

# Beautifully Wrong

by

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**Klaine || AU || NC-17** *Blaine is FtM (female to male transgender) and no one at McKinley knows about it, but he realizes this has to change if he wants his relationship with Kurt to survive. This fic explores different aspects of Blaine's transition and how it affects his relationships with those closest to him.*

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## PROLOGUE

*A short prologue dealing with Blaine's childhood.*

As a young child you don't have a concept of gender, and you have never even heard the word "identity". It doesn't really occur to you that the world is divided into male and female – boys and girls; men and women – and that there are different sets of expectations for each. You just exist. When you're old enough to talk, you call yourself a girl because it's what you're supposed to do. It's what the world tells you that you are.

As the years pass, you begin to learn what it means to be a girl. For one thing, there's the hair that your parents like you to keep long, preferably in pigtails or braids. You don't see the point, however – long hair just gets in the way as far as you're concerned. Then there are the clothes. Long frilly dresses and skirts that get stuck everywhere; tights that make your legs itch; and shoes that are impossible to run in.

Most days you're allowed to just wear pants, because your mother wants you to be a modern young woman. You don't know what that means, but you know that, even when you wear pants, you have to look a certain way, because you still look different from the boys you like to play with. But at least you can run and play freely.

On the days that you are forced into a dress, you complain loudly that it's uncomfortable and you feel silly – like you're wearing a costume – but after a while you stop complaining, because you can see that the dresses make your mother happy, and you want her to be proud of you. Still, you can't help but look at your brother in silent jealousy sometimes.

You're six years old when you enter first grade, and your best friend since preschool stops talking to you because his new friends think girls are lame. That's the first time it truly hits you that you're a *girl*. That not only do you have to dress and keep your hair like one, but people are also going to treat you like a girl. It doesn't matter that you feel uncomfortable and out of place in a group of girls, and that the boys are much more fun to hang out with. You're a girl, and that isn't going to change.

So shortly before your seventh birthday you come to a decision, and from then on you try harder to fit in the way you're supposed to. To be the girl the world expects you to be. It feels kind of like you've taken up an extra class at school; one where you're constantly trying to catch up, always a step behind everyone else and perpetually confused about this week's homework. You tell yourself that it's probably this way for everyone, but – like you – they try not to show it or talk about it. After a while you even get used to it.

The constant struggle becomes just the way things are, how they're always going to be, and whenever that nagging voice in the back of your mind becomes a little too insistent, you drown it out with words of praise and love from the people around you.

You're eleven and a few months away from completing your fifth grade when a new student transfers into your class. The first time you see her, you're convinced that she is a boy, and you're confused at first when the teacher introduces her as Sara. The girl fascinates you, and when you approach her to welcome her and admit your mistake, she laughs and says that she is definitely a girl; she just doesn't like most girl things. It's called being a tomboy. Sara and you take to each other quickly and you stay best friends throughout middle school. Sara is completely at peace with herself and it's through her that you start to learn that it's okay to like what you like and be who you are; that not every girl has to be a princess. You start picking out your clothes through different criteria, and for your twelfth birthday your only wish is that you be allowed to cut your hair short. Your parents, though a little reluctant, grant your wish. You're a little confused as to why people start assuming that you and Sara are an item, but you don't really care because you have never felt more happy and comfortable in your own skin.

It doesn't last.

Logically, you have always known that puberty is going to happen to you. You are aware that at a certain age boys and girls start to change into men and women. You've covered the basics in biology and you know plenty of grown women, so it isn't that you're surprised when it happens. What does surprise you is how you react when you notice the changes.

It's panic. It hits you like a ton of bricks one morning about a month after your twelfth birthday. Panic because suddenly, as you stand naked in front of the mirror, you can see how much has already happened, and you know it will keep happening. All at once this is real and it feels so, so wrong. You hate what your body is turning into and you feel inexplicably betrayed by it. All the other girls seem to be welcoming the changes. Even Sara is excited about the prospect of buying her first bra, but the thought terrifies you, and you don't understand why. You don't understand why you can't just be like everyone else.

You try to tell your mother about it one morning over breakfast, but she tells you it's normal to be a little scared about leaving your childhood and to just hang in there, it will get better. This doesn't help you at all, and you have a hard time believing that you're really meant to feel like this. Claustrophobic and trapped in your own body. Like each day is a nightmare that you keep hoping you'll wake up from, but you never ever do. Like the person you see reflected in the mirror every day isn't even you. Before you can

articulate any of this, however, your mother is out the door, off to one of her important meetings, and you're alone in the kitchen again.

You decide that the internet is your friend, but as you sit in front of your computer, the brightly colored Google letters far too cheery, you have no idea what to even search for. Or at least that is what you tell yourself, when the truth is that you're scared. Scared that there isn't an answer to your problem. Scared that there is. So every night you sit there staring at the computer screen as the blinking cursor seems to mock your indecision, and every night you go to bed without having typed a single word.

By rights the thing that finally pushes you over the edge should be some big dramatic moment, but it isn't. It's simply more of the same, but week by week it gets more and more difficult just to exist, and the months go by until finally you've had enough. You sit down at the computer, open Google and without planning or hesitating you type in the words *confused about my gender* and hit enter.

You don't sleep that night. Instead you spend hour after hour browsing through dozens of websites and watching countless videos until your eyes hurt and your mind feels like it's about to explode from information overload. It's nearly four in the morning when you finally go to bed, and even then you lie awake for the longest time, your whole body thrumming with nervous excitement. It's real. What you're feeling is real. It's then that you say the words out loud to yourself for the first time.

*I'm a boy. I may not look like one, but I am. I'm transgender.*

Somehow, even though knowing this, and knowing that there are others like you out there, should be – and is in some ways – comforting, you've never felt more alone.

You fall asleep crying.

## CHAPTER ONE

*Today all day I had the feeling (When he's talking)*

***Blaine makes a realization about his relationship with Kurt, and he meets Sebastian. Drinking ensues***

Kurt didn't know. No one did. Or rather no one besides the people that couldn't *not* know. There was Blaine's family obviously: His parents and Cooper; aunts and uncles, cousins and grandparents. Then there was Blaine's doctors and therapist, who oversaw his treatment. All those were unavoidable. School administrations at Blaine's first high school, at Dalton and now at McKinley had also been told, which was necessary for certain allowances to be made (Blaine didn't shower with the rest of the boys after P.E. and he was excused from certain field trips). Trent was the only one of Blaine's peers who knew, and then only because him having been Blaine's roommate at Dalton sort necessitated it. Blaine supposed there was also the kids at the high school in Columbus, where he had spent his first freshman year. It had been nearly three years since he had seen any of them, though, so they didn't really count, and in fact Blaine preferred not to think about those kids at all.

So as far as his day-to-day life was concerned, Blaine was, to all intents and purposes, what was known as "stealth", and he liked it that way. He knew that it was unfair not to include Kurt as one of the people who knew. It was just that telling all those people had been literally quite unavoidable, and telling Kurt – though the morally right thing to do – wasn't. Blaine had been on hormones for two and half years, which meant that as long as he took certain precautions, like binding his chest and avoiding communal showers, no one would ever suspect that he wasn't biologically male. And with this being the first relationship for the both of them, Kurt and Blaine had agreed from the start to take things slow physically and Kurt hadn't pushed (Blaine sure hadn't) so keeping that part of himself hidden hadn't been difficult for Blaine.

It wasn't that Blaine had ever planned on entering a relationship with anyone without first telling them the truth – least of all with Kurt who meant so indescribably much Blaine, not only as a boyfriend but as a *friend*. But then he and Kurt had just sort of happened without planning or forethought. Of course, looking back, Blaine could see it happening over weeks and months, could see himself falling harder and harder with every day that passed, but he had tried so hard to keep himself at a distance, focusing so much of his energy on that, that when he couldn't anymore, there was no plan ready in his mind. There was just *Kurt, Kurt, Kurt* and *Tomorrow. I'll tell him tomorrow.*



It was Artie of all people who made Blaine stop and take stock of the situation.

It had been nearly a month since the full cast list for McKinley's production of *West Side Story* had been posted, and now the premiere was less than a week away. However, Artie (as the eager young director) was still not satisfied with certain aspects of the show and on Friday afternoon he pulled his leads aside to run through a number of the songs. As Blaine and Rachel's voices rang through the auditorium with the final note of *Tonight*, Blaine was feeling quite happy with their performance, confident even – but then the words "sexual awakening" left Artie's mouth and Blaine tensed, sure he wasn't going to like the rest of the conversation. And as Artie continued to talk about passion and sex and first times, somehow not finding the topic remotely inappropriate, Blaine found he was right.

It wasn't that Blaine put much, if any, stock in Artie's idea that that one specific experience could really make or break anyone's performance. Rather he was caught uncomfortably off guard by the whole thing. His awkward 'I'm waiting for the right time,' in response to the inquiry about his first time, was only half-true, because the truth was that Blaine hadn't been waiting as much as he had ignored the topic of sex and physical intimacy altogether. Now that it been brought brutally back to the forefront of his mind, however, and Blaine was hit with the sudden realization that he and Kurt were coming up on their ninth month together and there was only so much longer Kurt would be satisfied with what they had now, Blaine had to face the fact that he may very well be running out of time.

'Well, that's me done.' Kurt closed his textbook with a loud snap, which Blaine, sitting cross-legged on the bed with his nose in a book, barely registered. He felt the mattress dip as Kurt joined him on the bed, but kept his eyes trained on the book in his lap. 'How's yours coming? You done soon?'

'Mmm,' Blaine non-responded, having not really heard the question.

'Well, get cracking then.' Kurt patted Blaine's leg teasingly. 'The whole point of this was that we'd have some alone time when we're done. I don't think Artie's gonna let us sleep this weekend, let alone have social lives, so we gotta make tonight count.' Kurt paused for a moment before continuing, his voice high and breathless. 'I can't believe we open next week. Feels like they just cast us last week. I think we've all worked hard though, and we're ready. Or we will be by Thursday. I feel ready. Do you feel ready?'

'Mm, yeah, sure,' Blaine said distractedly, still not looking up.

'But then I thought I might not do the play at all, and just move to Alaska and work in a gold mine.'

'Yeah, good... wait, what?' Blaine finally looked up, frowning at Kurt's words, to find his boyfriend looking at him with a bemused sort of expression.

'There you are.' Kurt smiled and leaned over to press a soft kiss to Blaine's cheek. 'Thought I'd lost you for a second.'

'I'm sorry.' Blaine exhaled deeply and leaned back against the headboard. 'But you said it yourself. I just need to finish this chapter for History and then I'm all yours.'

Kurt's eyes narrowed as he took the book from Blaine and examined it briefly. 'Yeah, I'm pretty sure this is Algebra, Blaine. Also, you haven't turned the page in at least ten minutes.' Kurt threw the book aside on the bed and shifted himself so he was sitting directly in front of Blaine, his hands resting on Blaine's knees. 'What's going on? Are you okay?'

'No. Yeah. It's fine, really.' Blaine closed his eyes for a brief moment, suddenly so tired. 'Just something Artie said earlier. It's nothing.'

'What did he say?' Kurt's eyes narrowed and his tone was dangerous as though he would like nothing more than to get his hands on Artie.

'Nothing really.' Blaine waved a dismissive hand. 'Just a director's note. You know how he is. It's nothing.'

'It's not nothing if it's got you all worked up like this,' Kurt said.

'Honestly, Kurt, it's fine. Don't worry. I'm just overreacting.' Blaine paused as Kurt kept eyeing him skeptically. 'Really. It's nothing. I shouldn't've even told you.'

'You know, Blaine, there's only so many times you can say "it's nothing" before it starts to mean the opposite. What did Artie say? Was he being rude or out of line or...?'

Blaine bit his lip as Kurt watched him from the bed, his eyes big and earnest. Blaine's heart hammered as he considered the possibility of just telling Kurt the truth here and now. *It's just that he mentioned sex, and*

*I'm scared to even bring that up with you, because the truth is I'm transgender, so my body doesn't look like other boys' and I'm afraid of what that will do to our relationship when you find out.* Blaine let out a breath he had been holding a little while longer than usual.

'No, he wasn't. It was just-' Blaine cut himself off when he heard the front door slam downstairs. *Saved by the bell.* 'Hold on, that's my mom. I just gotta...' Blaine grabbed something off his bedside table and waved it in front of Kurt as though that was an explanation. 'Be right back.' And before Kurt could do much more than look frustrated, Blaine had left the bedroom faster than if it had been on fire.

He found his mother downstairs, still in the hall, hanging her coat. Something about the speed and swiftness of her movements let Blaine know that, while she may be home for the night, her work day wasn't over. She was probably headed straight to her computer.

'Hi Mom,' Blaine said softly, coming to a halt at the bottom step. She wheeled around to face him, an expression of mild surprise on her face. It was an expression Blaine's mother wore a lot around her youngest, as though she kept forgetting he was in the house too. Blaine supposed she was just still getting used to having him home after two years at Dalton, but sometimes, when a dark mood struck him, Blaine wondered if maybe she hoped he would just go away again, or grow up already and go to college or something.

'Hi sweetie, you're home. Have a nice day?' she asked, but her voice was breathless and Blaine could tell that her mind was elsewhere and she was really just feigning interest, so he decided to cut to the chase.

'Yeah, it was fine. I got your tickets today. Best seats in the house.' Blaine beamed as he held out the thin pieces of papers in his hand. 'I know Dad isn't due home for another two weeks, but I got one for him as well. Just in case.'

Blaine shrugged and gestured again for his mother to take the tickets. She accepted them, but when she examined them her face fell and she sucked in a breath and made a noise of regret.

'It's on Thursday? Blaine, sweetie, I'm sorry, but I can't come. I have a huge meeting on Thursday. It's impossible to reschedule at this point.'

'But Mom,' Blaine pleaded, his heart sinking. 'I worked hard on this. I- It's the lead role. I really wanted you there.'

'I know, I'm sorry,' she replied sympathetically but Blaine didn't miss the defensive edge to her voice as she went on. 'But you know what my job is like. You can't just spring these things on me last minute. You have to tell me ahead of time, so I can work my schedule around it.'

'I did.' Blaine's voice was quiet as he spoke and he hugged his arms around himself. 'Last month. When I first got cast. I did tell you.'

'You did?' She bit her lip. Clearly this was news to her. 'I must not have had my calendar with me, and it slipped my mind.'

Blaine let out a short humorless laugh. 'It slipped your mind... Meanwhile Rachel's parents have been running lines with her every night. They're both coming to the opening show on Thursday *and* a couple after that. Plus they're filming the whole thing. They're bringing a *tripod*.'

Blaine's mother opened and closed her mouth a few times, no sound coming out, but then she seemed to gather herself. 'Well, I don't know who this Rachel is, but it sounds to me like her parents have a lot of time on their hands.'

'No, they *make* time,' Blaine said, yanking the tickets out of his mother's hand and turning to walk back upstairs.

'Hey, that's not fair, Blaine. We're doing our best here,' she called after him. Then she added softer, 'Another night, okay? I'll try and make it one of the other nights.'

'It doesn't matter,' Blaine called back, even as disappointment burned in his throat. 'It's just a silly high school production.'

When he reached the door to his bedroom, Blaine put the tickets away in his pocket and allowed himself to stand there for a moment, picking himself back up and burying the anger and hurt. He was well practiced by now so it didn't take long.

'Hey.' Blaine strode into the room all smiles to find Kurt standing in the middle of the room, a contemplative look on his face.

'Hey...' Kurt's greeting was a little more hesitant, and he watched as Blaine crossed to the other side of the room to his record player. 'Everything okay?'

'Yeah,' Blaine replied breathlessly as he directed his focus to a stack of old vinyls.

'What are you doing?' Kurt asked as Blaine found the record he was looking for and pulled it from its case. 'I thought you still had to finish.'

'Yeah, well, it's Friday and it's past six.' He put the record in the player and started it, enjoying the soft crackling sound it made. 'You can't expect me to concentrate on Algebra right now.'

'No, especially not as you don't even seem to be able to tell it apart from History,' Kurt chuckled briefly. 'What was that about?'

'I told you. It's Friday,' Blaine said simply. 'Now dance with me.'

As Blaine started to move in front of him, Kurt looked doubtfully on as though he would really rather that they had a serious conversation, but it only took a few moments before the corners of his mouth twitched into a smile at sight before him. Blaine took that as his cue to grab Kurt by the hand and soon they were dancing and laughing along to the tunes of Roxy Music.

'Hey, no, we can't stop now,' Blaine said as the record ran out and Kurt moved to sit down on the bed. Blaine scrambled to switch sides on the record. 'This is the best one.'

'You've been saying that for three songs,' Kurt pointed out as he got more comfortable on the bed.

'Okay, yes,' Blaine admitted as he replaced the needle. 'But this time it's true.' Blaine started moving again as *Love is the Drug* began playing. 'God, I love this record. Definitely the best new album this year.'

Kurt raised an eyebrow. 'You do realize this album has been out for, like, forty years, right? It's Roxy Music. It's hardly new. The vinyl should give you a clue.'

'Thirty-six,' Blaine corrected. 'And I meant new to me. Also, I'll have you know they still make vinyls. Thank god.'

Kurt smiled indulgently. 'My boyfriend's a Katy Perry devotee *and* a vinyl purist. You, honey, are truly exceptional.'

""Devotee."" Blaine chuckled. 'You make me sound like some kind of crazed stalker. I prefer "admirer.'"

'Like that's any better.' Kurt said with a snort, which prompted Blaine to stick out his tongue at him.

'Anyway, I'm not a *purist*. I just like them. The mechanics. The little crinkling sound. It's soothing.' Blaine paused, lost for a moment in childhood memories of a grandfather who had left behind an old turntable and his undying love of records when he passed. 'And who says it has to be one or the other? Old or new? It's not all black and white, you know.'

'Mmm,' was all Kurt said. He had settled on his stomach, propped up on his elbows, and he was watching Blaine quietly.

'What?'

'Nothing. Keep dancing. You're adorable like that.'

'I hope that's adorable as in "my cute and handsome boyfriend,"' Blaine said. 'And not "my stupid dorky little brother."'

'A little of both, I'd say? Mostly the first though.' Kurt looked thoughtful for a moment. 'My cute and stupidly handsome boyfriend, who is also adorably dorky.'

'I guess I can live with that,' Blaine decided with a grin, before moving back to the turntable and starting the record over, since they had talked over most of his favorite song. He resumed his dancing, letting himself be swept away by the music and admittedly egged on a little by the way Kurt seemed to be enjoying the show, judging by the way he was watching Blaine with still darkening eyes.

'God, Roxy Music makes me wanna build a time machine just so I can go back to the seventies and give Bryan Ferry a high five.'

'Do you think I'm boring?' Kurt asked out of nowhere.

'Are you crazy?' Blaine said, taken aback by the question and with no idea where Kurt was coming from. 'You're the single most interesting kid in all of Ohio.'

'I mean like...'

Kurt sat up on the bed and Blaine could tell that this was no longer idle chat. 'Sexually. I mean, we are playing it very safe by not granting our hands visas to travel south of the equator.' Kurt made an awkward gesture to show what he meant.

'I thought that's what we wanted,' Blaine said as casually as he could manage, while internally cursing this day and people's propensities for sex talks.

'It is. I'm just wondering, have you ever had the urge to just rip off each other's clothes and just get dirty?'

Blaine, who had been watching Kurt open-mouthed as he spoke, quickly recovered, and he was even able to answer quite truthfully, 'Well, yeah, but that's why they invented masturbation.'

'It's so hot in this room. Can we open up a window?'

Kurt was blushing slightly, and as Blaine crawled on the bed to reassure his boyfriend and talk about comfort, Blaine breathed an internal sigh of relief, because the blushing at least told him that Kurt wasn't ready to "get dirty" right now, even if he did want to talk about it. It gave Blaine time. Time to think and time to form some sort of plan that didn't end with him being alone and the word "freak" ringing in his ears.

No matter how much he stood by his decision to transfer to McKinley, it had not been without some regret in his heart that Blaine had said goodbye to Dalton back in September. It was a strange feeling walking through the grand halls of the place he had called home for two years, still remembering and recognizing every detail as if he had never left, but as a visitor now and no longer really belonging here. The odd thing was that, despite playing the male lead in the school musical and having been accepted into the glee club by anyone that wasn't Finn (what was his problem, anyway?), Blaine still didn't really feel like he belonged at McKinley either. He had the sneaking suspicion that he could stop coming to school tomorrow and no one besides Kurt and maybe a few teachers would notice or care.

However, from the way the face of every Warbler lit up in excitement, when they saw him watching their performance from the doorway – even a few new members that Blaine had never met – it was clear that the Warblers hadn't forgotten Blaine in the two months he had been away. When one of the new guys dragged Blaine into the performance, Blaine was reluctant for only half a second before he gave in to it and let himself be swept away by the music and the fun. It was a little bit like coming home.

The performance ended to great applause from Blaine and as he gave Nick a hug, congratulating him on a great solo, his old group of friends all milled around him, buzzing with excitement.

'Is this your triumphant return to Dalton?' Trent urged. 'Please?'

'Actually, I'm here to invite you guys to my opening night at McKinley,' Blaine said as from his back pocket he withdrew a stack of tickets, that he had been lucky to get this late in the game. The two now useless tickets Blaine had got for his parents had served as good bargaining chips. 'West Side Story. I reserved a whole block of tickets just for the Warblers. It would mean the world to me if you guys could come.'

'We'll be there,' a tall Warbler that Blaine didn't know – the same guy that had pulled Blaine into the performance – assured him. 'Once a Warbler, always a Warbler, right?'

