eyes affectionately, offering Kurt his hand. "Come on, let's head up," he said.

Kurt took his hand and listed himself up. The two men slowly made their way upstairs, stripping themselves down to their underclothes before climbing into bed, curling into each other. Kurt leaned into the gentle touch as Blaine pushed his hair away and kissed his forehead softly.

"I love you," the man murmured quietly and Kurt couldn't help but smile in response.

"Love you, too," he replied, watching as Blaine's eyes fluttered closed again, the contentment evident on his face.

Kurt pressed his ear against Blaine's chest, listening to the hypnotic rhythms of his heart and lungs working, reveling in the comfort they offered him. At last his heartbeat slowed and his breathing evened and Kurt realized that the other man was already asleep again.

Kurt let out a slow breath, closing his eyes and letting the warmth of Blaine's arms seep through his t-shirt. Slowly, he let the sensation and his own contentment lull him to sleep as well.

Kurt was the first one awake in the morning. He carefully extricated himself from Blaine and crept into the shower, ensuring he wouldn't wake anyone else. After dressing, he made his way downstairs to put on a pot of coffee and start on some breakfast.

It wasn't long before Burt made his way downstairs as well, helping himself to a mug of coffee and settling himself in a chair.

"What's on the menu for this morning, then?" he asked his son teasingly.

Kurt grinned at this. "You'll be pleased," he remarked. "I'm making a casserole that has bacon in it." He slid the glass pan into the oven, then sat himself across from his father.

"Let me guess," Burt sighed. "Only egg whites, though, right?"

Kurt chuckled. "You know all of my tricks," he said. "It's lucky that the kids haven't figured it out yet."

"Yeah, well, you used me for practice," Burt allowed. "You know how to hide it better, now. Bet they don't even know the difference, do they?"

"Not a bit," Kurt smiled. "Besides, egg whites are really good for kidney health."

"Ahh." Burt nodded. "And are kidney-friendly foods also kid-friendly?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I do my best with it," Kurt responded. "A number of them are surprisingly easy. I'm just thankful I was able to find an old Alton Brown episode on turnips, that was incredibly helpful."

Burt chuckled at this. "I've gotta tell ya, kid. Sometimes I'm amazed you became so interested in healthy living, even when you were younger. I know I didn't really make it easy."

"You certainly didn't," Kurt teased. "But I hope that I taught you that 'healthy' isn't synonymous with 'disgusting'."

"Yeah, but 'bad for you' and 'delicious' definitely is," he commented back, stretching out his legs beneath the table. Kurt sighed, rolling his eyes fondly. "How have things been going since

Blaine came home, anyway? I know it was a topic not to be discussed last night."

"Good," Kurt told him immediately. "Really great. I can see how he's improving. And I know he's happy he doesn't have to go in for dialysis all the time."

Burt hummed in response. "And how are things between the two of you going?"

"Good," Kurt repeated.

"I'm really glad you didn't lose him, kid."

"Me too," Kurt responded quietly. "*Really* glad..." He trailed off, looking down at his own cup of coffee, sitting on the table. He looked back up at his dad hesitantly, and Burt raised his eyebrow.

"What's on your mind?"

Kurt let out a low breath. "I've been thinking," he said slowly, quietly.

"About?" Burt prompted.

"Blaine."

"*And?*" he pressed on again.

"And... taking the next step," Kurt said awkwardly, eyes flickering back downward. "Of marriage, I mean."

Burt looked his son over for a moment, watching as he fidgeted and his eyes bore into his mug of coffee. "And what have these thoughts involved?" he prodded, voice suddenly more gentle in its questioning.

Kurt sighed again. "He... he asked me to marry him," he said, looking up at his father. "Back in July."

"And you said 'no'."

Kurt nodded. "I wasn't ready."