The statement was met with cheers and murmurs of assent, while Blaine himself watched the new guy curiously. There was something strange about the way he looked at Blaine, that Blaine couldn't put his finger on, and he wasn't altogether sure he liked it. As the Warblers began filing out of the room, Blaine suddenly remembered the other reason he was here and quickly pulled Trent aside, speaking to him in a low voice.

'Hey, can I talk to you? In private?' he added meaningfully.

Trent frowned for a short moment, but then he seemed to catch on and gave a small nod. 'Sure. Can you hang around though? I have to go meet with the guidance counselor. Say in an hour at the dorms?'

'Great, thanks.' Blaine glanced over his shoulder at the new Warbler, who was watching the two of them, clearly waiting for them to finish. 'I guess I'll just go say hello to the new guy. See you later then.'

Sebastian Smythe was unlike anyone Blaine had ever met – and definitely very much unlike Blaine himself. Sebastian had a certain air of confidence about him, that Blaine had to admit he admired a little, even though it also made him a bit nervous.

'So you're a legend at Dalton,' Sebastian said the moment the two of them had sat down for coffee.



'Well, I...' Blaine mumbled, at a loss for how to respond.

'Don't be modest,' Sebastian said, his smile wide and revealing perfectly straight white teeth. 'I was, like, I don't know who this Blaine guy is, but apparently he's sex on a stick and sings like a dream.' Blaine gave an involuntary jerk of the head at word *sex*, before laughing awkwardly at Sebastian's words. 'So – sucks that I missed him.'

As Sebastian's smile morphed into a smirk, his gaze at Blaine changed into something more intense and searching, and Blaine couldn't help the feeling that Sebastian was looking for something that wasn't there.

'Alright,' Sebastian continued, his demeanor melting into something more business-like. 'Since I'm working to recreate your meteoric ascent, I need to ask. Why'd you leave Dalton?' Sebastian's eyes darkened and he lost the business act as he went on. 'Were you bored with all the preppies around here, or is it that you broke too many hearts to stay?'

Blaine laughed nervously. It was slowly dawning on him that he was being flirted with and it gave him an odd unsettled feeling in his stomach.

'It wasn't like that,' Blaine managed to get out. He thought for a moment. 'Let's just say I miss Dalton every day, but McKinley's where my heart is now.'

Sebastian seemed to take the hint and kept the topic on the Warblers and performing as he went on. Blaine, however, was only half paying attention, though he was acutely aware of the way Sebastian kept eyeing him like he was some particularly delicious piece of food that he couldn't wait to devour. Blaine vaguely wondered if Sebastian would be so interested if he knew what Blaine hid beneath layers of clothing. Blaine's mind wandered then to everyone in his life who knew his truth and to his less than stellar relationship with each of them. There was his mom, who worked all the time and never seemed to pay attention to anything Blaine did or said. There was his dad whose job had him on the road for weeks at a time and who Blaine didn't know how to talk to anyway. Then there was Cooper with whom Blaine usually got along well enough on the rare occasion that they saw each other, but in whose eyes Blaine never seemed to measure up. Blaine didn't really speak to much of his extended family of grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins, but as far as he knew none of them had been too happy to learn that the little girl they knew was really a boy, though his grandmother had at least paid for him to attend Dalton. Blaine's maternal grandfather, with whom Blaine had had a strong bond, had passed away before he could

know, and Blaine was half glad of that as it left no chance for his grandfather to be disappointed with or think less of his grandchild. Theirs would always be the one perfect relationship Blaine had.

Inevitably Blaine's thoughts circled back around – as they always did these days – to Kurt and the conversation that must come. He felt his stomach do a sudden unpleasant swoop, and he looked at his watch, willing the clock to go faster as the urge to talk to Trent got impossibly stronger. Trent who had known Blaine's story since five minutes after they met and who had accepted Blaine unconditionally despite seeing sides of Blaine that the other boys – not being his roommate – never did. Blaine sometimes wished that he and Trent could have just fallen for each other. Things – well, some things – would have been so much simpler then.

'I have to go. Lacrosse practice,' Sebastian said then, jolting Blaine from his thoughts. 'But... could we meet again? I could really use some more insight from you, Blaine. You know, Warbler to Warbler.'

'Sure,' Blaine replied before he could really process what Sebastian was asking, his brain still so deep in thought about everything else. It was a moment before it reoccurred to him that the whole time Sebastian had never stopped looking at him with hungry eyes, and there were several reasons why that made Blaine uncomfortable, but before Blaine could even consider voicing his concerns, Sebastian had left the room. Blaine didn't figure he had any reason to worry though. Sebastian seemed harmless enough, and who was Blaine to turn down helping a fellow Warbler? After all, as Sebastian said, once a Warbler, always a Warbler, right?

Fifteen minutes before he was supposed to meet Trent, Blaine sighed and got up from his position at the table, figuring if he walked really slowly he wouldn't be early. On his way to the dorms Blaine met a couple of familiar faces – and a couple of unfamiliar ones that seemed to know him – some merely offering brief hellos, while others stopped to chat.

Blaine smiled to himself as he proceeded down the hall to the dormitories, the walk to his old dorm room both familiar and new, having walked this way so many times before but never as a visitor. He came to a halt in front of the door, before looking quickly at his watch. Seven minutes early. That would have to do. He knocked.

The door was opened quickly by Trent sans blazer and sporting a loose tie, clearly taking advantage of his free and private time before dinner to unwind a little. Blaine had seen this countless times before, and it gave him a series of sudden flashbacks to the many private moments the two of them had shared as roommates. Trent's face lit up in a smile as he saw Blaine, and he stood aside to let him in before closing the door behind him.

Blaine absently noted that Trent's side of the room looked exactly like it had two months ago (perfectly neat and tidy), while a stranger's belongings took up the side of the room that had been Blaine's. The idea made him feel strangely sad, but there was no time to ponder this for long, because then Trent was hugging Blaine like he hadn't seen him in years. Blaine had learned a long time ago, that Trent could be an extremely affectionate person once you got to know him.

'God, I missed you,' Trent mumbled against Blaine's neck before finally letting go of him. 'My new roommate's *horrible*. He leaves dirty socks everywhere, he has no appreciation for music, and he *snores*, Blaine.' Trent was ranting now, and Blaine could feel his own mouth curling into an amused smile, despite how much he tried to look concerned. 'I feel like I haven't slept properly in a month. Do you know what it's like living with someone like that? I *need* my sleep. He never even goes home on weekends either. I suspect his parents are kind of relieved to-'

'Trent?'

'Yes?'

'Breathe.'

Trent let out a long breath of air. 'Yes. Good. Thank you.' Trent sank onto his bed, leaning against the wall at the the head of the bed, and Blaine joined him, sitting sideways and letting his shoe-clad feet dangle over the edge. 'See, this is why I need you.'

'To remind you to breathe?' Blaine said, keeping his voice even and turning his head to regard Trent, one brow raised.

'Hilarious,' Trent replied sarcastically and threw a pillow at Blaine, who raised his arms in defense. Trent continued in a softer tone. 'How are you though? What's it like being back home?'

'It's...' Blaine hesitated, buying time by making a show of picking up the pillow and hugging it against his chest. 'Surprisingly lonely.'

'How so?'

Blaine sighed. 'My parents. God love 'em, they've done so much for me, but they're never really there. In any sense of the word. I guess I just expected...' He trailed off. 'Anyway, I've been used to having friends around me all the time. I guess I've just gotta get used to being by myself again.'

'You've got friends at McKinley, though, right? In New Directions.'

'Yeah, sure.' Blaine thought of Finn and Santana chastising him for being an attention seeker, and he thought of the way he still felt like he was on the fringes of everything that went on in the club. 'It's difficult... they've all known each other for so long. I'm still trying to figure out where I fit in.'

'Kurt's gotta make the whole thing easier though? Being closer to him and seeing him every day. I mean, he's basically the reason you left, right? I still remember what you were like to live with those last few months after Kurt had transferred back. Not that I didn't sympathize, but you were kind of whiny, no offense.'

Blaine threw the pillow back at Trent with a grin, but immediately wished he hadn't because he missed having something to clutch. He bit his lip.

'Yeah...Kurt. That's kind of why I'm here actually. It's- He doesn't know. I've never told him. About the whole -' Blaine automatically lowered his voice despite being behind a closed door with presumably no curious eavesdroppers trying to listen in. '- trans thing.'

'He- what? How is that even possible?' Trent's eyes went wide with shock. 'How can he not know?'

'I've been careful.' Blaine shrugged.

'Okay, wow...' Trent said quietly. 'I just sort of always assumed you'd told him at some point.'

Blaine slumped, face planting onto the bed and mumbling into the mattress, 'I know, I should have. I'm a horrible person.'

Blaine felt the mattress dip near him and a hand touched his shoulder. He sat back up but didn't meet Trent's eye.

'Okay, one: You're not,' Trent told him firmly, leaving no room for doubt. 'You're just... scared, I assume? And two: That word is reserved for my roommate, remember?'

Blaine sighed and sank back into the bed, leaning his head and shoulders against the wall. 'I have to tell him, right?' Blaine said in a hollow voice, staring at the clock on the opposite wall. 'He deserves to know.'

'Well, yes.' Trent sat himself next to Blaine. 'I don't want to get involved with things that are none of my business, but, if he doesn't know, the two of you can't have gone very far. Physically, I mean. Don't you want more? Don't you think he does?'

'I know he does. And I want more, too.' Blaine contemplated this statement for a few moments. 'Or at least I *want* to want more. Does that make sense?'

'So what's holding you up?' Trent asked.

'Well, it's like you said. I'm...scared. How's he going to react? Not just to the thing itself but to the fact that I kept it from him?' Trent was quiet. He had no answer. 'What if he hates me? I couldn't bear that.'

'I'm sure, whatever he's going to do or say, he won't *hate* you,' Trent said reasonably. 'Kurt doesn't do hate.'

'Try telling his former best friend that.' Blaine paused. 'Do you remember last year when Kurt and I had that big fight? When I thought I might be bi? He completely tore me a new one and basically denied that bisexuality exists. What's he gonna do when I tell him I'm transgender? It's not even like either of us can hide behind a "maybe" with that one.'

There were a few moments of silence in which Trent seemed to be contemplating something. 'You do realize that it was love at first sight with the two of you, right? Okay, maybe not "love" but *something*. Kurt knew. You, on the other hand, were a little slower on the uptake. The guys had a bet going about how long it would take you.'

'What, seriously? You *bet* on us?'

'Well, *I* didn't,' Trent corrected as though it were a matter of pride. 'Although I may have acted as referee. Jeff won, by the way. He bet it would happen by Regionals.'

Blaine snorted incredulously, not knowing whether to find the matter tasteless or amusing. 'I'm confused though. What does that have to do with the fight?'

'Isn't it obvious? He was *jealous*, Blaine. And that wasn't just any girl you went out with. Rachel was supposed to be one of his best friends. That has to have stung.'

'Oh,' Blaine said dumbly. 'Well, I feel stupid now.'

'Don't let me stop you.'

'Hey!'

Trent just surveyed him with his 'you know I'm right' face. 'Well, really Blaine. You have to admit you can be pretty dense sometimes.' He prodded Blaine in the side, teasing him. 'You're lucky you're so cute.'

'Yeah, that's me. Lucky...' Blaine let the word hang in the air for a few moments, while he wrestled with a thought. 'It's just, even if he doesn't outright hate me, what are the odds that he's gonna stick around as anything more than a friend? I mean, he's *gay*.'

'And you're a guy,' Trent said simply, clearly refusing to understand where Blaine was going.

'Yes, I know that. But I don't exactly have a...' Blaine made an awkward half-hearted gesture. 'And there's this,' he added, waving his arm in front of his chest. 'That's not what he signed up for.'

'How long have you been together? Eight months?' Blaine nodded. 'And he hasn't pushed for sex yet?' Blaine blushed, his mouth falling open slightly. Trent was a good friend, yes, but they didn't usually have conversations like this. 'Come on, answer the question,' Trent insisted a little impatiently. 'You're the one that made this about sex.'

Blaine cleared his throat. 'No. He hasn't pushed.'

'And you guys are happy, right?'

'Yes.' A smile spread across Blaine's face. 'Very.'

'Well, I'd say that's proof enough that he likes you for more than your hypothetical penis.'

Since his very first day as a Warbler, Sebastian had heard stories about the great Blaine Anderson, whose lead vocals had led them to Regionals the previous spring. Sebastian had seen videos of their performances at both Sectionals and Regionals and had to color himself impressed by what he saw. It made him quite regret having missed the guy by a matter of weeks. Admittedly Sebastian's own chances at a solo had to be better without Blaine here to compete against him (not that Sebastian would ever admit to Blaine being *better* than him, but this guy was clearly the darling of the Warblers), but Sebastian also had other, far less professional, reasons for wanting to meet Blaine Anderson. However, when he asked about the boy that Blaine had done a duet with at Regionals, Sebastian was told briefly about Kurt Hummel; Dalton student and Warbler for five months, Blaine's boyfriend and the sole reason Blaine had left Dalton at the start of the school year. Most guys would probably have taken that as a sign that the boys were in love and to not try and get in between them.

Sebastian was not most guys.

Blaine was already at the Lima Bean when Sebastian got there nearly ten minutes early. He imagined Blaine worrying about being late and appearing rude and showing up fifteen minutes early as a result. Filing the knowledge away for later use, Sebastian grinned as he greeted the shorter boy and led the way to the counter to place their orders. Blaine Anderson, the person, was turning out to be quite different from what Blaine Anderson, the performer, had led Sebastian to expect. Far be it from him to complain, though. This was so much more interesting. There was a certain schoolboy innocence about Blaine, that Sebastian was itching to explore before ultimately stripping it away, layer by layer.

As Sebastian finished his coffee order, he added as an afterthought, completely straight-faced, 'And could I get a shot of Courvoisier with that, please.'

'I- I'm sorry, sir, I don't know what that is,' the young barista stuttered apologetically, and Sebastian barely suppressed a smirk at her look of confusion, while feeling oddly triumphant at the look of incredulity and amusement that crossed Blaine's face.

'Never mind,' Sebastian sighed dramatically. 'Just get me the coffee then.'

'I can't believe you asked for a shot of Courvoisier in your coffee,' Blaine said with a small chuckle as they made their way to a table.

Sebastian grinned, then replied as he sat down, 'I forget how lame this town is. When I lived in Paris I drank it like it was mother's milk.'

'When you lived- Oh, okay. Wow.' Blaine was apparently at a loss for words, clearly impacted by Sebastian's.

'What?' Sebastian asked, his smile wide and feigning ignorance as though he hadn't planned to drop that bit of information in there.

'You're just so... you know, you're out there.' An uncertain smile was playing on Blaine's lips as though he wasn't quite sure what to make of it all.

'And your whole bashful schoolboy thing?' Sebastian responded without missing a beat, figuring he might as well be upfront and see what kind of reaction he got. 'Super hot.'

Blaine's smile faded immediately. 'Look, Sebastian. I have a boyfriend.'

This Sebastian knew, of course. 'Doesn't bother me if it doesn't bother you,' he said truthfully. Quite the opposite, in fact.

'No,' Blaine said. 'I mean, I really care about him.'

'He doesn't need to know,' Sebastian emphasized.

'I'd just never want to mess my thing up with him in any way. He's really great,' Blaine said and Sebastian was about to counter with *That's why you don't tell him* when their conversation was interrupted.



'Who's really great?' Sebastian looked up at the owner of the high-pitched voice, recognizing Kurt from the videos he had watched.

'You!' Blaine cried, his expression caught somewhere between relief and panic. 'We were just talking about you. Sebastian this is Kurt, my boyfriend, who I was just-'

'Got it,' Sebastian cut him off, saving Blaine from his own fluster. The way Blaine was acting like a kid caught with his fingers in the cookie jar, you would think he had done something other than reject Sebastian's every advance. Which had to mean that either Blaine really was faithful to a fault – or he wasn't as uninterested as he made out and was playing hard to get. Sebastian knew which option he preferred.

Kurt shook Sebastian's hand, giving an icy 'Pleasure' before turning to Blaine. 'And how do we know Sebastian?'

'We met at Dalton.' Sebastian saved a still sputtering Blaine from answering. 'I was dying to meet Blaine,' he went on, deciding that if Kurt was going to be all icy and obnoxious, saying *we* when he meant *you*, then Sebastian wasn't going to give a damn about flirting with his boyfriend in front of him. 'Those Warblers just won't shut up about him. I didn't think he could live up the hype. But as it turns out...'

'Yes, he's even more impressive in the flesh,' Kurt said as he pulled up a chair and sat next to Blaine, looping one arm around his boyfriend's. Staking his claim.

This was going to be fun.

The moment Sebastian suggested a night out at the local gay bar, Blaine knew it was a bad idea, but it wasn't until he and Kurt actually got there the next night that he realized just how uncomfortable the night was going to be. As they spotted Sebastian across the room at the bar, Kurt murmured just loud enough for Blaine to hear him over the music, 'I really don't like that guy.'

'He's harmless,' Blaine reassured his boyfriend, because while Sebastian talked a good game, he had not actually tried anything, and it wasn't like Blaine was interested.

Kurt didn't say anything but snaked an arm around Blaine's waist as they approached Sebastian. Blaine didn't think anything of the gesture, figuring Kurt simply considered the gay bar a safe place for PDA. Sebastian greeted them with drinks, taking care that Kurt's – as he was the designated driver – was alcohol free. They stayed at the bar for a while, sipping their drinks and chatting idly.

As one song faded into another, Sebastian downed the rest of his drink, before taking Blaine's empty beer bottle from him and placing it on the counter. He patted Blaine's upper arm and gestured with his head towards the dance floor. 'Come on. Let's dance.'

Blaine glanced at Kurt, who was still clutching his half full glass.

'Join us when you're done, Hummel,' Sebastian shrugged as if it really didn't matter to him. 'Unless you think the fun will be too much to handle.' He tugged at Blaine. 'Come on, Blaine. I love this song.'

Blaine opened his mouth in half protest, looking from Sebastian to Kurt, but ended up stumbling after Sebastian who pulled him away by the wrist. The dance floor was not particularly crowded but Blaine still felt Sebastian dancing rather closer than he would have liked. However, Blaine was alone with him for less than half a minute before Kurt joined them, pointedly cutting between his boyfriend and the other boy. Unfazed Sebastian moved to Blaine's other side, so Blaine was sandwiched between him and Kurt, both boys dancing a lot closer than Blaine thought was strictly necessary. Kurt's eyes narrowed at Sebastian.

'Just ignore him,' Blaine said, bringing his hand to Kurt's face and forcing his gaze back on Blaine. 'Dance with me.'

Kurt's face split into a wicked smile then as he grabbed Blaine's hand and spun him around so he was once again facing away from Sebastian. Blaine had eyes only for his boyfriend, but before the song ended Sebastian had edged around them once more, prompting Kurt to spin Blaine around again. This pattern continued into the next song, and the one after that, and it left Blaine feeling rather dizzy, probably not helped by the beer that was starting to take effect.

When the third song ended Blaine withdrew his arms from where they had been curled around Kurt's shoulders. 'I need to use the bathroom,' he said and without uttering another word he left, stalking across the floor through the thin crowd of people.

Two steps into the restroom, Blaine stopped short, momentarily overwhelmed by the smell of it. He scrunched up his nose in disgust at the sight of urinals, for once glad that he couldn't use them, before proceeding to find the stall that looked the least gross, sighing as he sat down. Being desired by more than one person was not half as fun as it sounded in theory. Blaine supposed he should just ask Sebastian to back off, and maybe for Kurt to take it easy with the territory marking, but he really didn't want to upset anyone. And perhaps this was just Sebastian's misguided way of being friendly or having a laugh or whatever, because really, what else was he doing acting like this when Blaine's boyfriend was right there?

Blaine zipped his pants back up, making sure everything was positioned correctly down there, before exiting the stall and washing his hands. As he looked at himself in the mirror it was beyond him why anyone in their right mind would find him attractive, but he supposed the dim lighting of the bar did its part to mask what was clear now in the stark, unflattering light of the bathroom. Blaine had been up since the crack of dawn, rehearsing the musical by himself, going over some of trickiest parts of the script. Then he had had school, followed by glee and the final dress rehearsal for the musical. It occurred to Blaine then that he hadn't had a moment to himself all day, which meant that he had been wearing his binder since seven a.m. No wonder his back ached so much and his face was scrunched up in that pained expression. You were supposed to wear them for a maximum of twelve hours per day and he was well past that by now, he realized looking at his watch.

He frowned briefly at the sight before him and sighed before splashing cold water in his face and fixing a strand of hair that was threatening to come loose. There, that helped some. It didn't take away the urge to rip off the fabric that kept his chest flat, nor did it make the prospect of the night ahead of him any more enjoyable, but it was the difference between looking dead and looking dying.

Out in the bar again, Blaine went for the bar rather than the dance floor. If he was going to make it through this night he deserved some liquid strength. He ordered another beer, downing half of it in one long gulp. He finished the rest of it quickly and he had just set the empty bottle down when he heard a voice behind him and turned to face its owner.

'There you are.' Kurt was half-shouting to make himself heard over the music. 'Have you been over here the entire time?'

'Nope. I've only just come back from the bathroom,' Blaine lied.

'Are you okay?' Kurt stepped closer allowing him to speak in a more normal voice. 'You didn't throw up, did you? You left a bit quickly.'

Blaine forced a smile. 'You know how it is. When you've gotta go, you gotta go.'

Kurt chuckled. 'Okay then. Come, let's find a place to sit.'

'Let's.' Relieved that he wouldn't be tugged back on the dance floor, Blaine's smile was easy this time as he led the way to the booths across the room, where they settled in to an empty one.

Kurt eyed the well-worn plushy seats that were torn in places and the rickety wooden table that could use a good cleaning. 'No wonder people don't want to come out in Lima when *this* is our gay bar.'

'Or, you know, could be that the place looks like this because business isn't exactly booming,' Blaine said reasonably.

'Semantics.' Kurt rejected the argument with a wave of his hand, focusing his attention on inching closer to Blaine where he sat at the bottom of the "U" formed by the booth.

'Well, no. It's not semantics, Kurt,' Blaine went on, not content to let the thing go. 'More like the...the...' Blaine searched for the word. He could feel the second beer starting to take effect, slugging his mind. 'The cock and the egg argument.'

Kurt snorted. "'The chicken and the egg" is what I think you meant to say there, Blaine,' he said, patting Blaine's leg.

'Yeah, that's what I said...' Blaine trailed off, frowning to himself and then at Kurt, whose expression had hardened as he watched something across the bar. Blaine turned his head to find Sebastian approaching them.

'Ugh, why can't he leave us alone?' Kurt said.

'You can't ask him to sit by himself, Kurt,' Blaine said. 'That's not fair. He's the one that got us in.'

'I know, but why does he have to be so...' Kurt made another sound of frustration, apparently unable to find a suitable word.

'Hi guys.' Sebastian's smile was wide as he greeted them, and he carried a dark drink in his left hand.

Kurt smiled back, but he was doing that squinty thing he sometimes did with his eyes when he was annoyed with someone. 'What's wrong?' Kurt said, faking concern. 'Couldn't find the man of your dreams?'

Sebastian watched Kurt for a moment, an amused sort of smile on his lips, before taking the empty seat on Blaine's side. 'Oh, I've found him alright. Having fun, Blaine?'

'Yeah, loads,' Blaine muttered. 'Excuse me, I need another drink.'

'Get me one too, will you?' Kurt asked as Blaine had moved past him and was on the floor again. Kurt glanced at Sebastian, then at the drink in front of him. 'Rum and Coke.'

'Sure.'

As Blaine made his way back from the bar, taking a few swigs of his beer as he went, he could see Kurt and Sebastian having a conversation and was relieved to find that it looked civil enough.

'Here.' Blaine dropped the drinks down on the table and scooted in beside Kurt.

'Thanks.' Kurt picked up the drink with his right hand and sniffed it for a moment before taking a sip, grimacing as he did. Across the table Sebastian took a swig of his own drink, watching Kurt quietly. Blaine became aware of Kurt's left hand on his thigh, caressing softly. Kurt shifted a bit, turning himself more towards Blaine and blocking Sebastian out of his view. Before Blaine knew it, Kurt had deposited his drink on the table and his mouth was on Blaine's. Blaine yelped a bit in surprise, but kissing back all the same, bringing his hand to cup the side of Kurt's face. When it went on for more than a few seconds, however Blaine pulled back a little, very much aware of Sebastian watching them.

'Come on, Kurt, we can't- mmph.' Blaine's words were cut off by a swift kiss on the lips. 'We're being-' Another kiss and teeth that scraped across his bottom lip. Kurt clearly didn't care who was watching them and whose company they were supposed to keeping.

'Ahem.' Someone across the table cleared their throat meaningfully, but now Kurt's tongue was in Blaine's mouth, and well, Blaine really liked Kurt's tongue.

A demonstrative cough was next, and it was demonstratively ignored.

'So guys... anyone want to go dance again?' Sebastian's voice came. 'Blaine?'

Kurt freed himself from Blaine's lips long enough to offer a dismissive reply – 'You go. We're kind of in the middle of something.' – before resuming work on Blaine's mouth. Sebastian gave a contemptuous laugh and out of the corner of his eye Blaine saw him go off into the crowd.

'That was *rude*, Kurt.' Blaine giggled and straightened up, repositioning himself from where he had been almost about to slide onto the floor.

'So?' Kurt shrugged and, seeing Blaine's problem, he slid to the back of the booth where they would have more room, tugging Blaine with him. '*He's* rude. Besides...' He paused for a moment, his eyes scanning Blaine's face and landing on his kiss-swollen lips. 'As I said, we were in the middle of something.'

That was all the warning Blaine got before Kurt practically pounced on him.

'You're being awfully P about your DA's today,' Blaine giggled again.

Kurt pulled back from where he had been nibbling at Blaine's right earlobe, confusion clear on his face. 'What?' he chuckled out. Well, it had made sense in his head at least, Blaine thought.

'Alright guys.' Blaine and Kurt both looked around to find Sebastian setting down a small tray and settling into the booth once more, taking advantage of the newly created empty space on Blaine's side. 'Time for the real fun.'

Kurt rolled his eyes as he straightened back up, taking in the items Sebastian had brought with him. On the tray were three filled shot glasses, three wedges of lime and a salt pot.

'Body shots!' Sebastian said, smiling widely, and Blaine clapped his hands excitedly. Kurt, however, looked unimpressed.

'Come on, Kurt!' Blaine nudged his boyfriend teasingly. 'I've never done one. It'll be fun.'

'What's the matter, Hummel?' Sebastian grinned. 'Don't know how it's done? I'll show you.' Sebastian slid further down the booth so he was seated right next to Blaine. 'Tilt your head to the side,' Sebastian ordered in a low voice. 'No, other side, genius.' He laughed, pushing gently at Blaine's head until his neck

was exposed. It made Blaine think about vampires and he broke into a new fit of giggles at the idea that Sebastian was about to sprout fangs.

'Okay, hold on. No.' Kurt's sharp voice on Blaine's other side made Blaine wince, and he glanced over to find his boyfriend looking like he was about to breathe fire. So he had vampire on one side and a dragon on the other. That could totally be the premise of a TV show or something. 'What the hell do you think you're doing?'

'Oh, come on, Kurt. Don't be like that. We're all friends here. It's all in good fun,' Sebastian assured him. 'Don't be the jealous boyfriend. No one likes that guy.'

Kurt looked to be considering his options, but before he could say yes or no, Sebastian had leant in and licked a stripe from Blaine's collarbone almost all the way up to his ear.

'Tickles,' Blaine shrieked, before clapping a hand to his mouth when he realized how shrill he had sounded.

Sebastian pushed at Blaine's head again so it was as horizontal as it would go while still leaving Blaine relatively comfortable in a sitting position, before taking the salt from the tray and sprinkling it on the skin he had just licked.

'Mouth,' he murmured holding up one of the lime wedges. Blaine opened his mouth wide, prompting Sebastian to laugh at him. 'It's not for you, dummy. Just hold it on your mouth. Like this.' He showed Blaine what he meant before giving the fruit to Blaine to hold. 'Okay, we're ready.'

Blaine saw Sebastian cast Kurt a look that might have been a smirk. Next Sebastian dove in again, licking the salt from Blaine's neck and causing his skin to tingle again. Sebastian emptied one of the shot glasses into his mouth and leaned back in to take the lime from Blaine's mouth with his own. Blaine, however, could not contain himself any longer and burst into laughter, dropping the fruit in the process. It rolled off his lap and onto the floor.

'Sorry, sorry!' Blaine sputtered.

'*What* is so funny?' Sebastian snapped.

'I have no idea,' Blaine replied honestly, breathless from laughter and biting his lip to keep from starting again at the sight of Sebastian's disappointed face.

'Well done, Blaine.' Kurt patted Blaine's leg approvingly and Blaine thought he detected an edge of amusement to his voice. Blaine turned his head to smile brightly at his boyfriend. 'Let me try now?'

Blaine nodded eagerly. Kurt leaned across the table to grab what he needed. He handed Blaine the lime, tugging at it a bit to make sure it was secure, before planting a soft kiss to each of Blaine's cheeks.

'Now, don't drop it, okay?' he said sternly, but a smile was tugging at the corners of his mouth. Blaine nodded again. 'By the way,' Kurt observed lightly, leaning down to pick the dropped lime up from the floor. 'I believe this was yours.'

He threw the dirt-covered piece of fruit at Sebastian who caught it with a grimace.

'Do you think he hates me for dropping it?' Blaine whispered to Kurt.

'Doubt it,' Kurt said. 'Not that I'd be too upset if he did, to be honest.'

'But-' Blaine started, but then Kurt was licking his neck the same way Sebastian had, only on his right side instead of his left. Blaine emitted a soft 'uuhh' at the tickling sensation that for some reason didn't leave him fighting the urge to giggle this time. Kurt made quick work of sprinkling the salt on his skin, and then he was licking again, causing Blaine to let out a whimper. It was strange how one person's tongue could feel so different from another's. Kurt emptied the second shot glass and slowly leaned back in for the lime, a smile that was somewhere between affectionate and suggestive playing on his lips. He grabbed the fruit between his teeth and sucked the juice from it, grimacing a little at the taste. He took the shell from his mouth and threw it aside, before going in for a proper kiss, one unhindered by sour fruits. As the kiss deepened, Blaine could taste the lime and the alcohol in Kurt's mouth and it made his head spin. Kurt broke the kiss and licked away a stray bit of lime juice, that had trickled down Blaine's chin, and Blaine looked down to see Kurt's eyelashes fanning against his cheeks in the most beautiful way.

'God, Kurt, you're amazing.' Blaine brought his hand up to caress the hair on the nape of Kurt's neck. 'So amazing. So beautiful. I love you so much,' Blaine babbled.

Kurt finally (too soon) pulled back and Blaine was brought back to the reality of where they were with Sebastian watching them and still one more shot to go.



'Okay, me next, me next! I wanna do you,' Blaine said excitedly to Kurt, whose eyebrows shot up.

'You know,' Kurt mused looking past Blaine at Sebastian as Blaine licked a long stripe on his neck. 'This was a really great idea.'

'God, how much did he actually drink?' Sebastian said as Blaine stumbled out of the bar, Kurt doing his best to keep him steady as they made their way across the parking lot. He sounded part amused, part concerned.

'Too much,' Kurt panted as he fought to keep them walking in a straight line. Sebastian was watching from safe distance. 'Oh, nonono, Blaine.' Kurt placed one hand on the driver's side door to keep Blaine from entering that way. 'You are definitely not driving like this.'

'Yeah, neither are you,' Sebastian said from a few feet away.

'What?' Kurt wheeled around to face the other boy, but taking care to keep his grip on his boyfriend. Sebastian stood calmly by the trunk of Kurt's car, hands in his pockets. He didn't bother with an answer but instead raised an eyebrow at Kurt's question. 'Crap. Well, we'll just-'

'Come on, I'm parked over here.' Sebastian jerked his head to indicate the direction.

'Wait, how are you any better to drive?' Kurt frowned, losing his grip on Blaine when the latter somehow managed to stumble while standing still. Blaine fell to the ground with a thud.

'Ow,' Blaine pouted, sounding more annoyed than hurt.

Kurt offered Blaine a hand, distracted as he was watching Sebastian more than Blaine, a confused look on his face. 'You've been drinking all night too,' he pointed out, pulling uselessly at Blaine. 'Come on, Blaine, you've gotta help me out here.'

'Yeah, I've been drinking,' Sebastian spoke with the air of someone explaining something very simple to a three-year-old. 'Coke. Except one drink when we first got here.'

'Oh.' Kurt lost his grip on his boyfriend once more, and Blaine slumped back to the ground and let out a loud wail. Kurt watched as Sebastian walked over to them, stopping at Blaine's side. 'I thought that had rum in it,' Kurt muttered stupidly.

Sebastian meanwhile had crouched behind Blaine and gripped him under his arms, pulling him effortlessly to his feet. 'Surprise.' Sebastian's tone was flat and mocking.

Kurt crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes at the taller boy, who was now holding the intoxicated boy steady, one hand gripping his forearm firmly and the other resting at the small of his back. 'What about the tequila then?' he asked.

'Water,' Sebastian admitted easily.

'*Water?*' Kurt's eyes bugged at the realization. 'What do you mean "water"? Why the hell would you fake that?'

Sebastian's face was blank as he let a moment pass, leaving the question unanswered.

'Come on,' he said as he began to lead Blaine away from Kurt's car. 'Let's get him in my car. I'll drive him home. I'm going that way anyway.' Sebastian turned to look at Kurt as he caught up with them. 'I'll take you too, I suppose, even though your house is kind of out of my way. I'm nice like that,' he added with a grin.

'Oh yeah, you're a real prince,' Kurt snarled. 'And you can take both of us to my house. I don't trust you alone with him like this.'

'Oh, come on.' Sebastian came to a halt by what was evidently his car. He rolled his eyes, exasperated. 'As if I'd try anything. I'm not that kind of guy.'

'Funny,' Kurt replied coolly. 'I'd have thought that's exactly the kind of guy you were.'

Sebastian gave a theatrical gasp and put a hand to his chest. 'Oh, no. You hurt my feelings.' He rolled his eyes again. 'Fine, I'll take you both to yours. Happy?'

'Extremely.' Kurt gave an exaggerated grimace of a smile.

Cold water splashed across Blaine's face and he became truly sentient to his surroundings for the first time since somewhere between his third beer and the tequila shots. His entire body ached and he wanted more than anything to tear off all his clothes and put on his favorite pajamas, but he was at Kurt's house and that was not an option for several reasons. Blaine sighed. What a night.

Kurt was waiting for him in his bedroom, brandishing a cup of coffee which Blaine accepted gratefully. He sat down on the bed next to Kurt and took a few large gulps, beyond caring that it was scalding his tongue.

'You with me again?' Kurt asked softly.

Blaine took another swig of the coffee and then nodded. 'Yeah.' He chuckled a little. 'Sorry 'bout that. Guess I got a little carried away.' He looked around the room, testing himself, and was relieved to find that his surroundings had mostly stopped spinning. His head felt a lot clearer now and what foggiess was left was probably more from exhaustion than anything.

'Good,' Kurt said as he took the cup from Blaine and put it on the bedside table. 'Then I won't feel like I'm taking advantage when I do this.'

He leaned forward, cupping Blaine's face with both hands as he kissed him. Flashes of their night in the bar ran across Blaine's mind as he kissed back, and he blushed a little when it occurred to him what they must have looked like to other patrons. The kiss deepened, and then suddenly Blaine was lying flat on his back and Kurt was on top of him, still kissing him, growing more and more desperate by the second. Blaine could feel Kurt's growing hardness against his hip as Kurt thrust his hips rhythmically, and somewhere at the back of his mind Blaine was aware that he was panicking but he didn't move away from Kurt's touch.

'I'm ready,' Kurt breathed then, and Blaine became aware of a hand that was starting sneak underneath his shirt. 'I'm comfortable.'

Blaine stilled and he looked wide-eyed into Kurt's darkened ones. 'I- I'm not.'

At these words Kurt froze and he watched Blaine with something akin to confusion. Beneath him, Blaine squirmed, trying to sit up and Kurt moved aside to let him.

'I'm- I'm sorry. I'm not. I'm just- I'm not- not ready. I'm not,' Blaine stammered out.

'It's okay. I'm sorry, I shouldn't've- It's okay, Blaine.' Kurt reached out to touch a reassuring hand to his boyfriend's arm. 'Blaine, you're shaking.'

'What?' Blaine jerked away, moving to stand up. 'Yeah, no, it's fine. I was just- surprised, I guess.'

'I'm sorry,' Kurt repeated, staying on the bed, apparently not trusting that it was safe to move closer. 'I didn't mean to pressure you. I just assumed that you-'

'It's fine,' Blaine croaked, raising his hands before pressing two fingers to either temple. He sighed. 'I have to go.'

As Blaine backed away and turned to leave through the open bedroom door, Kurt scrambled to get off the bed. 'What? No, Blaine, you can't. I'm sorry, okay? I won't try anything again. You just can't leave. You don't have a car or anything.'

'It doesn't matter. I'll manage.' Blaine continued down the dark hall without looking back. 'I just can't be here right now.'

'Please, Blaine. Just stop, you're freaking me out.' Kurt's voice was high-pitched and frantic as he followed Blaine downstairs. 'You can sleep on the couch. We don't even have to talk, just- Blaine!'

But Blaine was already out of the door and disappearing into the dark night.

## CHAPTER TWO

*Less than perfect*

***Blaine and Kurt deal with the fallout from the incident the night before, and in 2008 a discussion about clothes leads to unexpected places.***

*'No.'*

*Your mother's face falls as you reject yet another outfit. She puts it back in the closet and as she begins rifling through the contents again, you throw yourself on the bed, exhausted and staring up at the ceiling.*

*'What about this?' You close your eyes, refusing to even look at it. 'Amber, sweetheart, that's not going to help. Sit up and look at it.'*

*You wince at the name your mother so carelessly throws your way. Amber. The name of a girl who doesn't even exist. You do as you're told, though, and sit up to look at the thing. You always do as you're told. The outfits seem to be getting progressively worse. This one is actually a dress; pink and flowery and with a bow under the bust.*

*'Absolutely not,' you blurt almost harshly before you can think to sugarcoat your reaction.*

*'Okay.' She sighs and turns away again to replace the dress in the closet. 'Is there anything you do want to wear?'*

*'This,' you respond immediately, indicating the clothes that you are currently wearing.*

*Your mother's face darkens in displeasure. 'Amber, you can't wear baggy jeans and a t-shirt to your cousin's wedding. It's a wedding, for Pete's sake.'*

*'Alright. Dress pants then,' you say hopefully, but the look your mother sends you is almost pitying and you know the answer is no. 'Why do I even have to go?'*

*'Because Katie is your cousin,' your mother replies simply.*

*'That's not really an answer, you know,' you say as you stand and move to join your mother by the closet. You eye the assortment of skirts and dresses and frilly tops with a decidedly unimpressed grimace.*

*'I don't know why you even own all these, if you're never going to wear them.'*

*Your force yourself to keep your tone polite as you reply, 'Neither do I. You're the ones that keep giving me this stuff.'*

*Your mother abandons her search for the perfect outfit and steps back to look at you, taking in your entire appearance. She cups your chin softly and you avert your eyes because you know the look that crosses her face.*

*'Sweetheart, you're nearly fourteen. And you're such a pretty girl. Isn't it time you started dressing more like one instead of hiding yourself behind all this?' She indicates the two sizes too big t-shirt you're wearing. 'And maybe grow out that hair too.'*

*'I'd rather not,' you say stiffly.*

*'Well, you're not really going to have a choice once you start school in the fall,' she says, her tone brisk suddenly.*

*'What?' you ask sharply.*

*'Crawford Country Day. The school,' she adds when you stare blankly at her. 'You'll have to wear a uniform.'*

*'B-boarding school?' Your eyes grow huge and you get that familiar tight feeling in your chest, like someone is squeezing around your heart. 'Why am I going to boarding school?'*

*'Your grandmother,' your mother explains as though she thought you knew this. 'She's offered to pay for the whole thing. You know, like she did for Cooper.'*

*'No,' you tell her flatly. 'I'm not going.'*

*'You don't have to board,' she says quickly, seeing your panicked face. 'But you know how important these things are to your father's family. And you'll have such a leg up when it comes to college admissions,' she points out bracingly.*

*'I don't care. I'm not going.' Your mother looks at you for a second like she doesn't even recognize the teenager standing in front of her. "Tomboy" or not you have always been a well-behaved kid and this sudden and vehement resistance is clearly throwing her off.*

*'This is not something you turn down,' she says her voice firm, trying to reason with you. 'Do you know what I would have given for an opportunity like this?'*

*You look away from your mother, only to catch a reflection of the two of you in the mirror on the opposite wall. It strikes you suddenly how much more she and you look alike with each day that passes. Her skin tone is a little darker than yours, but your face shape, mouth and eyes are the same, and your body is even starting to curve like hers. When you look back at her and respond, your tone is more apologetic than defiant.*

*'Well, I'm not you.'*

Blaine yawned as he entered the kitchen early on Thursday morning. He felt kind of like he hadn't slept at all, and he wanted nothing more than to crawl back into bed and hide from everything.

'Morning,' he called unenthusiastically to his mother who was finishing a bowl of cereal while she checked emails on her phone.

'Morning,' she called back without taking her eyes off the phone, her greeting as distracted as Blaine's had been tired.

Blaine poured himself a large cup of what he hoped was really strong coffee and took a swig, before throwing together a quick breakfast. His mind was working twice as slow as it usually did in the mornings, and what little brain activity he did have was focused on the events of the previous evening and worrying about what he was going to tell Kurt when he saw him.

'Big day today,' his mother said as he joined her at the table.

'Yeah,' Blaine agreed, his stomach doing an excited swoop. He had almost forgotten about the musical.

'This could mean huge things,' she went on. 'Huge.'

'What?' Blaine didn't understand what she was getting at.

'For the company.' *Oh*. Of course she was talking about her Big Meeting. 'If everything goes as planned, we could be landing the biggest deal the company has ever seen.'

'Great.' Blaine's mother missed his sarcasm.

'But it also means I'll be home pretty late,' she said, as she went through her purse. 'So do you think you could take care of dinner yourself tonight?' She handed him a fifty-dollar bill.

'Sure.' Blaine accepted the money. 'I was planning to go out with friends tonight, anyway. You know, to celebrate.'

'Celebrate?' His mother had become distracted again, her focus once again on her phone.

'Yeah, the musical. We premiere tonight.' Blaine was careful to keep his voice even.

'Oh?' she finished typing something and put her phone down for the moment. 'Oh! Yes, of course. I knew that.' She paused. 'You know I would have loved to be there, right?'

'Yeah, *clearly*,' Blaine muttered low enough that he didn't think his mother could hear. And at any rate her attention was once again on her phone as it pinged with a new message, and she frowned its content.

'Mom?' He asked tentatively after a few moments.