"Understandable," Burt said, shifting himself in his seat so he was sitting up straight, leaning forward on the table slightly. "And I'm sure he understood, too." Kurt nodded again. "But I *did* notice you

said 'wasn't'," he said, and Kurt's eyes fell to his coffee and the hands clutching his mug again. "So I guess that's no longer the case."

Kurt looked at his father with uncertainty. "Is that wrong?" he asked.

Burt sighed. "Does it *feel* wrong?" he asked.

"No."

"Then it's not wrong," he said, and Kurt looked at him a little skeptically. "Kurt, I know that you were in love with Alex. And I know that you struggled with even *entertaining* the thought of moving on from him. But moving on doesn't mean you've forgotten," he said pointedly. "You were the one who reminded me of that, and you reminded Finn, too."

"But that was... different," Kurt argued.

"Why?" Burt asked. "Because it took longer for Carole and me to find each other?" He shook his head. "Everyone's different, and every case is different. With you and Blaine it was a matter of being able to find each other a second time, and I think that's definitely an important factor."

Kurt nodded. He smiled reluctantly. "I feel like I have no right to feel nervous about it," he reasoned, "considering he already asked me."

"*Please*," Burt said, rolling his eyes. "You think I wasn't nervous when I asked your mom, or Carole? And I knew both of 'em would say yes."

Kurt's lips quirked up into a smile. "Guess it's only natural, then."

"Damn right," he said. "I think I'd be more concerned if you *weren't* nervous." He sighed, draining the last of his coffee. "Am I the first one to hear about this, then?"

"Sort of," Kurt said. "I'd mentioned Blaine's proposal to Finn while Blaine was still in the hospital," he admitted. "He helped me realize I regretted turning him down and all that."

Burt hummed in response. "So Rachel knows?" he asked, and

Kurt nodded. "So *everyone* knows in your little circle."

Kurt frowned. "No," he argued, and Burt's eyebrows raised a little comically. "Well, they haven't mentioned it."

Burt shook his head, patting Kurt's shoulder as he made his way to the sink to rinse his mug. "Believe me, kid," he said kindly. "You know I love her, but if she knows, so does everybody else."

Kurt sighed exasperatedly. "Yeah, well... as long as he's the last one to know, I think I'll take it."

As grew slowly colder along with December, Kurt discovered just how right his father was.

"Have you figured out how you're going to do it?" Tina hissed over lunch one day, their kids playing in the backyard despite the chilly weather, wrapped up in their coats and scarves. Kurt rolled his eyes.

"I'm taking my time," he assured her, instantly knowing what she was talking about, despite having never told her.

"*Kurt...*"

"Maybe we've just decided to elope," he said, and she laughed.

"Yeah, *right*," she responded.

"Fine," he sniffed good-naturedly. "I've been coming up with a few ideas," he admitted. "I'm just... not satisfied with them."

It wasn't too much later that Tina went to the bathroom and Mike slipped into the room, handing Kurt a small flyer.

"The CSO," he explained, when Kurt raised an eyebrow. "They're doing a special show just after Christmas."

Kurt's lips quirked up into a slight smile. "Thanks," he said.

Mike shrugged slightly. "Figured it might be of some use to you," he replied, smiling in turn.

"Dinner at the Refectory, followed by a wonderful performance by the CSO," Blaine said, smiling as he and Kurt walked hand in hand on the edge of Franklin Park. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you were trying to *woo me*, Mr. Hummel."

Kurt felt his cheeks heat up slightly, but hoped that between the darkness and the cold, Blaine wouldn't notice. "Don't be silly," he responded playfully, though he could feel his heart rate speed up a little, and suddenly the small silver band in the tiny square box in his pocket felt infinitely heavier.

They walked for a little, snow starting to fall and dusting the ground of the park. At last, Kurt took in a deep breath, his free hand in his pocket.

"Do you remember our first Christmas together?" he asked.

Blaine chuckled. "I made you a ring out of gum wrappers," he said, and Kurt smiled.

"I still have it," he admitted.

"I assumed you would have thrown it out," Blaine responded.