'Hm?'

'You know Kurt, right?'

'Mm-hm, your boyfriend.' Her frown at the phone was growing deeper and deeper, and she typed out a fast reply to whomever she was in contact with.

'Yes. Well, it's getting kind of serious... I mean, we've been together nearly eight months... and, well, I love him. I really do. But, you know, it's difficult because he doesn't- I mean, I'm wondering how to-'



'Oh, for Pete's sake!' his mother said suddenly a moment after her phone had pinged again, and Blaine jumped. 'You have got to be kidding me. Oh, I'm going to strangle him.' She got to her feet, a frantic look on her face, and deposited the empty cereal bowl by the sink. 'I'm sorry, sweetie, what were you saying?'

'Nothing, nothing,' Blaine replied quickly. Why did he even keep trying? 'It's not important.'

Ten seconds later the front door slammed, and she was gone.

Blaine left early for school, planning to avoid Kurt at least until he had worked out what he was going to tell him. When he arrived at school, however, he found Kurt already waiting for him by his locker. Blaine sighed and approached warily.

'Hey,' Blaine greeted cheerily, pointing over his shoulder. 'Your locker is that way, you know.'

'Yeah, I know, I've already got my things,' Kurt said, ignoring Blaine's attempt at a joke. 'I got here early. I wasn't going to let you get away with avoiding me.'

'I wasn't going to,' Blaine lied quickly, but Kurt just raised an eyebrow at him and it was clear he wasn't buying it. Kurt knew him too well by now. *And not well enough at all.*

Blaine busied himself with collecting the things he needed for his first lessons, but he could feel Kurt's eyes on him the entire time. When Blaine finally slammed his locker shut, Kurt took him by the hand and began leading him down the hall.

'Kurt, what're you-' Blaine objected as he half-stumbled after Kurt. 'We'll be late for class.'

'We have fifteen minutes,' Kurt said, and a few moments later they stepped into the empty auditorium.

'What are we doing here?' Blaine asked as he followed Kurt slowly down the steps.

'We need to talk.' Kurt stopped at the bottom of the stairs right in front of the stage. 'And I didn't think either of us would be comfortable in the middle of the hallway.'

'Kurt-' Blaine began but Kurt held up a hand to stop him.

'I'm sorry. About last night.'

'You've said that already,' Blaine pointed out as he descended the last few steps and moved to lean against a seat on the front row, his arms crossed over his chest. 'And it's okay, Kurt. I wasn't upset with you. I was just...'

'Upset,' Kurt finished for him, and Blaine nodded. 'I totally misread the situation, though. I shouldn't have just assumed you'd be fine.'

Blaine had no real answer to that, so he just shrugged and walked up the length of the stage, climbing the stairs in the middle, not really sure where he was going or what he was doing, except he felt like he needed to not be standing still.

'I guess you just always seemed so comfortable with everything,' Kurt went on, trying to engage Blaine and make him talk. 'I really thought we were just waiting for me.'

Blaine knew that Kurt was thinking about last year and Blaine's attempts to talk to him about sex. He wondered vaguely if Kurt also knew that he had gone to Kurt's dad in his eagerness to help. That had been different though, all that, and much easier, because he and Kurt weren't together then, and everything said was theoretical and didn't involve Blaine.

'I'm sorry, too,' Blaine offered as Kurt joined him on the stage. 'I shouldn't have taken off like that. I was just... overwhelmed.'

Kurt stepped closer, standing so near that Blaine could feel his warm breath on his nose. He took Blaine's hand in his, lacing their fingers together and holding their hands between them over their hearts.

'We'll take it at whatever pace you're comfortable with, okay?' Kurt said softly. 'But Blaine, can I ask? Is there something deeper behind this?' Blaine's eyes widened, and he felt his heart rate pick up. 'I just feel like maybe your reaction was a bit extreme for it be just...' Kurt trailed off with a shrug, trying to seem unconcerned, but Blaine could see he was worried.

'What? No, of course not. I just wasn't expecting it,' Blaine said.

But Kurt persisted. 'But you were literally shaking, Blaine.'

Blaine swallowed. This was it. He could tell Kurt right now. They were alone and Kurt was *asking*. His hand was squeezing Blaine's gently, and as Blaine looked into Kurt's eyes, so open and concerned, it seemed like the perfect opportunity.

Except then Blaine thought of the musical, which was going on in less than twelve hours, and if he dropped a bomb like this on Kurt now, no matter what the reaction was, neither of them would likely be mentally equipped to play their roles properly. Granted it was just a high school production, but everyone had worked really hard, and it wasn't fair for Blaine to compromise all their work for selfish reasons. Not to mention Rachel would kill Blaine if he made her look bad. He had waited this long. What was one more week until the musical was over?

'You didn't think-' Kurt hesitated, biting his lip. 'You didn't think I was going to hurt you, did you?'

'What?' Blaine exclaimed, taken aback. 'No! *God*, no.'

'Then what?' A thought seemed to occur to him then and he let go of Blaine, suddenly pale. 'Oh god, you weren't- You didn't- I mean, did someone- Did something happen to you?'

Blaine's mouth fell open as he realized what Kurt was asking. 'No. Just no. Nothing like that,' Blaine said in a firm voice. 'It just really caught me off guard. It was already a long intense day, and then with Sebastian at the bar, and the drinking, and I just... I overreacted, and I'm sorry.'

'Okay, good.' Kurt breathed a sigh of relief, calming himself. 'I've just been making myself crazy since last night, thinking there was something you weren't telling me.'

'There isn't,' Blaine said and then winced internally, because this was the first time he had downright lied to Kurt, and he hated how it made him feel.

*Just one more week*, Blaine told himself. *One more week and the play is done, and this will all be over one way or another.*

*'Knock, knock,' comes a playful voice from the doorway and you turn to see your father there, all smiles and carrying one of his expensive cameras. 'How are my two favorite ladies? Anything you want to show off yet?' He points excitedly to the camera.*

*'Dad.' Your voice is frantic and desperate as you turn to him next. 'Please don't make me go to Crawford.'*

*'What?' Your father stares confusedly from you to his wife, clearly looking for some kind of context, and she shrugs, equally perplexed.*

*'I've told her she doesn't have to board if she doesn't want to, but-'*

*'It's not about that,' you're quick to reiterate. 'I just really don't want to go to that school.'*

*'What's the problem?' your father asks, frowning and his tone worried. He deposits the camera on the dresser next to him, before taking a few more steps into the room. 'Crawford is a fine school. I've heard plenty of good things about it. Your cousin Katie went there, you know.'*

*'Please,' you beg, your voice almost a whisper. You can feel the tears threatening to spill over, but you force them back. 'Just let me go to the public high school. Tell grandma thanks but no thanks.'*

*'What is this really about? Hm?' Your father walks to stand right in front of you, and as he gently tilts your face up to look at you properly, you can't stop your bottom lip from trembling. 'Sweetheart?'*

*'Just say I don't have to go,' you plead, your voice quivering too now. 'Please, Daddy.'*

*Your father takes you by the hand then and leads you to sit on the edge of the bed, before kneeling in front of you. You can sense your mother somewhere behind you, unsure and hovering. 'Now, explain to me what the problem is. Why are you so upset about this?'*

*The tightness in your chest has spread to your stomach, which is twisting uncomfortably, and your cheeks are burning. Your hands are clammy with cold sweat, and they are shaking a little, you realize, as you lift one to brush a hair out of your face. You clench your fists to make it stop and you take a few calming breaths.*

*'Because-' you begin, first speaking to your father's tie, but then you lift your gaze to look him straight in the eye instead, forcing yourself to give off an air of calm far from your actual state of mind. 'Because it's a girls'*

*school. And- and I'm not a girl.' Your father's face remains completely impassive at these words, and behind you your mother isn't moving a muscle. 'I think- I feel like... I feel like I should have been a boy.'*

*'Sweetie, that isn't something you joke about,' your mother tells you seriously and you twist to look at her as she walks around the bed to stand next to your father.*

*'It's not a joke,' you say calmly. 'I feel like a boy. I have for a long time. It's called being transgender.'*

*At the last word your mother's mouth falls open a little bit and your father sucks in a quick breath. You turn your gaze back to him, then back at your mother and back and forth between them, frantically searching for some kind of reaction.*

*'I just can't do it anymore, it's too much.' You drop your calm facade, choking the words out in a trembling voice that keeps breaking, and you shake your head from side to side, now looking anywhere but at your parents. 'I tried so hard. To be normal. To be right. To be what you wanted me to be, but I just can't, and it just hurts so much to keep trying.'*

*Your father stills you and stops your stream of words with one strong hand on your shoulder and another warm hand gently touching your cheek. Your breath is shallow and your throat is hurting with the effort of not crying. Your father's face is pained with heartbreak and you don't know whether it's for you or him, but that's when you feel the first tear roll thickly down your left cheek.*

*'Please just don't send me to Crawford. Please,' you sob out as the tears begin to fall for real. Then the next thing you know, you're on the floor and your father has scooped you up in his arms, cradling you like a small child.*

*'Shh, it's okay, Amber,' he murmurs soothingly, and though part of you is afraid he has missed the point entirely, you're just so relieved that no one is yelling at you. 'You don't have to go. We'll figure it out. We'll figure it all out, okay?'*

*'I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' is the only thing you can say between sobs as you burrow deeper and deeper into your father's warm embrace. 'I'm so sorry.'*

'It feels weird not to have the musical to worry about anymore,' Kurt was saying as he and Blaine let themselves into the, as always, empty Anderson house the next Wednesday afternoon.

Blaine hummed in agreement as he closed the door behind them with a smile. 'Next up: Sectionals.'

'I'm so happy you decided to transfer, and we get to do this together.' Kurt's voice rose to an excited squeal and he clapped his hands giddily. Blaine smiled fondly. He knew that Kurt had never truly felt at home at Dalton and competing with New Directions meant so much more to him. 'Admit it, you're glad too.'

'I am. Very,' Blaine agreed before going in for a quick kiss. 'I'm also pretty convinced that Dalton wouldn't have let us get away with a performance like the one earlier today,' he said as they moved into the living room.

Performing *Hot For Teacher* with Mike, Finn and Puck had felt like a small milestone for Blaine, who had been touched when Mike had approached him and asked if he wanted to help out. It was a fun challenge trying to keep up with Mike's moves, and the whole experience had left him feeling one step closer to being a proper member of the group. Kurt had looked like he quite enjoyed the show, too, and in fact he still sort of looked like that.

'Yeah, that was... interesting.' Kurt smirked and quirked a suggestive eyebrow.

Before Blaine could do anything more than grin in response, his alarm went off on his phone, and as he pulled it out, he saw the reminder he had set that morning as he was on his way out the door. *Shot*, was all it said, but Blaine knew what it meant. Today was the day of his biweekly hormone injection, and while Blaine usually did them in the mornings, he had overslept this morning leaving him no time to do it before he had to leave for school. Which meant that he had to do it now. Although he could also wait a few hours until Kurt had gone home and nothing bad would happen. Blaine hated not doing his shots on time, though.

He looked up at Kurt.

'What is it?'

'It's nothing, it's just-' Blaine searched his mind quickly for an excuse. 'I have to call my mom real quick. Can you wait down here for a bit?'

'Sure. No problem.' Kurt shrugged and swung his arms lightly by his side, looking around the room.

'Feel free to watch TV or whatever you want. *Mi casa es su casa*,' Blaine quipped and winked at Kurt. 'I'll be right back.'

The injections didn't take a long time to do, especially not now that Blaine was so well practiced. The first couple of times of doing his own shots, it had taken him quite a while to ignore his body's instincts that stabbing himself with a needle was an exceptionally bad idea, and just *do* it. Now he could usually do it in five minutes if he was in a hurry.

For some reason though, everything seemed to go slower today. Maybe it was having Kurt right downstairs which was psyching him out and making him self-conscious, or maybe it was him having overslept this morning which was throwing his whole rhythm off, but first he couldn't find the alcohol wipes he needed to sterilize the area, and then he kept doing everything in the wrong order. Then when the shot was done there was more blood than usual and of course he couldn't find the band-aids. When he was finally all done, Kurt had been left to his own devices for at least ten minutes.

'Sorry, I took so long,' Blaine apologized as he re-entered the living room. 'There was- What are you doing?'

Kurt was sitting in an armchair flicking through an old photo album, and Blaine lost his breath for a moment.

'Making myself at home as per your request.' Kurt grinned up at Blaine as he approached him to see what he was looking at. 'I still can't believe the guy from those commercials is your *brother*.'

Blaine blew out a breath of air as he perched on the armrest and looked down realizing with relief that Kurt had picked an album which was mostly full of photos of a young Cooper before a second child had joined the family.

'Yeah, Cooper's quite something,' Blaine said, smiling at a photo showing an eight-year-old Cooper dressed up as Elvis.

Blaine's smile stiffened, however, when Kurt turned the page to reveal a photo of a nine-year-old Cooper holding a newborn baby. The handwritten note underneath the photo read *Cooper holding Amber for the first time*.

'Who's Amber?' Kurt asked, a puzzled look on his face.

'That's... that's...' Blaine swallowed. *Just say it*, he told himself. *Just say it. That's me. It's just two words, it's not that difficult. Just say it.* 'My cousin. She's my cousin.'

When Blaine transferred to McKinley he knew he was doing it so he could spend more time with Kurt, and he knew how much that time was going to mean to both of them. What he hadn't counted on was how much he would value the opportunities throughout a day to simply *look* at his boyfriend. Blaine loved to watch Kurt when Kurt didn't know he was being watched – not in a creepy, stalker type of a way, but things like stealing glances at him during the few classes that they shared, or spotting him between classes at the other end of a crowded hallway. Kurt had such a grace about him, and he was honestly the most beautiful thing Blaine had ever seen. Not that Kurt knew it, of course (despite how often Blaine told him so), which somehow only amplified his beauty. Possibly what Blaine admired the most about Kurt, though, was his strength and his refusal to let anyone else define him. Even when people were throwing him dirty looks or snide remarks, Kurt always carried himself so proudly, and Blaine loved that about him.

He loved noticing these things about Kurt as he watched from afar, and he loved the moment when Kurt turned around and saw Blaine; the way his expression would immediately change to something softer and less guarded. Something that was just for Blaine.

Sometimes it terrified Blaine how much he loved Kurt.

When Blaine got together with Kurt back in March of that year, there was a part of him that very purposely didn't mention his unique situation. He had honestly been half convinced that it wouldn't take long before he screwed things up in some other way, and as they were taking things very slow, he saw no reason to complicate the relationship needlessly. But then the impossible happened and Blaine *didn't* screw everything up right away, and before he knew it he had gone from *You move me* to *I love you*, which complicated things all on its own, because from then on the idea of telling Kurt, and possibly losing him, got so much more difficult.



*I'll tell him, Blaine would reason in his mind. Just one more kiss. One more day. One more week. Until the whole idea of coming out was mostly peripheral and brought up only during his darker moments in front of the mirror at home, when some event or comment had sent him reeling, leaving him in an endless loop of dysphoria and self-hatred. Who's ever gonna want a freak like you?*

It was Kurt's speech at the debate that made Blaine decide to quit stalling and quit feeling sorry for himself, because in that ninety-second speech Blaine saw exemplified just about everything he loved and admired most about Kurt. His strength and defiance in the face of bullies. His kindness and compassion for others. And here Blaine was, concealing a major aspect of himself and lying to this amazing guy day after day. Who the hell did he think he was?

It was time for an answer.

*It's nearly two weeks and a lot of crying later, when you and your parents pull into the parking lot of the Unitarian Church in North Columbus. After days of talking in circles and not getting anywhere, your mother finally announced that there was a local PFLAG group and maybe it would be a good idea to attend one of their meetings. You agree and, as you approach the building, you're still glad she made the suggestion, but that doesn't stop your heart from racing somewhat harder than usual, or you from sticking closer to your father's side than under normal circumstances.*

*Once you enter the room where the meeting is being held, you are promptly greeted by a cheerful, middle-aged woman.*

*'Hi! I don't think I've met you before.' She throws you an exuberant smile as she looks at the three of you in turn. You shuffle your feet awkwardly, struck by sudden shyness. Behind her are about two dozen people, all seated around the large table that takes up most of the room, chatting quietly in pairs or small groups.*

*'Yes, this is our first time,' your mother responds, and you can tell that she, too, is a bit nervous, because she has adopted her brisk business personality. 'Sorry, we're late, by the way. We're not familiar with the neighborhood and got a bit turned around, I'm afraid.'*

*'No worries,' the woman waves the matter off. 'We were only just about to start. I'm Susie, by the way, and I coordinate this whole mess. Well, I'm supposed to.' The woman lets out a low rumbling laugh.*

*'I'm John,' your father holds out a hand to greet Susie, smiling politely though he is clearly still a little apprehensive about the woman in front of him. You like her though, you've decided. She has kind eyes. 'This is my wife, Grace, and this is Am-'*

*'Blaine,' you cut him off before he can finish, saying the name out loud for the first time. 'It's Blaine.'*

*Your parents regard you curiously, and Susie looks between the three of you, a knowing look passing her features.*

*'Blaine,' Susie says fondly, tasting the name and shaking your hand. 'Nice to meet you, Blaine.'*

*The meeting starts with a round of brief introductions, during which it becomes clear that most people here are family members of gay and lesbian youths, though "bisexual" gets a few mentions as well. The only other transgender person in the room is Michelle, a college-aged transwoman who is there with her mother, both of them apparently regulars at these meetings.*

*When it comes your turn to introduce yourselves, your father takes the reigns and stumbles his way through introducing the situation, saying words like "girl" and "daughter" and using all the wrong pronouns, which makes you shift uncomfortably in your seat. It's not like you expect your parents to be able to make the switch just like that, and you really are grateful that they have come this far this fast.*

*But that doesn't mean that it doesn't hurt – now more than it ever has.*

*When the introductions are over, the floor is open to discussion of any topic that are on the attendees' minds, though you and your parents mostly stay uninvolved, preferring to sit back and listen. Eventually the meeting breaks up into smaller groups chatting amongst themselves or discussing a particular issue in depth. It's around this point that you feel a hand on your shoulder and you look around to see Michelle crouching behind you and your father. Next to her, her mother is addressing your parents.*

*'Hi,' Michelle greets you, her voice soft and kind. 'What's your name?'*

*'B-Blaine.' The name still feels foreign on your lips.*

*'Hi, Blaine,' Michelle smiles sweetly. 'Wanna talk?'*

*She jerks her head to indicate that you should move, and you follow her to the other side of the room.*

*'Best to leave them to talk privately,' Michelle explains and you look back at the table, where your mother is nodding seriously at words you can't hear. 'Don't worry about them. Let's you and me talk.'*

*You look back at her. 'About what?'*

*'Whatever you want.' She shrugs. 'I'm sure your parents aren't the only ones with questions.'*

*You look thoughtfully at her. At this young woman, years into her transition. Sure, her voice is a little deep (wouldn't it be awesome if you could trade?) and if you look close enough you can see the more masculine features revealing her history, but by all accounts Michelle is just a beautiful girl like any other.*

*'What's it like?' you ask in a small voice. 'Transitioning... Passing... Being... who you're supposed to be.' A tender look passes Michelle's face and you bite your lip, staring out the window behind her for a moment, before you look back at her. 'Is it like... happy?'*

*Michelle leans against the window sill and seems to consider her answer for a few moments.*

*'Am I happier now than I was five years ago? Yes. I'm not gonna lie to you, though. It's not going to be easy, the life you have ahead of you. There will be good days and bad days – and probably some really miserable ones.' She straightens up and looks you in the eye before continuing. 'But with a good support system and the right attitude, I promise you, you can make it. And there might even come a day, when you're glad this is the life you have.'*

*'I just get so bitter sometimes,' you say in strangled voice. 'It's not fair.'*

*'Life rarely is,' she says, before moving to stand closer to you. 'I know I sound like a fortune cookie, but you really just have to make the best of it. Hey, kid,' she says tenderly, tilting your face up with a soft finger under your chin to make you look at her. She smiles. 'Your life isn't over. In fact this is where you life starts. So chin up, alright?'*

*You nod obediently. For someone you just met, you feel oddly compelled to follow her advice.*

*'Also,' she continues, her gaze still on you. 'I've told you before, Ty. It's rude to stare.'*

*You blink confusedly and are just about to ask her why she is calling you Ty, when a boy a year or two older than you appears from behind you with a sheepish grin on his face.*

*'I'm sorry. It's just, I know you.' The boy points at you, clearly excited about his discovery. 'You're the Anderson kid. We went to the same junior high.'*

*'Oh,' is all you can think to say, stunned that this random older kid remembers you.*

*'You don't remember me.'*

*'Sorry.' You wince.*

*'It's cool,' he chuckles. 'It's not like I would've stood out to you. I was still kind of hiding back then. Tyler Simmons.'*

*'That makes two of us,' you say as you shake Tyler's hand, then add laughing, 'About the hiding, I mean. Not the being called Tyler Simmons. I'm Blaine. Blaine Anderson.'*

*'So...' your mother starts later when you're all in the car, driving back home. "'Blaine', huh?'*

*'Yeah,' you say from the backseat, your cheeks coloring a little. It's still so strange discussing any of this with your parents, or with anyone, really. 'I found it last year. It means yellow so I figure that's sort of like keeping some of Amber around. Does that make sense?'*

*'It does,' she nods encouragingly. She tries out the name again, 'Blaine. I like it. We'll try.' She pauses for a moment, exchanging a look with your father, before continuing. 'It's a lot. It is. We've never- We just thought you might be a lesbian. So is this a lot to take in.'*

*Your stomach clenches a bit at her words, and you look out the window. You can't help feeling guilty for putting this on your parents. You hate being a source of stress for them.*

*'But Michelle's mom was very helpful,' your mother continues, her voice aiming for hopeful but still a bit strained. 'She had a lot of good advice to give. She mentioned a support group down in the LGBT center that you might be interested in, and she gave us the name of a good therapist that we're going to try and set you up with, and- and we'll see from there, okay? And just- we'll try, okay?'*

It didn't quite work out as planned.

Blaine was good at excuses. First it had been *It doesn't need to be right now*, which had turned into *But I can't right now*. Then had he told himself he couldn't do it in the middle of the musical. Then after he had actually made up his mind, there was the whole mess with Santana's outing that distracted everyone for a few days, and Blaine and Kurt were working on *Perfect* and it just didn't seem like the moment.

Now, however, the situation had mostly blown over, and Blaine was waiting for Kurt in the empty choir room, having asked his boyfriend to stay behind with him after glee rehearsal (after a bit of deliberation Blaine had opted for neutral territory). Kurt had been pulled out by Figgins in the middle of it, which was why he wasn't here now, but as Blaine paced back and forth in front of the chairs, trying to work out how he was going to start the conversation, it didn't occur to him that that could mean anything bad.

There was the sound of someone bursting into the room and Blaine wheeled around to see Kurt, crying and clearly upset. Blaine was so wrapped up in his own thoughts that for one wild moment he thought Kurt was crying about what Blaine was about to tell him, but of course that didn't make any sense.

'Kurt, what happened?' Blaine asked, hurrying to Kurt's side.

Kurt sniffled once before launching into speech. 'I lost. I lost the race. Plus they think I cheated. Someone stuffed the ballot boxes. I could get suspended.' He looked at Blaine with red, tear-filled eyes and the magnitude of the situation seemed to sink in. 'Blaine, I lost. I really lost.'

Kurt sobbed again, and Blaine pulled him close, hugging him tight and murmuring comfort in his ear, all thoughts of coming out wiped from his mind, because right now Kurt needed Blaine's comfort more than his honesty.

*Excuses.*

They weren't *just* excuses though, honestly, because what kind of douchebag would he have to be to turn to his crying boyfriend now and say *Hey, by the way, I'm transgender. You don't mind, do you?* There was a time and a place and this was not it.

The next day they were in the library finishing up Kurt's application for NYADA. Kurt had composed himself a little, and Rachel had admitted to the cheating, so he wasn't getting in trouble. Kurt still lost though, and his expression was somber as they left the library together.

'Can we talk about something else now? I feel like thinking about this much more is just going to drive me crazy.'

Should Blaine tell him then? Granted what he had to say probably *would* make Kurt forget his current troubles for a while, but distracting Kurt from his worries by adding yet more worries didn't really seem like the way to go.

So Blaine waited, telling himself that he would do it after Thanksgiving, which gave Kurt the rest of the week to gather himself and his thoughts about this whole mess, before Blaine forced him to deal with another. And it gave Blaine a little more time (as though he hadn't already had enough), and maybe he could ask Cooper for advice this weekend.

'Tell me about your Thanksgiving. I know you said you were looking forward to it.' Blaine offered the only distraction he could think of, and he was pleased to see Kurt's sullen and worried features morph into something happier. Kurt launched into a rambling description of the Hudson-Hummel family's Thanksgiving plans, which involved visiting out-of-state relatives, and it lasted well into the drive to Kurt's house.

'What about you?' he asked, turning to Blaine, when he had exhausted the topic.

'Ah...,' Blaine sighed. 'Let's not talk about that. I just managed to get a smile on your face. I wouldn't wanna kill the mood.'

'Big family gathering?' Kurt guessed.

'Yup. My grandma, my dad's brothers, their wives, kids...' Blaine tried to keep his voice neutral, but Kurt caught his discomfort easily.

'That bad, huh?'

'No, I mean, I guess it could be fine,' Blaine reasoned. 'It's just I haven't really seen them all since... well, since I came out.'

'I can see how that could be awkward,' Kurt said, grimacing in sympathy. 'But hey, it might not even come up at all. It's not like you're wearing a sign saying "I'm gay, ask me how". If they can't deal, maybe they'll just ignore it as much as they can. You know, to keep the Thanksgiving peace.'

'Yeah, maybe...'

Except ignoring the issue was kind of the opposite of what Blaine was hoping for in this case.

## CHAPTER THREE

*When it has to do with my life (A certain kind of sadness)*

***It's Thanksgiving time, which means Cooper is back in town - but this year so is Blaine's extended family. Fun times.***

'You know you didn't have to drive me,' Blaine remarked just as the car passed the sign that informed them, that they were *NOW LEAVING LIMA*. 'I do own a license.'

'I know that, sport,' Blaine's father replied cheerfully, patting Blaine's leg. 'But I gotta see my kid sometime, don't I? You're always so busy when I'm home.'

'Well, I'm sorry. It's not like I plan it that way, but I can't really put everything on hold just because you're finally home for a while.' Blaine was careful to keep his tone non-accusatory. The last thing he needed was to get into an argument with his father in the middle of a two-hour drive.

'Hey, there's no need to get defensive,' his father said. 'I'm just saying I saw an opportunity and I took it.' He shrugged. 'Besides, your brother will appreciate being picked up at the airport, and two birds with one stone and all that.'

'Mm,' Blaine hummed to show that he had heard, but offered no comment. He looked out of the window at his side, watching the fields and tress pass by in a blur.

'So what's up with you? How's school? Are you settling in alright?'

'It's fine,' Blaine said simply.

'What about classes? Any interesting ones?'

'I don't know. I guess. A few.'

They drove in silence for a while, Blaine's father momentarily out of questions, and Blaine once again turned his head to stare out of the window. He was not being purposely petulant or spiteful, but the relationship he had with his father didn't really lend itself to a lot of soul-baring. Blaine's father would



often be away for weeks or months at a time, and the first day or two after he got back, things tended to be a bit tense between the two of them, and oftentimes they never got past the awkwardness before he had to leave again. Right now, as his father, in lieu of any conversation, thrummed his fingers on the steering wheel, every once in a while throwing Blaine a glance, Blaine felt a bit like the man next to him was a stranger.

'I was sorry I couldn't make it home in time for the musical,' he said once the silence seemingly got too much for him. 'I wanted to be there. How was it?'

Blaine shrugged.

'You didn't like it?'

'No, I did. It was just...' Blaine trailed off with a sigh, not sure where to begin trying to explain everything that had been going on – and even less certain that he wanted to. Lying to Kurt. Seeing Sebastian and feeling embarrassed about his own behavior the previous night. Watching all his friends after the opening show bask in the glow of their parents' praises, while not a single family member had come to see him. His Warbler friends were great, and he loved them dearly, but they hardly made up for it.

'It's okay, no one's saying you have to do musical theater, if you don't want to,' his father said, misunderstanding Blaine's hesitation. 'It's a bit girly anyway, isn't it?'

Blaine raised his eyebrows, though to be honest he wasn't altogether surprised by the statement.

'It's not like I was the female lead,' he replied quietly.

'No, I know that,' his father said quickly. 'I just mean, I'd understand if you wanted to do something a bit more...' He trailed off, but Blaine thought he knew what he was getting at. 'Cooper was in a band, you know, when he was your age, and I know he used to love it.'

Blaine stared blankly at his father. 'But I have glee club.'

His father opened his mouth for a moment as though he was about to make an objection, but then thought better of it. 'Yes, of course. It was just a thought, that's all.'

Blaine's father watched him as he reached to turn on the radio in the quiet hope that it would encourage his father to make the rest of the drive in silence. Blaine was used to making the drive to see his therapist in Columbus alone, and having his father there was throwing him off a little bit.

'Looking good there, champ,' his father said, eyeing Blaine's exposed upper arms. 'Boxing still working out for you?'

'Yeah. I go a couple of times a week at least.'

'That's my boy,' his father exclaimed. 'You'll be taking on Mike Tyson himself in no time, I bet.'

Blaine rolled his eyes. 'Dad, it's not like I compete.'

'Well, maybe you should,' his father argued, excited suddenly.

'I doubt I'm good enough for that,' Blaine said. The truth was that he didn't particularly want to involve other people in his sport, because the solitude of the boxing was exactly what drew him. It was kind of like therapy, but not in an anger management kind of way. Rather, when he was poised in front of the punching bag, he was able to block out everyone and everything, and he was alone in the world, all his problems gone. They always came back of course, but somehow after a round with the punching bag, they seemed less important for a while.

'But maybe with the right incentive, you could be,' Blaine's father went on. 'I remember Cooper getting so much better at baseball once he joined a proper team. He wasn't that great at first – though please don't tell him I said that – but by the end he was one of the best, I think.'

'Mm, yeah, well, maybe once I've had top surgery.'

The excitement faded from his father like the air from a balloon. 'You're still set on that, then?'

'Yes?' Blaine replied as though his father had just asked him if the sky was still blue.

'It's just that surgery is a major step,' his father explained. 'Major. There's no going back after that.'

'I wasn't really planning to.'

'Well, obviously you're not *planning* to, but I'd just hate for you to do something you're going to regret later on.'

'So you're still going to make me wait?' It was more of a statement than a question. Blaine was regretting bringing up the topic at all. 'Because if it's about the money, I'll pay you back, I swear-'

'It's not about the money. It's about not wanting to let my kid undergo major surgery for something that isn't life threatening.' There was a note of finality and an edge of annoyance in his father's voice.

'And when I'm eighteen?'

'Then we can start to talk about it.'

Blaine sighed and leaned back in his seat. He had a hard time seeing what another four months was really going to do except prolong his daily pain needlessly.

A little before ten, Blaine was dropped off for his appointment with Dr. Richards, while his father went to pick up Cooper from the airport, promising to be back by the time Blaine was done.

Blaine liked his therapist. In the beginning he had struggled a lot with the idea of exposing himself to a stranger and putting himself in that vulnerable position. It had taken him a while to come to know that he could trust her and that nothing bad would happen. Eventually he had gotten not only the diagnosis he needed and the go-ahead to start hormone replacement therapy, but he had also come to appreciate the sessions themselves for giving him the chance to air some of his deepest worries and fears – and in some cases to realize what those worries and fears were in the first place. Although not holding back in therapy also meant that he was left pretty emotionally drained by the end of a session, and today – Blaine having had more to talk about than usual – was no exception.

When he walked out of Dr. Richards' office, however, his father and Cooper were sitting in the waiting room, and Blaine couldn't help the grin that spread across his face upon seeing his brother again.

'Coop.'

'Blainey!' Cooper called out and, as he rose to meet Blaine in a warm hug, something in Blaine stilled and calmed. He couldn't really explain what it was about his brother that made him react this way, and sometimes Cooper could be infuriating, but there was something about the energy that Cooper radiated that made Blaine love to be in the same room with him, even when he sometimes hated it. If he had to call the feeling anything, he supposed it would be "safe".

Dr. Richards had stepped out of her office and Cooper, having never met her before, turned to say hello.

'Hi, I'm Cooper. Blaine's my little brother.'

'Juliette Richards. So...' Dr. Richards seemed to be appraising Cooper. 'This is the famous Cooper. I've heard a lot about you.'

Blaine felt heat creep into his cheeks. He didn't talk about his brother that much, did he? Cooper, however, seemed to take it as a comment on his status as a so-called "celebrity" and proceeded to flirt with the poor woman, leading Blaine to roll his eyes and share an exasperated look with his father.

Yep, Cooper Anderson was back in Ohio.

After Valentine's Day, Thanksgiving was Blaine's favorite holiday. He had always loved it, even before he had really been able to explain why. He liked the concept of giving thanks and being grateful, and while he wasn't actively looking forward to spending the entire weekend with his father's family, he wasn't about to let them ruin it for him. So when his father asked him and Cooper for help with the holiday shopping, which would include ingredients for dinner for fourteen people, Blaine complied with a smile. There was more than enough to do, and by the end of the afternoon they were all exhausted, but still smiling, as they sat in the dining room, making their way through the two large pizzas, that they had brought home with them.

Blaine rolled his eyes fondly as Cooper went on and on about the amazing work he was doing in LA and the idiotic casting directors who rejected him, when his talents were clearly superior to everyone else's. He had just bit into his fourth slice of pizza when his father's phone went off but, figuring that it was probably just his work calling, neither Blaine nor Cooper paid any attention, when he answered it. Instead

Cooper turned to Blaine, changing the topic and telling him, 'So... I got the recording of West Side Story that you sent me.'

'And?' Blaine waited with bated breath, watching as Cooper took a bite of his pizza, chewing slowly.

'Pretty impressive production,' he said through a mouthful of pizza, before swallowing and continuing. 'Your foot work was a bit sloppy, though, and *Tonight* could have been better.'

'I- okay. I guess I'll work on that,' Blaine replied quietly, hating that he could never seem to please his brother, but – in the spirit of Thanksgiving – he supposed he should be grateful that Cooper cared enough to watch, let alone give notes.

Blaine glanced over at his father whose usual smile was gone. 'You cannot be serious,' he hissed into the phone, before catching his sons looking and getting up to continue the conversation in the kitchen.

'So anyway,' Cooper resumed their conversation from before. 'I have a list on my laptop. We can go over it later, if you want.'

'Sure, that'd be great,' Blaine replied. He wasn't honestly particularly looking forward to watching the musical with Cooper pointing out his every single mistake, and he wondered vaguely how long that list was, but he would be damned if he was going to let anything – least of all his own brother – break his holiday spirit.

'I know it's your *job*! I don't give a damn about your job! Tell them to shove it!' Their father was yelling in the kitchen and his voice carried clearly into the next room, where Blaine and Cooper were sitting. 'This is Thanksgiving and we're your family. You know, I'm so sick of this with you.'

Not even that.

Blaine and Cooper shared a look across the dinner table as they both tried to concentrate on eating, but their father was practically shouting and it was impossible not to catch fragments of his side of the conversation.

'That's not fair. It's not the same thing and you know it. At least *I'm* here when it matters. I don't ditch my family on the holidays.'

'So I guess Mom's not making it back,' Blaine said, his tone casual as though he was talking about the possibility of rain tonight.

'I'm sorry,' Cooper said quietly. 'I know how much Thanksgiving means to you.'

Blaine shrugged, letting the disappointment wash over and out of him. 'It's alright. We'll make it work.' He offered a wry smile. 'At least this way we won't have to watch her and grandma fight.'

Guests started to arrive early on Thursday, and it went about as smoothly as Blaine could have hoped for. First to arrive were Blaine's grandmother, oldest uncle, Peter, and his wife. Blaine's grandmother spent a long moment regarding him, before finally giving a dissatisfied 'Hm,' and Blaine thought he saw Peter send his youngest brother a critical look.

Next came the middle brother, Andrew, with his second wife and their teenage son. Stephen was, to Blaine's recollection, a good three or four years younger than him, and already a good inch taller than Blaine. He looked Blaine up and down, not bothering to hide his curiosity, but Blaine stubbornly stood his ground, refusing to shrink back or appear embarrassed. Eventually the boy's mother had to reprimand him, hissing at him, '*Stephen, what did I tell you? It's rude to stare.*'

Last to arrive were Blaine's grown cousin, Lucy, with her husband and two young daughters. The girls, who were nine and eleven respectively, looked confusedly around the room between the younger members of the group, and Blaine had the sudden thought that they had expected one of them to be a girl, and now they couldn't work out what was what.

This really wasn't that bad though, Blaine thought. Sure, Stephen was even more obnoxious as a teenager than he had been as a child, and his grandmother was being who she had always been, but no one had used the wrong name or pronouns on him. Of course, they hadn't used the *right* ones either. Blaine suspected they were trying not to gender him at all and, whether they were doing it for him or themselves, that at least was something. In fact if this was as bad as things were going to get, Blaine thought he could handle it just fine. Kurt was probably right: It was Thanksgiving and no one wanted to rock the boat. They

would all just have to get through this weekend, and then continue on with their lives as they had separately.

Later that night Blaine would chastise himself for ever being so foolishly optimistic.

The first real warning sign came when Blaine was invited and expected to help out with cooking the big Thanksgiving dinner. It wasn't that he had a problem with cooking or that he subscribed to the silly stereotype that the kitchen was a woman's domain – his father was a better cook than his mother, although admittedly that wasn't saying much – but every other person in the kitchen was a female and it was clear that he was here because they all still viewed him as such. However, Blaine didn't think that getting pissy with his family on Thanksgiving was going to solve anything, and probably the best thing he could do to win them over was to be the polite, well-mannered boy that his parents had raised him to be.

So he stayed, helping out to the best of his abilities and listening to the four women's chatter about family and politics (Blaine had to bite his tongue several times at some of the opinions that were spewed, many of them of the *I'm not racist, but...* variety). For the first hour or so nothing much happened, except for Blaine's grandmother complaining loudly that the kitchen was so small, she didn't understand how they ever got anything done in here. Blaine tried to keep his scowling to a minimum. Admittedly they *didn't* actually get a lot done here, but that had more to do with his mother's aversion to cooking than the size of the kitchen. Blaine didn't know what his grandmother was complaining for, anyway. She had been the one to insist on coming here.

Eventually the women seemed to run out of things to talk about amongst themselves, and they turned to Blaine, questioning him about his school and social life and what his hobbies were. His two aunts spoke to him in an oddly accusatory tone, that made Blaine feel like a criminal on trial, while his cousin Lucy spoke to him in the same kind of gentle and vaguely patronizing voice that one might use on a mental patient. Blaine thought maybe he preferred his grandmother's approach of not speaking to him at all.

'What about dating?' Lucy asked in that annoying sweet voice at the same time as her youngest daughter came running into the kitchen demanding a glass of water. 'Are you seeing anyone? *Paige*, don't run inside.'

'Yes, I have a boyfriend,' Blaine told her. 'Kurt. He's amazing.'

'Ooh, boyfriend!' the nine-year-old exclaimed, forgetting about her quest for water. 'I wanna see! I wanna see! Do you have a picture?'

Blaine had to laugh at the little girl's excitement. 'Sure. Let me find one.' Blaine pulled out his phone and began scrolling through his gallery in search of a suitable photo of Kurt. Paige was practically hanging off his arm and bouncing up and down.

'Let me see, let me see, let me seeeee.'

'Paige, behave,' Lucy called sternly over her shoulder from the stove. 'Give poor Amber a chance. She's doing what you asked.'

Blaine froze in his search. He had expected this to happen at some point, but it did not make it sting any less. Except for Kurt asking about the baby photo the other week, it had been years since Blaine had heard anyone refer to his birth name or call him "she". It felt kind of like a slap to the face, but he kept calm as he turned towards his cousin.

'Actually, it's Blaine now,' he informed her with as much politeness and patience as he could muster. 'And I'd prefer it if you didn't refer to me as "she".'

From the adults this statement garnered no response whatsoever. None of them even looked up at him. Paige, however, cocked her head at him, and she seemed to be working something out in her head. She pulled at Blaine's arm and peeked at the photo that was showing on his phone, which was of Blaine and Kurt in their Dalton days, the first one they had taken together as boyfriends. Comprehension dawned on Paige's face.

'You're gay.' Her words seemed to surprise her a little, but there was no malice or prejudice in her voice at all. Blaine nodded, and she grinned in response. 'Cool.' Blaine smiled fondly after Paige as she skipped off. There was hope for this family yet.

'Amber, dear,' Linda, who was Lucy's mother, called. 'Come help me out for a minute.'

Blaine kind of wanted to shout at her *Do I LOOK like an Amber?* but instead he walked calmly over to join her by the stove, repeating in a quiet but firm voice, 'Please, my name is Blaine. It has been for over three years.'



'Here, stir this,' Linda instructed him, pretending not to hear him.

If cooking dinner had been unpleasant, sitting down to eat it was absolute hell.

It started out with the normal holiday chatter of catching up with each other's families – whose daughters were getting married, whose sons had received a promotion recently, which couples were having kids, and where were they all spending Thanksgiving – and it went on long enough that Blaine was lulled into a false sense of security. For a while he even managed to enjoy it all, choosing to let himself be entertained by, rather than annoyed with, his family's hopelessly outdated values and the way his father seemed to absorb them as his own in their presence.

Around the time when everyone was tucking into their second helpings, however, his grandmother, who was sitting at the head of the table, put down her knife and fork with a loud clatter and announced in a clear voice, 'I'm sorry, but I just can't keep ignoring this.'

'What, Mother?' his father inquired from the other end of the table, sounding politely puzzled.

'*That*, John!' She gestured wildly at Blaine, who froze in the middle of cutting up a piece of turkey. Next to him, Cooper's movements tensed.

'Mother, this is not the time-'

'How could you let her do this, John? I thought pulling her out of that Dalton school meant you had put a stop to it. I don't know how you afforded it for so long, anyway.'

Blaine became aware that the room had got very quiet. Everyone had abandoned their previous conversation, and all were all staring at either his grandmother or father, if not at Blaine himself.

'Look, can we not do this right now?' his father insisted.

'Listen, John,' Peter, the oldest of the three brothers, started then. 'I'm all for gay rights and all that, but you have to admit this is pretty weird.' He glanced at Blaine, who was too shell-shocked that this was

happening to do anything other than stare back at him. In the way his uncle watched him, there was no acknowledgment that he was looking at a fellow human being. Blaine might as well have been an image on a television screen.

'I have to agree with Dad,' Lucy said and turned to Blaine. 'No one is blaming you, sweetheart. It's not your fault that your parents didn't know how to help you.'

'We did help him,' his father said. 'I told you all this years ago. He's transgender.'