Kurt shook his head. "I still wore it, even after we broke up," he said. "I wore it until it started falling apart, and then I decided I'd keep it safe."

Blaine laughed and shook his head. "Looking back, it doesn't seem as sweet and perfect as it did at the time," he sighed.

"I still think it was perfect," Kurt said smiling, and Blaine leaned in to capture his lips in a slow, gentle kiss.

"And I still think that you're perfectly imperfect," he responded, still holding the man close to him.

"I love you," Kurt said, his hands grasping Blaine's biceps. "I've been thinking a lot, lately."

"Uh-oh," Blaine said teasingly. "Thinking?"

Kurt rolled his eyes and plowed on. "I was so afraid I'd lose you that I didn't want to completely have you," he said. "And I think that that was foolish as well as a bit selfish. But I've realized that I can't imagine spending another moment without you." He let his hands trail down so that they were both holding Blaine's. "I love you," he repeated, and he dropped his hands, leaving Blaine to look at the ring that was left in his open palm, "and I would love it if you would marry me."

Blaine's eyes widened, flickering from the band to Kurt's eyes, mouth open slightly. Kurt could see the questions in Blaine's features, asking '*really?*' and '*are you sure?*' and Kurt simply smiled a little wider in response, hoping that would be enough of an answer.

At last a tiny breath of a laugh escaped Blaine's still parted lips and he broke into a ridiculous grin. "Yes," he said quietly. "Yes, of course, Kurt."

Kurt let out a sigh of relief, taking the ring from Blaine and sliding it onto his cold finger. Their lips quickly found each other's once again, kissing sweetly and passionately. At last they pulled apart and rested their foreheads together, just letting the happiness of the moment sink in, both fully aware of how thankful they were to find each other again after so long.

Epilogue

There was something about weddings that was bittersweet.

There was always so much planning and time and effort that went into them beforehand, taking months and months of making sure that every last single detail was perfect. And then, in a matter of hours, it would be over. In fact, the ceremony itself lasted under half an hour, and that was it.

Still, there was the whole *idea* of it. There was the idea that they would spend the rest of their lives together, and they full-heartedly planned to do so, making the promise before all of their family and friends.

And then, suddenly, it wasn't so much of "Kurt and Blaine" but "Mr. and Mr. Anderson-Hummel", and that day was meant to be one to remember, when that transformation took place.

It was a winter wedding, nearly a year after they'd become engaged. It had been a slow yet eventful year, with so much time dedicated to arrangements and preparations, yet they both knew that it would be worth it in the end. They wanted this, and that was what mattered.

And then the day was there so quickly, and time was rushing past. Before Kurt could even *really* wrap his head around the meaning of the day, he found himself at the reception, Rachel raising a toast to the newly married couple. It was then at last that it struck him, and he felt his chest swell with an onslaught of emotions, feeling the happiness and love and excitement for the thought of the rest of their lives.

Everyone drank their champagne, and cheered for the newlyweds, someone quickly tapping a knife to their glass. At the sound, Kurt rolled his eyes but leaned in to kiss Blaine—*his husband*—a smile on each of their lips.

The chatter picked up again, and Blaine looked to Kurt, still

smiling.

"What's on your mind?" he asked him softly.

"Mm," Kurt hummed. "Just thinking about how happy I am to be here."

"Me too," Blaine responded, pressing a chaste kiss to Kurt's lips. "We've come a long way."

Kurt nodded at this. "I suppose it took me a while to come around," he said, a little teasingly.

"We're here now," Blaine reminded him. "That's what matters."

Kurt smiled at this, taking another drink of his champagne, still feeling the joy beating along with his heart. He let the reality of everything around him continue to sink in, marveling in just how far they actually had come. He finally felt excited and happy and hopeful, things he hadn't been able to honestly admit to in what felt like such a long time.

And, he thought, smiling as he took Blaine's hand in his, he felt safe. He felt at home. He felt, at last, completely *healed*.