'Mommy, it's true,' Paige spoke up in barely more than a whisper but, in the silence that had fallen over the table, it was loud enough for everyone to hear. 'Amber's a boy. Sh- He told me. It's Blaine now, and he's gay.'

Lucy shushed her daughter. 'Paige, honey, this is grown-up stuff, okay? Eat your dinner.'

The girl sank back in her chair with a frustrated frown on her face, and Blaine wanted to send her a smile or a wink or something, but he couldn't seem to get even simple motor skills to function, so he sat still frozen in his chair.

'She's *sick*, John,' Blaine's grandmother implored. 'She thinks she's a boy, for Christ's sake. You don't treat something like that by letting her live out the fantasy. If I told you I'm the king of France, you wouldn't indulge me, and start calling me *your majesty*, would you?'

It was Cooper's turn to join in. 'Really, grandma, it's not the same thing at all. He has a diagnosis and it's not "crazy". We didn't pull any of this out of our asses.'

'Be quiet, Cooper,' she sneered at him. 'You're hardly equipped to talk about this. I think we all know what kind of people end up in your particular profession, don't we?' She looked around the table for confirmation that yes, actors were in fact stupid. 'Did you even finish college?'

Cooper opened and closed his mouth at her, too exasperated for words, as she turned back to their father.

'This is what happens when you marry a liberal,' she said. 'I told you that Grace was bad news. And where is Grace, by the way? Couldn't be bothered to show up, could she? I guess her kind don't care about family.'

Blaine stared down at his plate. A loud ringing had started in his ears, and he tried to concentrate on that, rather than the words of the people around him, but it was impossible to drown out. The comments kept coming, everyone joining in now, and Blaine was hardly aware of who was saying what anymore.

'I don't care what any doctor says, there's no such thing as "transgender". There's just very sick and confused people and the people who choose to indulge them.'

'I think it might be some kind of internalized misogyny.'

'She doesn't even act that masculine.'

'She admitted to having a boyfriend.'

'She will always be a girl, no matter how much she thinks she isn't. No amount of hormones can change that.'

'God made her a girl and trying to change that is an insult to Him.'

'You're making her a freakshow.'

'Guys, please.' Blaine made out Cooper's voice through the myriad of voices. His father seemed to have gone completely quiet, except for the odd vague protest. 'Not now. Blaine is sitting *right here*. He can hear everything you're saying.'

No one paid any mind, however, and the next thing Blaine knew, he felt a hand tugging at him, and Cooper's voice in his ear, 'Come on.' No one seemed to notice when Blaine followed Cooper into the kitchen, all too involved in handing out opinions and offering possible cures. Blaine caught a glimpse of his father, who looked completely overwhelmed and lost.

In the kitchen Blaine leaned heavily against the counter, trying to get his breathing to return to normal. He accepted the glass of water Cooper offered him, swallowing it down with difficulty, his throat too constricted to work normally. Cooper stood a few feet away, watching him with a sad expression. He didn't seem to know what to say.

'I was going to come out to Kurt on Monday,' Blaine said in a hollow voice. 'What if-' He shook his head, forcing himself to end the train of thought there. Kurt wasn't like that. Whatever he was ultimately going to do or say, he was still Kurt. He wasn't like those people in there.

'I'm sorry I wasn't more help in there.' Cooper's voice was full of regret.

'It's okay,' Blaine said. He understood. There was an unspoken understanding in the Anderson family that you didn't cross grandmother Angela, and she could get downright vicious if you tried. Blaine suspected she had struck a nerve when she had all but called Cooper stupid, and he at least had tried.

'Why didn't you speak up for yourself?' Cooper wondered.

Blaine crossed his arms over his chest, and responded a little defiantly. 'Because what good was it gonna do? And because I shouldn't have to.' He paused for a moment and let his arms hang slack against his sides again, adding in a thin voice, 'Because I wanted Dad to.'

Blaine let a small sob escape his throat, and Cooper crossed the space between them and drew Blaine into an embrace, allowing him to stifle his frustrated cries against his brother's chest.

Cooper knew he could be self-absorbed at times. Enough people had pointed it out to him by now that he took it as fact. He had a tendency to talk about himself and his accomplishments a lot, and some people – usually jealous coworkers who hadn't had a their break, or people stuck in boring jobs, like accounting (*shudder*) – had accused him of having a bloated ego. Cooper, meanwhile, thought his ego was exactly the size it needed to be given his particular talents and success, and if he was a little self-absorbed, could anyone really blame him?

People could call him self-absorbed all they wanted but, damn it, he wasn't selfish, and he was a good brother.

Cooper and Blaine didn't rejoin the rest of the family in the dining room, nor did they show up in the living room when it was time for the afternoon game. Instead they spent the rest of the afternoon and evening in Blaine's room, where they would both be sleeping tonight, since every other room was occupied by guests.

Cooper only went downstairs once to fix a couple of sandwiches and grab two desserts for them. While he worked on the sandwiches, his father entered the kitchen, coming to a halt in the doorway when he saw his son. Through the open door Cooper could hear laughter and talking and the clinking of glass.

'Is he okay?' his father asked quietly, brow creased in worry.

'Not really,' Cooper replied coolly as he finished the sandwiches and set them on a tray. 'Why don't you ask your dear mom for help? I'm sure she knows the number of a doctor that could make him all better.'

Cooper didn't give his father a chance to respond before leaving the kitchen, clutching the stocked tray rather more tightly than necessary.

They spent the time watching old movies on Blaine's laptop, playing made-up card games, and Cooper insisted that they also finish their work on West Side Story that they had started the previous night. Even though he got Blaine smiling again soon enough, there was a lingering sadness around him all night, and he went to bed early. As Cooper watched his features finally relax into peaceful sleep, he felt bad for having made his brother spend Thanksgiving cooped up in his room, but neither of them had particularly wanted to go back downstairs either. Cooper felt unspeakably angry that apparently this was the Thanksgiving weekend Blaine had to look forward to, if he didn't want to be called sick and a freak by people who were supposed to care for him.

Cooper had always been a protective older brother. He supposed it had started way back when his mother had been pregnant, with how his nine-year-old self would sometimes reprimand her for working too hard and not taking good enough care of herself. However, it was the moment when he first held his newborn sister in his arms, and looking into her tiny eyes, that Cooper knew there was nothing he wouldn't do for her.

When 'Amber' became 'Blaine' and 'sister' became 'brother' that didn't change. On the contrary, in a strange way Cooper felt an increased sense of responsibility towards his brother that he hadn't felt towards his sister. Not that they weren't ultimately the same person, of course, or that Blaine needed "rescuing" of any sort. In fact Cooper was sure that the reason Blaine was still standing today had little to do with Cooper and everything to do with the fact that Blaine was a damned strong kid. His relationship to Blaine had become less throw-myself-under-a-bus and beat-up-anyone-that-so-much-as-looks-at-you-wrong, and more about the quieter moments. Things that Cooper did without blinking, but that he, in the back of his mind, was aware meant so much more to Blaine than most people could ever understand. It

was in switching the name and pronouns and never messing up. It was in helping Blaine look at binders and packers online. It was in giving advice whenever he could. It was in casually referring to Blaine as his brother. It was in making Blaine feel like it was okay to not bind his chest when he was around Cooper. It was in offering a supportive hug at the right time.

And – if he needed to – it was in giving their father a piece of his mind, because Blaine never would.

Cooper stood outside the door to the study and took a few deep breaths, going back over what he was going to say, before he knocked on the door three times. He waited a few seconds until he heard his father's voice inviting him in before entering and closing the door behind him. His father was in the process of making up the couch in here (his grandmother having insisted on taking the master bedroom), and he looked up at Cooper with a mixture of guilt and relief.

'Cooper, I-'

'You need to choose,' Cooper told him flatly.

'What?'

'It's them or us. Either you tell them to stuff it and go home tomorrow, or I'm taking Blaine away for the weekend.'

'Don't you think that's a bit extreme, son?' his father said reasonably, clearly trying to regain control and be the parent.

Cooper looked his father straight in the eye and kept his voice even as he responded. 'Are you really asking me that right now? After what happened at dinner?'

'They don't know what they're saying,' his father said with the air of a man who has grasping at straws and knew it. 'You know what my family is like. We always knew they didn't approve.'

'Then perhaps you shouldn't have invited them here,' Cooper replied simply. He turned to leave, having said his piece.

'It's not that easy. I can't just- They're family.'

Cooper turned slowly back around and regarded the man before him for a long moment. They were the same height, but somehow his father appeared so much smaller than him tonight.

'*We're* your family. Blaine and me and Mom. Not these people.' Cooper paused. 'Did you know that he's been worrying about how to tell his boyfriend the truth? All this,' Cooper made a vague gesture with his hand. 'Isn't helping. Like I said; them or us.'

His father made a series of flustered noises, none quite making it into words. He was clearly caught between two opposing instincts, trying to decide who to favor. His children? Or the mother and the family to which he had always been always such a bitter disappointment? Cooper didn't think it should have been that difficult of a question. He shook his head and made a noise of disbelief.

'Great. Call us when you make up your mind.'

Blaine was shaken awake early the next morning. He blinked confusedly against the light from the night lamp, which was the only source of light in the room as it was still dark outside, as far as Blaine could tell.

'Coop?' he groaned groggily. 'What time is it?'

'Five thirty,' Cooper said, sounding like he had been up for hours. 'Come on, get up. You can sleep in the car if you want, but I want to get going now, so we don't cause a scene.'

Blaine sat up quickly, watching as Cooper made quick work of packing a bag of Blaine's things. 'What are you talking about? We're leaving? Where?'

'Wherever.' Cooper shrugged and threw clean clothes at Blaine. 'Come on, get dressed. Chop chop. I'm officially kidnapping you.'

'Coop,' Blaine said seriously, which seemed to do the trick of calming Cooper's somewhat manic behavior and their eyes met. 'Thank you.'

The car (their father's because, as Cooper said, *fuck him*) ended up taking them two hours away to Columbus, which wasn't terribly exotic perhaps, but Blaine appreciated the gesture more than he could express. Besides, Cooper was right. Right now anywhere was better than home. And as trips went, it wasn't actually a bad one. Since moving to Lima shortly after his fifteenth birthday, Blaine had visited his home town regularly, since it was where his therapist and endocrinologist were, but he never actually went there and stayed for longer than his appointments required. Despite some of the things he had gone through here, it was still his home town and seeing the place again, really *seeing* it, visiting all their old haunts, parks and coffee houses, was not altogether unwelcome.

And Cooper, in his efforts to turn this Thanksgiving around, seemed determined to show Blaine a good time. He checked them into a five-star hotel (apparently those commercials paid a lot better than Blaine had suspected) and the first thing he did was call room service and order two large breakfasts, which had arrived by the time Blaine had finished his morning shower. When they were done eating, Blaine wanted to laze around the hotel room for a bit, but Cooper insisted that they hadn't left one room just to stay cooped up in another, so out in town they went. There were museums to visit, movies to watch and concerts to go to. It was the best kind of exhausting, and on the first night Cooper took Blaine out for a dinner that was everything the Thanksgiving meal the day before had been and more.

On Saturday they took a bit of a different approach and lounged around town, window shopping and taking turns approaching the managers of all the cafes and coffeehouses that had a piano and asking if they could play a few songs. At first they made it a sport to see who could earn the most tips, but when it was clear that Blaine was winning, Cooper suggested that they play together from now on, which made Blaine tease him mercilessly for the rest of the day, calling him a sore loser.

'Best Thanksgiving ever,' Blaine grinned as they got back to their hotel room on Saturday night. 'Thanks for doing this.'

'No problem, Squirt. I've had fun as well.' Blaine grimaced at the nickname. 'Hey, if you get to call me a sore loser all day, I get to call you Squirt. It's only fair. And for the record, I totally let you win.'

Blaine snickered, moving to throw himself on the bed. 'You so didn't. I could see you getting desperate by the third round.'



'Hey, I'm not an actor for nothing, you know,' Cooper pointed out, following suit and claiming the other bed. They were both quiet for a few minutes as an entire day of running around town finally caught up with them and exhaustion hit.

'Coop?'

'Hm?'

'Remember when I came out to you? You didn't even blink. You were just like "Cool, so what's your name? Next topic." I was so nervous before telling you, but I think we spent all of five minutes on it, before you started talking about my performance in the school talent show.'

'Well, it was flawed,' Cooper responded casually. 'I thought you could use a few pointers.'

'Yes, well, my point is that it wasn't a big deal to you. I guess I'm just sort of wondering why that was.'

'Why? Did you want it to be a big deal?'

'No, and that's my point. I want it to not matter, but it does anyway and-' Blaine's phone rang, cutting him off. 'That's sort of where I was going,' Blaine explained, showing the photo and the name on the display to Cooper, who nodded in understanding, before accepting the call and lying back comfortably on the bed. 'Hey, Kurt.'

'Hey, yourself,' Kurt greeted in return. 'So we just got back to Lima, and I was wondering if maybe I could come over or something? I miss you.'

'Admit it,' Blaine teased. 'You just wanna come over so you can meet my brother before he goes back home tomorrow.'

'What, no. Not at all. Where would you get that idea? That's silly.' Kurt said his voice shrill, before admitting in a small voice, 'Okay, maybe a little bit? But I do actually miss you.'

'It's okay, I get it.' Blaine grinned and turned his head to wink at his brother, but Cooper was too deep in thought to respond to the gesture. 'But we're actually kind of in Columbus right now.'

'You're what? What on earth are you doing in Columbus?'

Blaine sighed. 'It's kind of a long story. I'll tell you all about, I promise, but...' Blaine trailed off, looking questioningly at Cooper who was now holding out his hand, gesturing for Blaine to give him the phone, his eyes alight with inspiration. 'But first you get to talk to Cooper on the phone.'

Blaine handed Cooper the phone, mouthing to him *What are you doing?* but Cooper just mouthed back, *Trust me.*

'Hey! Kurt! This is Cooper Anderson.' Kurt was speaking on the other end, clearly excited, his voice having risen to dangerous heights, and Blaine found it so adorable that it didn't occur to him to resent Cooper (and after the weekend Cooper had given him, Blaine couldn't really begrudge his brother the ego stroke that he knew Kurt's excitement was bound to be). 'I heard a rumor that you wanted to meet me, and since I've decided to extend my stay in Lima, why don't you come over on Monday and we'll hang out, all three of us.'

Blaine couldn't hear Kurt's reply, but it was clear from his tone that the answer was yes. When the call had ended, Blaine raised his eyebrows at Cooper. 'You've decided to extend your stay in Lima?'

'Sure,' Cooper shrugged. 'Commercial's on hiatus, so I've got time. And I wanna help with your boyfriend problem. I figure if I meet him and get a feel for him, I'll know better how to handle it.'

'What do you mean "handle it"?' Blaine asked cautiously, sitting up properly and looking at Cooper. 'I was just going to, you know, tell him.'

'Okay. How?'

'What do you mean "how"?' Blaine frowned and watched as Cooper, too, sat up and moved to face Blaine, a serious look on his face.

'I mean *how*. Set the scene for me.'

'It's not a performance, Coop.'

'It kind of is, though,' Cooper argued.

Blaine hesitated. He thought that sounded like almost the exact opposite of what he should be aiming for. 'I don't know, Coop. I was going to just tell him on Monday. I don't wanna drag it out any more.'

'Trust me, Blaine. I know what I'm talking about. You'll thank me later.' Blaine gave a soft sigh of exasperation. 'I want to help, okay? You can wait one more day, can't you?'

To Blaine's surprise, Cooper showed up at glee rehearsal on Monday afternoon. When Blaine arrived with Kurt, his brother was already there, deep in conversation with Will Schuester.

'Omigod,' Kurt squealed the moment he saw Cooper. 'You didn't tell me he was coming *here*.'

'I didn't know,' Blaine replied honestly, though he thought he should have known that Cooper was planning something more than meeting Blaine's boyfriend, when he decided to stick around in Lima.

'Blainey!' Cooper called, motioning them over. 'Look who I ran into.' He indicated Mr. Schue. 'Your director here tells me you're in dire need of professional help with prepping for Sectionals.'

'Well, "dire" is probably a bit extreme, but-' Mr. Schue mumbled awkwardly.

'Never be afraid to ask for help!' Cooper patted the older man on the shoulder, before turning again to Blaine and Kurt. 'So I've decided to offer you all my services for the next two weeks until the competition. See if we can't whip you into shape.' Cooper looked so excited to be here, it was hard to tell if he was doing it more for them or himself.

'Wow, that's- that's great.' Honestly Blaine didn't know whether to find the prospect more exciting or terrifying. Cooper had always been involved in Blaine's performance life to some extent or another, and it always worked out alright, but Blaine wasn't sure that involving him so directly was the best idea. Mixing family and work seemed like a recipe for disaster, and Blaine loved his brother. He would rather that it stayed that way. The rest of New Directions, though, were firmly in the "excited" camp – Blaine didn't think he had ever seen Kurt so worked up about anything – so he decided to not be a buzzkill and let it be, welcoming Cooper to the group with a smile.

And Blaine had to admit that having Cooper around actually worked wonders for the glee club. One by one or two by two he brought people to the floor to perform for him so he could 'assess their strengths and weaknesses', and Blaine didn't know whether it was because everyone was so intent on impressing

Cooper or whether it was the sheer energy that he gave off, but everyone was at the top of their games today. Blaine didn't get to perform (*'I already know what your weaknesses are.'*) but by the end of the lesson he felt more included than ever before as every single person called out a *'Bye, Blaine'* or *'See ya, Blaine'* before leaving. Who knew that all it took was bringing your semi-famous brother to school?

When the three of them made it back to the Anderson house, Cooper went to the kitchen to take care of snacks, while Blaine and Kurt went upstairs to drop off their things.

'Your brother is *amazing*,' Kurt exclaimed emphatically the moment they stepped into the room, and he knew they were well out of earshot.

'Mm-hm, and you have a crush,' Blaine teased.

'Don't be jealous,' Kurt said. 'You're still my number-one guy.' He poked the tip of Blaine's nose playfully as though to indicate that he really did mean him.

'Mm, I'd better be,' Blaine said, pulling Kurt in for a kiss.

'Besides,' Kurt noted, breaking the kiss and his mouth quivering in a barely contained smile. 'He's way too old for me.'

'You are terrible.' Blaine laughed and stared towards the door, pulling Kurt with him. 'Come on, your man awaits.'

'Do you think it's too much if I ask for an autograph?' Kurt whispered hopefully as they made their way back downstairs. Blaine chuckled.

'If I know Cooper right, you'll ask for one and he'll get you ten.'

When they entered the living room, Cooper was fiddling with the DVD player. 'I thought we'd start with a movie!' he said, an excited glint in his eyes. Blaine's mind reeled with the different movies Cooper could possibly have chosen for this occasion, and when Kurt went to the kitchen to collect beverages, Blaine rounded on his brother.

'Tell me you didn't. I mean, not-' Blaine mouthed the next three words. *'Boys Don't Cry'*? Because while I realize it's a conversation starter, I don't think I can-'

'Dude, relax. I'm not stupid.' Cooper put a calming hand on Blaine's shoulder. 'It's just a random movie. You know, to break the tension. Trust me, I've got it all worked out.'

It was true. The movie was a typical romantic comedy with nothing remarkable about it at all. It wasn't a *bad* movie, Blaine supposed, but Kurt, for one, was a lot more interested in cuddling and kept getting distracted from the plot of the movie, seemingly trying to figure out the exact shape and feel of Blaine's lips against his. This wasn't far outside their usual movie-watching behavior, but they also usually watched movies in private, and Blaine couldn't help feeling embarrassed that he was cuddling and making out with his boyfriend in front of his brother. Cooper didn't seem to mind though. In fact he kept catching Blaine's eye and smirking at him, and Blaine had a feeling he was in for a brutal round of brotherly teasing later on.

'I don't know which was more exciting,' Cooper said as the movie ended and the credits began to roll. 'You guys or the movie.'

Blaine chuckled. 'Wow, that sounds vaguely creepy. Well done.'

'Well, most of Lima isn't exactly big on gay PDA,' Kurt explained to Cooper. 'So we have to make the most of it when we're in private.' He put a hand on Blaine's knee, smiling at him. He turned back to Cooper, suddenly a bit flustered. 'I hope we didn't make you uncomfortable though. I mean, Blaine told me you were cool with everything, but I guess that's not the same as-'

Cooper held up a hand to stop him. 'Kurt relax, man. Do I seem bothered? I've been to plenty of pride events, even joined the parade once and I may or may not have had an unforgettable experience with a drag queen from Canada.' Blaine grimaced. There was an image he didn't particularly need stuck in his head. 'Trust me, gay is okay in my book.'

'What's it like? The pride thing, I mean,' Kurt hastened to add.

'Oh, you've never been? It's *so* much fun. It's the most diverse group of people you can imagine coming together in one place and celebrating, just, you know, *freedom*. You get gay people, straight people, bisexuals, pansexuals, asexuals. Butches, femmes, drag queens, transmen, transwomen, genderqueers...'

Blaine let out a long breath, which he had held, waiting for the moment the word *transmen* passed Cooper's lips. In hindsight he didn't really know what he had been expecting Kurt to say to such an

offhand remark. *Now that you mention it, I love transmen and I'd be totally fine with dating one* seemed a bit farfetched, and of course what Kurt did say was nothing.

'So your brother's very enthusiastic about the LGBT community,' Kurt remarked an hour later, when it was time for him to go home and they were back upstairs collecting Kurt's things. 'You'd think he was the gay one.'

Blaine laughed, handing Kurt his messenger bag.

'So do you think I passed?' Kurt asked and Blaine frowned in question. 'I'm not stupid. I know today was just as much about him meeting me as it was about me meeting him. He was being all Mr. Protective Brother checking out the boyfriend.'

'I think you passed. As if you'd ever fail at anything.' Blaine smiled, giving Kurt a brief goodbye kiss, before sending him out the door with the usual plea for him to call before bed.

The moment Kurt had left, Cooper was in Blaine's doorway. 'So I think that went well,' he said confidently.

'Yeah,' Blaine agreed. 'Although you could have been a bit more subtle than *So what do you think of Chaz Bono?*'

'I was getting desperate, okay?' Cooper said defensively. 'He wasn't talking, and I wanted at least something on the issue.'

'So what's the ruling then? Any advice?'

'I think he's a keeper.' Cooper nodded. 'But why don't we discuss it over dinner? I'm starving.'

'Sure. Just let me change into something more comfortable. I'm choking in this thing. Be right down.'

'Yep yep.' Cooper turned to leave but stopped on the doorway, lips quirking into a teasing smirk. 'Oh, and Blaine? You two? *So* adorable.' He made little kissy sounds, ducking out of the room quickly before Blaine could throw a pillow at him.

Blaine snorted to himself as he stood in front of the mirror, making quick work of removing his bow tie, vest and shirt until the binder, that he so loved and hated at the same time, was the only thing left. He tore

it off unceremoniously, reveling in the feeling of *breathing* again. He regarded the binder in his hand for a moment, amazed that one could have so many strong and conflicting feelings about a piece of fabric. He lifted his gaze and watched himself in the mirror, longing for the day when surgery became more than just a distant possibility.

It happened in the space of ten seconds, maybe less, maybe more. Time seemed to at once have slowed down and sped up, as something behind him in the mirror caught Blaine's eye, and he wheeled around to discover Kurt's phone lying on his bed. It must have slipped out of his bag earlier without either of them noticing. At the same time as he was seeing this, he became aware of the sound of someone thundering up the stairs and he knew it was happening seconds before it did, but he just stood frozen in the middle of his bedroom, shirtless and facing the open door, too panicked to even think of covering himself.

'Sorry.' Kurt was breathless as he entered the room. 'I just forgot my ph-' He stopped short when his eyes fell on Blaine and his unmistakably female-looking chest. Kurt's mouth fell open and for a long moment he simply stood there, staring and completely lost for words.

Blaine wasn't sure how long they stood there, but he became the first one to act as he finally thought to use the binder that was still in his hand to cover himself as well as he could. His voice was panicked and pleading as he spoke. 'Kurt. Oh god, I'm so sorry. I swear, I was going to tell you. I didn't want you to find out like this.'

Blaine started towards his boyfriend, but Kurt recoiled, backing away from him into the wall, and Blaine's heart broke at the look Kurt sent him.

'You- I never- How could you- *Eight months*, Blaine.'

'I know, I'm sorry,' Blaine repeated, voice breaking. 'I was going to tell you, I swear I was. I was literally going to do it tomorrow.'

It was Blaine's turn to recoil as Kurt practically yelled, 'Tomorrow? What's tomorrow? You should have told me *months* ago.'

'I'm sorry. Kurt, I'm so sorry,' Blaine pleaded as Kurt tore his eyes away and picked up his phone from the bed. Blaine didn't even recognize the look on Kurt's face as he turned and moved towards the door. 'Wait. Please, Kurt, we can talk about this.'

'I can't. I just- I can't,' was all Kurt could say and, without even looking back, he ran out, leaving Blaine standing broken and exposed in the middle of the room.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Part one*

*Look, I'm still around (I'm trying hard to take it back)*

***Kurt has a decision to make.***

*I'm sorry. Please don't tell anyone.*

Kurt sat at the red light, staring blankly at his phone, the message from Blaine just a series of meaningless letters. When the light turned green, he threw the phone on the seat passenger seat next to him, keeping his eyes on the road as he drove. To an outsider he may have looked perfectly calm and content, but that was far from the case. Kurt's mind was spinning. He played the moment over and over in his head as though, if he just did it enough times, he would come to a different conclusion, and this wouldn't be his reality. Catching his boyfriend shirtless by accident would have been exciting rather than horrifying. Blaine wouldn't have lied to him through eight months of dating. Kurt wouldn't be this angry right now. Or hurt. Or confused. Or scared.

'Hi, hon,' Carole called from the kitchen when Kurt made it home. 'Dinner's almost ready.' The smell of warm food was creeping into the hallway where Kurt was hanging his coat, and he vaguely recognized the smell as something he liked, but he thought he might throw up if he ate anything right now.

'I'm not hungry. I ate at Blaine's,' he called back, ignoring his rumbling stomach and barely keeping himself from grimacing at the sound of his boyfriend's name. He didn't wait for a response before hurrying upstairs to his room and closing the door behind him.

Leaning against the door, Kurt drew a long breath in the hope of clearing his mind, but all it did was make him more aware of his own ragged breathing and his heart thumping loudly in his chest. Unable to stay still, he began pacing back and forth, doing his best to ignore the urge to scream and throw things.

How had Blaine managed to keep this secret for so long? And how had Kurt not seen the signs? Because there had been signs, Kurt was realizing. Now that he thought about it, wasn't it strange that he had never seen Blaine without a shirt before? Not even a peek as he was changing clothes, or sunbathing over the

summer? And come to think of it, Kurt had never been shown a childhood photo of Blaine. Around the Anderson house there were photos of his brother as young as three years old, but Blaine was never younger than fourteen in any of them. And look how violently Blaine had reacted to Kurt's attempt to move the physical aspect of their relationship to the next level. At the thought another flash of anger tore through Kurt. His instincts had told him that something was very wrong, and he had expressed his concerns, giving Blaine every reason to think that, whatever the problem was, Kurt would be understanding.

But still Blaine had lied.

Kurt felt deceived. He felt used. Except maybe for his dad, Blaine was the most important person in Kurt's life, and he had let himself believe that the feeling was mutual. Apparently, though, Kurt wasn't even important enough to be afforded basic honesty, and he had to wonder how much longer the lying would have gone on for if tonight hadn't happened.

Who else knew? Had Blaine told anyone? His family knew of course, but-

Kurt ceased his pacing abruptly. All at once it occurred to him just why Thanksgiving had been so awful for Blaine. He heard Blaine telling him in a would-be casual voice *My grandmother literally called me a freak* and, in the light of recent events, the word choice took on a whole new meaning. Kurt sank to the floor and leaned against his bed, overwhelmed with sudden sadness and heartbreak that Blaine of all people – beautiful, warm Blaine, who never had a mean word to say to anyone – had been made to listen to that. Though Kurt still felt hurt and betrayed, it wasn't hard to tell why Blaine had failed to tell him what was going on, and by running out on him, Kurt might just have confirmed his worst fears.

If only Kurt had the slightest idea what to do next.

Because how was he even remotely equipped to handle something like this? He didn't know the first thing about gender identity issues, or what someone like Blaine might be feeling. Sure, people had always had issues with Kurt, making fun of him for being "girly", and he had been called "lady" more times than he cared to count. But those were *their* issues, and though the thought had crossed his mind once or twice when he was little, that things might be easier if he were a girl, Kurt had never truly questioned his gender. He was just informed enough that he knew what the "T" in LGBT stood for, and he vaguely knew that "FTM" and "MTF" stood for "female to male" and "male to female" respectively, but he had never

dwelled on the topic for long, honestly finding the whole concept a bit difficult to comprehend. The idea of dating a transperson had never even occurred to him, but now it was there and he was just *lost*.

He wanted – *needed* – to talk to someone, but Blaine had asked Kurt not to tell anyone and, whatever mixed and messed up feelings he had towards his boyfriend right now, Kurt would never do that to him, even if it was just Kurt's dad who Kurt thought could be trusted to keep quiet. There had to be someone he could talk to though, someone who already knew the truth. There were Blaine's parents, obviously, but Kurt had barely spoken two words to either of them, and he couldn't imagine that conversation going particularly well. Then there was Cooper, who Kurt had just met and liked a lot, but still, he was Blaine's brother, and Kurt thought he might be a little too close to the situation. Kurt needed someone who could give him solid, neutral advice.

What about Dalton? Blaine had boarded there for two years. Someone had to have known. When the answer finally came to him, it was so obvious that Kurt couldn't believe that he hadn't thought of it before. *Trent*. He had been Blaine's roommate. Trent must have known. He couldn't not have known, right? Quickly Kurt pulled out his phone – the phone that had started all this tonight – found Trent's number and called him up.

'Hello?'

'Please tell me you know why I'm calling,' Kurt said as a way of greeting.

'Kurt? What's wrong?' Trent sounded immediately worried.

'It's Blaine.' Kurt kept his answer purposely vague just in case he was wrong.

'Oh. He finally told you?'

'More like "I walked in on him while he was shirtless and I figured it out,"' Kurt explained.

'Oh, okay. Wow. That's- not ideal. What did you do?'

'I took off.' Kurt sighed. 'I mean, what was I supposed to say? I was freaked out.'

Trent made a noise in his throat to show that he had heard Kurt's answer, but offered no immediate comment. Kurt bit his lip nervously. While it wasn't a stretch to call Trent a mutual friend, he was still

more Blaine's than Kurt's, and Kurt wondered whether Trent was upset with him for reacting the way he did. Should Kurt have been able to just stay and deal with it right away?

'What about now?' Trent asked cautiously. 'Are you still freaked out?'

'Yes!' Kurt said a little more fervently than he meant to. 'I mean, this just happened, what - ' Kurt looked at his watch. ' - less than two hours ago, and I... I'm just so angry and confused, and I'm sad for him, and I'm just- This is just all wrong. I wish he would have just told me.'

Trent didn't reply immediately, and for a minute all Kurt heard was scrambling and then the opening and closing of a door. Kurt guessed that he had moved somewhere more private and, apparently alone now, Trent let out a small sigh before speaking in a quiet voice.

'The thing you have to understand is that there's no "just" about it for him. Being trans is not something Blaine is proud of.'

'He shouldn't be ashamed,' Kurt said. That much he knew. 'It's not like he can help it. It's like being gay, isn't it?'

'Well, yes,' Trent agreed. 'And I'm not saying he is. All I know is that it's not something he wears on his sleeve, and he doesn't like to talk about it. There's a reason I'm the only one at Dalton who knows. Not even all the teachers knew about it. Don't get me wrong, you deserved to know, and I'm not saying he was right to keep it from you for so long. I guess, I'm just saying that it's difficult.'

'See? I don't know about those things.' Kurt sighed deeply and sat down heavily on his bed. 'I don't know what to do. Tell me what to do, Trent.'

There was a brief pause as Trent considered his words.

'Okay, then. Let me ask you this: You're upset that he lied to you – that's understandable. But the fact that he's trans, does that upset you?'

'Yes. No. I don't know. I love him. But I just- I wanted a normal boyfriend.' Kurt winced. 'Sorry, that came out wrong. I just mean that this is... I didn't sign up for this.'

'Neither did he, for what it's worth,' Trent said. 'Difference is, you get to walk away from it.'

Blaine was waiting by Kurt's locker, when Kurt arrived to school the next morning. Kurt had half expected something about Blaine to appear different today; that he wouldn't be able to keep himself from picking up on all the clues that revealed the biology Blaine was trying to escape. Instead there was just Blaine as he had always been. Kurt smiled softly when he reached him.

'Hey. I was going to come find you.' Blaine gave a small nod in response.

'We need to talk,' he said, a steely, determined look about him.

'I think we do.' Kurt followed as Blaine turned and led the way to an empty classroom down the hall. Once inside Blaine leaned against the teacher's desk, while Kurt sat at a front row desk. Blaine took a deep breath and launched into speech.

'Okay. First we should probably make sure that we're on the same page here.' Kurt just nodded his agreement. 'So basically what you saw last night were my, well, *breasts*.' Blaine spat the word out with obvious distaste. 'And the reason I have those is that I was born into a female shape. I'm *male*, always have been. I'm not "really a girl" or anything like that. I'm male in here.' He touched a finger to his temple. 'But my body doesn't agree with me, and it took me a while to figure things out. That I'm trans. Transgender.'

'Okay. I understand,' Kurt said quietly. There was nothing in what Blaine said that Kurt hadn't figured out on his own last night, but hearing him say it out loud was still a little overwhelming. It was the final confirmation that this was happening; that what had happened last night was real and not just some really strange and vivid dream that Kurt had confused for reality.

'And with that out of the way: I'm sorry,' Blaine went on, looking straight at Kurt, still that determined look in his eye. 'You shouldn't have found out like that. I really was going to tell you today, believe it or not, and I know that doesn't make it better, cause I should have told you a long time ago, but I was just so scared that you would leave me, and I just- I just- I screwed everything up, Kurt.' Blaine paused to take a breath. He looked away for a moment before continuing, and Kurt could hear him struggling to keep his voice level. 'I understand if you hate me. Or if it's too much for you. Or, I dunno, not enough? I want you to know that I understand that, and I'm setting you free, so you don't have to say it. The only thing I ask is

that you *please* don't tell anyone what happened. Make up a lie, tell them I cheated on you, tell them whatever you want. Just don't tell them about this, cause I just- I can't deal with everyone knowing.'

Blaine finished talking, and for a long moment Kurt just watched him. Then he stood up and walked around the desk, moving to stand right in front of Blaine, who crossed his arms uncomfortably and didn't look at Kurt.

'I'm not going to tell anyone,' he said. 'And we're not breaking up.'

'We're not?' Blaine blurted, twisting his neck to look up at Kurt, his eyes wide with surprise and uncertainty.

'Not unless you want to?' Kurt lips quirked in a careful smile.

'No! Of course not. No,' Blaine said, straightening up, speaking in fractured sentences as he continued. 'I- I wanted to hope, I did, but I didn't think- I thought you wouldn't want- And I lied to you.'

'I won't lie, I spent a lot of time last night being angry with you,' Kurt confessed. 'I get that it must be difficult, I do, but you still should have told me, and I'm honestly hurt that you didn't. But damn it, Blaine, you're in my heart now, and I couldn't walk away even if I wanted to.'

'But what about...?' Blaine swallowed.

'Not a deal breaker.' Kurt took Blaine's hand in his, caressing softly with his thumb. 'You're a guy, and I love you. That's all that matters.' Kurt shrugged. 'The rest is just sex, and we'll figure that out if and when you're ready, okay?'

'Okay.' Blaine nodded, and they leaned in at the same time, their lips meeting in a brief kiss. Blaine's eyes were glassy when they pulled apart. 'I love you so much.'

Kurt smiled. 'Tell me about it. Just no more secrets, alright? From now on we talk about stuff.'

'Are you sure about that?' Blaine asked, mock serious. 'Because, I mean, that could make birthdays and Christmases very boring.'

'Jerk.' Kurt snorted and punched Blaine lightly in the shoulder. 'You know what I mean.'

'Well, excuse me for trying to lighten the mood,' Blaine said with a grin just as the bell rang, which prompted him to make a frustrated noise. 'Can we pretend that didn't happen? I kind of want to just stay here.'

""Kind of" being the operative word. We both know hell's gonna freeze over before you skip a class,' Kurt teased prodding Blaine lightly with a finger, before pulling him towards the door by the hand. When they reached it, however, he stopped and turned to Blaine, his expression serious again. 'Yours after school? I want to know your story. If you'll let me.'

'Of course.' Blaine nodded, though he looked a little uncertain.

'Don't worry. We'll be okay.' Kurt squeezed Blaine's hand reassuringly, and as they parted ways to go to different classes, Kurt just hoped he was right.

He was sure he had made the right decision in staying with Blaine – his heart told him as much – and Kurt was going to do everything in his power to make things work. This was all so sudden though, and Kurt was a little – okay a *lot* – overwhelmed. He hadn't exactly been prepared for a situation like this, and if he was still a somewhat apprehensive about the situation, that was to be expected, right?

It wasn't the sex part of Blaine being transgender that worried Kurt the most. That might take some getting used to, but Kurt figured he could deal with it, because whatever he looked like, Blaine was still *Blaine*, and he was more than a set of body parts. What really worried Kurt was the hurt and the fear he thought he could trace in his boyfriend's eyes. It was clear that Blaine's gender identity came attached to issues and demons, that Kurt might never fully understand, and while he wanted to be the one to help Blaine, what if he just couldn't? Or if he made everything worse? And Kurt didn't have anyone to talk to about it, because no one else knew.

Except Trent, Kurt recalled. He at least seemed to know what he was talking about. During Kurt's brief time as a Warbler, Trent hadn't been among those Kurt spoke to the most – not out of any sort of dislike, but simply because Kurt happened to click better with other people, and he and Trent hadn't shared any classes. However, Kurt had a feeling that the two of them were about to get very well acquainted.

After their last lesson of the day, Kurt met up with Blaine by the latter's locker, and they both kind of wanted to just go straight home, but with Cooper around and with Sectionals coming up in less than two

weeks, they agreed that skipping glee rehearsal wasn't really an option, no matter how much they wanted to be in their own world right now.

The hallways being mostly deserted this late in the day, they walked hand in hand to the choir room, where half the club was already gathered along with Mr. Schue and Cooper. When he saw them enter, Cooper turned to them, a worried look on his face. As they came to a halt in front of him, he eyed their joined hands and looked from one boy to the other, before his gaze settled on Kurt.

'Good?' Cooper asked simply. Kurt smiled and squeezed Blaine's hand.

'Good,' he confirmed.

The next thing Kurt knew, Cooper had charged forward and pulled him into a warm hug, catching Kurt off guard and murmuring into his ear, 'I'm glad I was right about you.'



## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Part two*

#### ***Kurt has a lot of questions. Blaine does his best to explain***

'So...' Blaine looked up at Kurt. As they had agreed, Kurt had gone home with Blaine after glee rehearsal, and they were now sitting cross-legged face to face on Blaine's bed. 'What do you want to know?'

Kurt cocked his head. His first instinct was to say 'Everything,' but he figured the situation was daunting enough for Blaine as it was, so he searched his mind for a simpler question that Blaine could reasonably answer.

'When did you know?' he asked finally.

'I was twelve,' Blaine replied and there was an awkward silence as Kurt waited for him to elaborate before realizing that he wasn't going to.

'Can I ask... how? How did you know?' Kurt prompted gently. 'Did it just come to you one day, or...?'

'Sort of, but not really.' Blaine sighed and ran a hand across his face. 'I don't know. It's difficult to explain.'

'Try?' Kurt asked him quietly, reaching out and running a soothing hand across one thigh, while Blaine bit his lip. 'It's okay. I'm not judging.'

'I always felt...' Blaine began. 'Sort of *wrong*. Off, somehow. Like I wasn't quite...' Blaine trailed off, and he seemed to be looking for words.

'This is really awkward, isn't it?' Kurt said after a few seconds of quiet, and Blaine let out a small sigh of relief.

'Yeah, sorry. I'm not really good at this. It's not that I don't want to tell you things,' he said quickly. 'I do. I'm just not sure how to explain everything. It doesn't always make sense, even to me.'

'I have an idea,' Kurt said as he stood up and held out a hand to Blaine. 'Come with me.'

Blaine frowned in confusion but took Kurt's hand, letting himself be led downstairs to the kitchen, where Kurt immediately began rummaging through the cupboards and picking things out, when he found an item he needed. Sugar. Flour. Baking soda. Kurt moved to the refrigerator next, muttering to himself, 'Eggs, butter... eggs, butter.'

'Kurt?'

'Mm?'

'What are you doing?'

'Checking that you have what we need for chocolate chip cookies,' Kurt said as though it was the most natural thing in the world, before he turned to face Blaine, 'Vanilla extract?'

'I- Top shelf,' Blaine replied slowly, pointing to the correct cupboard. 'Why?'

'Because,' Kurt responded, climbing a chair to be able to view the contents of the top shelf properly. 'Sometimes it's easier to talk when your hands are busy, and you aren't sat there, staring into the other person's eyes.' Kurt jumped off the chair, vanilla extract in hand. 'Trust me, it works. It's basically how Finn and I bond – I cook, and he pretends to help.'

'Alright.' Blaine grinned and moved to grab two aprons, handing Kurt one and putting on the other. 'Tell me what to do.'

'Turn on the oven? Three-fifty should do it.' Blaine moved to do as told while Kurt got started on measuring out butter and sugar, calling over his shoulder, 'So you said you knew at twelve. What was it like before? Were you just a huge tomboy or what? Take your time,' he added, keeping his eyes on the work in front of him.

'I was a tomboy, yes,' Blaine said, speaking slowly. 'But only really for the last few years before I came out. Like, from eleven onwards.' Kurt felt Blaine standing idly somewhere behind him.

'Mm-hm. Can you get the eggs?' Kurt asked him. 'Two.'

'For years before that I tried everything I could to be a normal girl,' Blaine continued, and Kurt heard the refrigerator open and close as Blaine spoke. 'I hung out with the girls. I tried to like the same things they

did. I tolerated the dresses my parents bought me. Hoping that if I just kept at it, it would all start to feel right some day.'

'Was it horrible?' Kurt looked up at Blaine as he accepted the whipped egg mass from him. Blaine leaned against the counter and seemed to consider his answer.

'Back then? Not *horrible*, I guess, because I managed to convince myself that what I was feeling was normal. I only had my own experience to compare to, so I didn't know any different. And you know me, I'm not exactly hyper-masculine, so it wasn't all bad, I guess. But I still always felt apart from the other girls. It's difficult to explain and I don't know if it makes any sense, but I just had this innate feeling that I wasn't like them, I just didn't know how or why. It didn't occur to me that there was such a thing as transgender.'

They continued like this while they worked, Kurt taking charge of the baking and letting Blaine talk. Every so often Kurt would offer supportive comments and ask new questions, but now that he had started and the whole situation was less confrontational, Blaine spoke freely and didn't need much prompting to continue. He told Kurt about hitting puberty and how that was when he started to realize that something was wrong that time wasn't going to fix. He described how it was like the knowledge opened a door for him and the whole world finally made *sense*. He spoke about living with the knowledge for nearly two years until one Saturday afternoon in February about a month before his fourteenth birthday, when he finally came out to his parents. He talked about starting the local high school as boy, leaving his female persona behind him in middle school.

'But of course it wasn't that simple,' Blaine said, smiling ruefully as he set the timer for the cookies that were now baking in the oven. His eyes were on Kurt, but he looked distant. Kurt could tell that bad memories were resurfacing, and he desperately hoped that he wasn't doing more damage than good by asking all these questions. 'I could change my name all I wanted, but a lot of these kids had known me since I was six years old, and the ones that didn't were quickly told everything. Everyone knew. I was the school freak.'

'I'm sorry.' Kurt winced. His words seemed horribly insufficient.

'It didn't go on for that long.' Blaine shrugged, but his voice was tight with suppressed emotion. 'It was less than six months before I left that school for good.' Something told Kurt that it hadn't been a peaceful goodbye. He got up from where he was sitting and moved to stand closer to Blaine.

'What happened?' Kurt felt bad for asking, because for the first time since they had started the conversation upstairs, Blaine had become visibly uncomfortable, but at this point it was better to get it out, Kurt thought, likening Blaine's words to poison from a wound.

'It was-' Blaine swallowed, closing his eyes for moment. 'It's- I've told you about it before.'

'Sadie Hawkins,' Kurt guessed, and Blaine nodded. 'It wasn't just two gay guys getting bashed, was it?' Somehow in a twisted way that would have been better, Kurt thought.

'They hated Tyler as well for being gay, of course, but I think mostly he just happened to be there. And he dared to be friends with me.'

'Did they catch the guys that did it?' Kurt asked, looking for some glimmer of justice, but Blaine shook his head.

'We never knew who they were. Anyway,' he went on, clearly eager to change the topic. 'Things got better after that. I was out of school for the rest of the semester. I started T – testosterone that is – a few months later, and my parents enrolled me at Dalton where no one knew me and I could start high school over as boy, no questions asked. That's when things really started to get better.'

As Blaine continued to talk about the transfer to Dalton and the new experiences and friends he had made there, Kurt saw him look truly happy for the first time since the night before. If there had been any doubt in Kurt's mind about the validity of transsexuality, it went out the window, when Blaine described finally passing consistently to strangers on the street and living every day unquestioned in his male identity. His voice was quivering with pure unadulterated joy.

Blaine was still speaking about Dalton ten minutes later when they made their way back upstairs, Kurt clutching a plate of warm, freshly-baked cookies, and as he went on his stories became less and less about his life as a transboy and more about his life just as a boy. Even though Kurt had heard some of the stories previously, hearing them now made him smile more than he ever had before. Kurt couldn't help feeling like he was getting to know his boyfriend all over again. He wasn't a different person obviously. All these new pieces of information still added up to the same wonderful Blaine, only *more* so somehow. Kurt wasn't sure that made any sense, but it was the only way he could describe what he was feeling.

'Okay,' Kurt said when Blaine had finally trailed off, and he faked seriousness as he took Blaine's hands in his. 'Just tell me one thing, because you haven't really been clear about it. Did you or did you not love Dalton?' Blaine looked confused for a moment, but then he caught Kurt's teasing grin and chuckled.

'I'm sorry. I gush. It's just, that place changed my life.' Blaine crawled up on the bed, sitting against the headboard and indicating that Kurt should follow. He grabbed a cookie from the plate on the night table, breaking it in two and offering Kurt one half. 'Twice. First when I started and then again fourteen months later.' He turned his head and smiled fondly at Kurt. 'When I met you.' He placed a brief kiss on Kurt's lips, which quirked in an amused smile.

'Mmm. Remind me to thank Puck. He was the one who suggested that I go spy on you guys,' Kurt explained when Blaine frowned in confusion. 'Although he was a bit of an ass about it. And he called you "The Garglers."'

Blaine laughed. 'I'll be sure to thank him sometime. But for now...' Blaine sank further into a lying position and scooted closer to Kurt who accommodated him gladly. 'Cuddling. Without an audience this time, please.'

'Mm, yes... sounds lovely,' Kurt agreed, stifling a yawn, and they both fell quiet soon after. Kurt suspected that he wasn't the only one who hadn't slept much the previous night.

There was still a question on Kurt's mind though. Something that Blaine hadn't brought up and that Kurt had felt too embarrassed to ask about, unsure if he was crossing a line.

'Blaine?' he asked finally.

'Mm, what?' Blaine mumbled against Kurt chest, sending pleasant vibrations through Kurt's body.

'Are we done talking for today or can I still ask?'

'You can ask.'

'What about, like, equipment? I mean, hormones can only do so much, and you obviously haven't had surgery...'

Blaine lay still for a few seconds, but then he untangled himself from Kurt, who sat up to watch what he was doing. Blaine opened the top drawer in his dresser and spent a few moments rifling through it. When he turned back around he was holding up a black piece of fabric that at first glance looked a bit like a sports bra. He threw it at Kurt who caught it.

'It's called a binder,' Blaine said as Kurt examined it. The fabric was stretchy and double-layered and it had a sort of rough texture that Kurt couldn't imagine felt comfortable on a person's skin.

'You wear this everyday?'

'Well, that one's my extra. I only wear it when my other one is in the wash or if I need to double-bind.'

'Why would you need to do that?' Kurt asked, concern in his voice, as he stood and walked over to Blaine. The thought of a person wearing one of these was bad enough, but two? 'You're so flat already. No one would ever guess.'

Kurt reached out to run a hand across Blaine's chest, meaning to prove his point, but Blaine recoiled instantly. He backed into the dresser with a loud bang, causing several items on top of it to fall over, and Kurt jumped back in surprise.

'I'm- I'm sorry. Sorry,' Kurt stammered, snatching his hand back. *Stupid stupid*, he cursed himself. *Use your head*.

'It's okay.' Blaine hissed slightly, rubbing his back where he had banged it against a drawer knob. 'I'm fine. You just startled me, that's all.'

'I'm sorry,' Kurt repeated.

'You weren't to know,' Blaine said simply, waving the matter off. 'Anyway, to answer your question. It's not necessarily about other people. I pass pretty perfectly like this. Even if I went out wearing a dress and heels, people would still think "man in a dress". Rationally I know that, but unfortunately that's not how dysphoria works, and if you're having a particularly bad day, it just helps to know that those parts of yourself are hidden as far away as possible.'

'Promise me one thing?' Kurt asked, lifting his left hand slowly to cup the side of Blaine's face. 'Next time you have a bad day, you tell me about it, and we'll deal with it together.' Blaine covered Kurt's hand with

his own, keeping it there for a few seconds, before gently pushing Kurt's hand away. It was a moment before he replied.

'Kurt, it gets... I'm fine most of the time – I deal – but it gets bad sometimes. Not- not "I-wanna-kill-myself" bad, but pretty bad, and I'm not sure you wanna be around that.'

'Well, I am. Besides what kind of boyfriend would I be, if I only wanted you when you're happy and smiley? Relationships don't work like that. Just promise me.' Kurt waited until Blaine gave a small nod, before he took a step back and, deciding he might as well be blunt about it, pointed at Blaine's crotch, where a slight bulge was visible in the tight pants he wore, and asked, trying his best not to sound awkward, 'What's that?'

'Ahh...' Blaine laughed awkwardly, and he was blushing slightly. 'That's called a packer. Hang on, I have an extra somewhere.' He went over to his bedside table, opened a drawer there and pulled out, well, a *penis*, which he placed on the bed for Kurt to inspect. It was flesh-colored and maybe four or five inches long and quite lifelike, Kurt thought. It even had testicles. He was tempted to reach out and touch it, curious to know what it felt like compared to his own, but he felt oddly like that *would* be crossing a line, so he kept his hands to himself.

'You can't, like, have sex with it or anything,' Blaine explained. 'It's just to create the, uhm, bulge.' He blushed again. 'Not all guys wear them, but I never leave the house without it. It helps, I guess.' Blaine trailed off and looked up at Kurt, whose eyes kept drifting to the packer. 'Is it weird? It's weird, I know-' Blaine made to grab the packer and the binder that was also on the bed, but Kurt stopped him.

'No no, it's fine,' Kurt said. 'It just takes some getting used to. I mean, this time yesterday I still thought you had a body like any other guy.'

'I'm sorry.'

'It's okay. It's just different.'

There was a knock on the door then, and before Blaine could respond it opened to reveal his father on the other side, a mobile phone in his hand.

'Blaine, your mom called, and she- Oh,' he interrupted himself, looking between Blaine, Kurt and the items on the bed between them. 'Hi, Kurt.'

'Hello, Mr. Anderson,' Kurt greeted politely as Blaine frantically covered the packer with the binder and then, apparently deciding that wasn't good enough, grabbed a pillow to cover both items. Mr. Anderson simply stared at the pillow.

'Dad? You had something to say?' Blaine asked coolly, and Mr. Anderson seemed to snap out of his reverie.

'Yes, sorry. Your mom called and she's on her way home. She's picking up dinner from that Thai place you like, and she wants to know what you want.'

'Oh. I dunno. Just get me a number eight with extra chili,' Blaine responded distractedly, and Mr. Anderson nodded before turning to Kurt.

'What about you, Kurt? Are you staying?'

'Thank you, but I should probably be heading home soon.' Blaine's father nodded and left the room, closing the door behind him. Kurt turned to Blaine with a light frown on his face. 'Was that as awkward as I think it was?'

'I'm being passive-aggressive,' Blaine told him casually.

'Why?' Kurt asked, half-amused. He knew that Blaine wasn't as close to his parents as Kurt was to his dad, but Kurt had never seen Blaine be anything but the picture of politeness around them.

'Remember when I told you about Thanksgiving? About my grandmother calling me a freak and all that?' Kurt winced but nodded. 'Did I tell you it happened during the big dinner, and that it wasn't just her, and that my dad basically sat back and let it happen?'

'He what? Why would he do that?'

Blaine simply shrugged. 'We came home on Sunday to Mom just screaming her lungs out at him. I don't think I've ever seen her so angry. It was kind of awesome,' he added, as though he was only just realizing this. 'Anyway, he did apologize, but I just can't be all buddy-buddy with him again after that. Not that I normally am.'

'But he's not against you being trans, is he? I mean, he wouldn't have allowed you to transition otherwise, would he?'



'No,' Blaine admitted slowly. 'I get the feeling he's more concerned that I'm not doing it right.'

'What does that mean?' Kurt asked, nonplussed. Blaine was quiet for a moment as he searched for words.

'Alright, so... in my dad's family, the way he grew up, it's like... men are men and women are women, you know?' Kurt nodded, rolling his eyes at the notion. 'It's stupid and old-fashioned, but that's what he was taught.'

'So, what? He's upset that you like show choir? That you'd rather talk about fashion than cars? That you're gay?'

'All I know is that after I came out as trans, he got obsessed with taking me out to all these stereotypically male bonding activities. Fishing. Playing video games. Car fixing. Baseball games. Playing basketball. And he doesn't even like half those things. Most recently he's told me that maybe I shouldn't be doing musical theater since it's so girly, while encouraging me to get more serious about boxing. It doesn't take a genius to figure it out.'

'I'm sorry,' Kurt sympathized. 'I thought he seemed different. A bit less rigid.'

'It doesn't matter.' Blaine tried to seem casual, handwaving the matter off. 'I'm done trying to please him.'

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Part three*

#### ***Kurt likes to stare at Blaine. So does Sebastian.***

As preparations for Sectionals got more and more intense – what with Blaine's brother riding them all harder and harder and with the number of rehearsal hours doubling – Kurt and Blaine didn't get many moments just to themselves for the rest of the week. Their time together seemed to be made up of brief talks during lunch and between classes, half-conversations as they struggled through their homework at night and the time they spent with the rest of the glee club in rehearsal.

'You're staring,' Rachel told Kurt, sitting down next to him on Friday afternoon halfway through rehearsal. Kurt turned his head to look at her questioningly, but she just nodded her head in the direction Kurt had been looking.

'He's my boyfriend. I'm allowed to stare,' Kurt replied shortly, gazing back across the room where Cooper was working with Blaine and Artie on their number. The rest of the group was doing Booty Camp with Mr. Schue, who was tapping people out one by one as they got the move right.

'Of course you are,' Rachel conceded. 'I've just caught you doing it a lot this past week. Always when he isn't looking.'

'Look at the kettle calling the pot black,' Kurt said dryly. 'How do you even know that if you weren't also staring at me?'

'The first few times I was actually just trying to catch your attention, not stare at you,' she explained patiently, before continuing, smile evident in her voice. 'Even if I was, you're my best friend. I'm allowed to stare.' She paused. 'Look, I just noticed and wanted to make sure you're okay. You guys *are* okay, right?'

'Yes,' Kurt said, a small smile playing on his lips. 'More than okay.'

'Oh, my god,' Rachel whispered in sudden excitement. 'You had sex!'

Kurt whipped his head around. 'What?'

'Because you're totally acting like Finn and I after-'

'Ew, no, Rachel. Don't go there,' Kurt said, holding a hand up to stop her talking. He had no problem with his brother and best friend dating, but hearing about their sex life was so not at the top of his wish list. 'And since you asked; no we didn't.'

'But something happened,' Rachel insisted. 'You look at him differently now.'

Kurt considered his words. He obviously couldn't tell her everything that was going on, but she was still his best friend and he wanted to share as much as he could with her.

'We did take things to a new level recently,' he said, looking back in across the room, where Blaine and Artie were finishing a piece of choreography, and Cooper was giving notes. 'And it's new and scary, but I'm also more in love than I've ever been.' Kurt glanced back at Rachel, smiling and biting back a laugh as he watched her fight her own curiosity.

'Okay, since you're clearly not about to spill – which for the record I think is a little unfair, seeing as I tell you everything there is to know about Finn and I-'

'Not that you give me much of a choice,' Kurt interjected.

'- I'm just going to sit here and be happy for you,' Rachel finished, crossing her legs and sitting back in the chair, hands folded in her lap.

'Good,' Kurt chuckled, patting her leg as he got up to rejoin Booty Camp.

'Wait, you're really not going to tell me?' she called after him.

'Nope,' Kurt called back, laughing at his friend's frustrated sigh.

Luckily, Mr. Schue had overruled Cooper when the latter had suggested that they set up extra rehearsal time during the weekend, which meant that they had the weekend off, although they were all still expected to practice by themselves. As Kurt and Blaine walked into the Lima Bean on Saturday morning, Blaine was telling Kurt how he had barely managed to escape the house half an hour earlier, Cooper having insisted on rehearsing one-on-one with Blaine.

'He's insane,' Blaine ranted as they made their way to their usual table, coffee in hand. 'I didn't even get to sleep until midnight last night, because he kept wanting to go over and over the same things. At this rate I'll be lucky to have any voice left for the actual competition next week.' He gave a frustrated sigh as he sat and took a sip of his coffee, which seemed to calm him somewhat.

'At least you're featured in two songs,' Kurt pointed out bracingly, careful not to sound too bitter about his own three lines (amazingly it was a step up from previous competitions with New Directions).

'Yeah, well,' Blaine muttered bitterly. 'Maybe I shouldn't be, because apparently I suck.'

'Come on, Blaine. You do not.'

'Oh, yeah. I bet our wonderful leader would have something to say about that.'

'Finn? *Finn* is stupid and insecure. He's acting like this because you *don't* suck, and you need to just talk to him.' Kurt would have talked to Finn himself a long time ago, except Blaine had asked him not to get involved. At Kurt's suggestion, however, Blaine crossed his arms and stuck out his bottom lip in a pout.

'He started it,' he grumbled, and Kurt had to swallow his laugh, because Blaine looked a bit like a toddler in a temper tantrum.

'Very mature, Blaine,' Kurt rolled his eyes. 'Anyway, on the whole I'd say you're better off than me. No lead in the musical, no school presidency, no competition solos and no chance in hell of getting into NYADA.'

'You're right, I'm sorry.' Blaine relaxed his arms and a concerned look crossed his face. 'We haven't even talked about that since...' Blaine made a vague gesture with his hand. 'Everything.'

'That's because there's nothing *to* talk about. I'm not getting in. Might as well get used to a life of barista work.' Kurt waved the Lima Bean application form that he had grabbed at the counter.

'Come on, now who's being immature?' Blaine scolded mildly. 'It's not NYADA or bust, you know. There *are* other options.'

'But I don't *want* any other options,' Kurt whined, knowing that he was in danger of sounding just as childish as Blaine had a minute ago.

'Hey, guys.'

Kurt looked up at the sound of the unfortunately familiar voice, and almost groaned at the sight of its owner, who for some reason seemed to think he was invited to sit at their table.

'It's *so* crazy, I'm sitting over there, checking out this guy, when all of a sudden I'm, like, "wait a second, I know that hair."' "

Kurt didn't like Sebastian. It was no secret and, as he watched the Warbler casually admit to checking out Kurt's boyfriend as though Kurt wasn't even there, he was pretty sure that the expression on his face betrayed his feelings, anyway. Blaine's face, meanwhile, lit up in a smile that, while far too bright to be entirely genuine, was a clear attempt to be polite and friendly.

Blaine really was quite possibly the politest, most well-mannered kid that Kurt knew – certainly at McKinley no one exceeded him in that department. Basically he was the kind of kid that every mother loved and wanted as their own, and Carole, for one, had expressed her adoration for Blaine on multiple occasions.

Kurt wondered sometimes where it came from. He knew that, even though Blaine wasn't exactly rich, his father did come from respectable money, and had disappointed his family by marrying "beneath" him and choosing a middle-of-the-road job. Before Kurt had met Cooper, he had thought that Blaine's behavior was the result of a strict upbringing. However, the more he learned about Blaine and his family and the more he thought about it, Kurt realized that it was simply in Blaine's nature to be as unfailingly polite and proper as possible. And if he thought about it a bit longer, it occurred to him that the way Blaine was always so perfect and eager to please, constantly striving to do and be better, might be him seeking approval from the parents to whom he was so certain that he was a disappointment. The idea made him sad, and Kurt thought that if anyone had a right to be disappointed it was Blaine.

The point was, Kurt thought, as Sebastian moved from his long-winded and smirky greeting to basically admitting that he stalked Blaine online, that where Kurt could sometimes be a bit cynical and snarky, Blaine was wonderfully warm and kind, the type of person who was always open to strangers, and who liked to see the best in people, and Kurt loved that about him. He really did.

The only problem was cases like Sebastian Smythe, where "the best" was so deeply buried it might as well be non-existent. The guy was creepy, wouldn't take no for an answer and gave off major stalker vibes, but

still Blaine didn't have the heart to put his foot down and tell Sebastian to leave him the hell alone. It made Kurt sick to think about Sebastian texting and flirting with Blaine, not because he doubted Blaine – even if it weren't for his obvious intimacy issues, Blaine would never cheat – but because Sebastian made Kurt's skin crawl, and he didn't want the guy anywhere near his boyfriend.

And when Blaine left to get another coffee, Kurt told Sebastian as much, which resulted in the two of them slinging insults at each other, only dropping it when Blaine returned. Later as they were making their way home, Kurt brought up the topic again.

'About Sebastian... Are you planning on ever telling him to stop following you around?'

'Not especially, no,' Blaine replied distractedly, more concerned with keeping an eye on traffic.

'Do you *like* having him follow you around?' Kurt went on, although he was pretty sure he knew the answer.

'He's harmless, Kurt,' Blaine said, an edge of impatience in his voice.

'He's creepy.'

'He is not *creepy*. I know he takes some getting used to but-'

'Why are you defending him?' Kurt interrupted, raising his voice a little and getting annoyed.

'I'm not def- I'm just saying that he may not be as bad as you make him out to be. Maybe he's just trying to make friends in his own weird way.'

'Oh, I think he has a bit more than friendship on his mind,' Kurt shot back. 'Are you really that naive? Or do you just enjoy having him flirt with you?'

'Oh, here we go,' Blaine snapped. 'Jackpot. I was waiting for this.'

'What?'

'You don't trust me!'

'Well, you did lie to me,' Kurt pointed out as calmly as he could given the situation. Why were they fighting all of a sudden? 'I'm not trying to be mean here, but those are the facts, and as much as I want to I can't just magically be over that.'

'I'm sorry. I'm sorry I lied. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.' They turned a corner into Kurt's street, and Blaine took a deep breath, his voice calmer and sincere as he went on. 'You know how much I regret that. But you also know that there was a very specific reason I did that, and Sebastian has nothing to do with any that. You really think I'd cheat on you? I've told you. I'm not. Interested. In. Sebastian.'

'Okay, I believe that,' Kurt replied honestly, but he persisted, realizing that Sebastian wasn't actually the real problem, anyway. 'Just answer me this then: Would you be happier if he just went away?'

Blaine shrugged. 'Probably, yeah.'

'Then why won't you make him?'

'Because...' Blaine sighed as they pulled into driveway in front of Kurt's house, and Blaine turned off the ignition, looking straight ahead as he answered the question. 'Because he's a Warbler, and I don't want to risk burning that bridge. You know how much those guys mean to me. Why does this upset you so much, anyway? It's not you he's bothering.'

'Because if you can't handle telling someone you don't even *like* to leave you alone or to, you know, behave like a decent human being, then how are you going to handle the really difficult conversations with me?'

'Like what?'

Kurt bit his lip. He hated saying it. He didn't want to be the asshole that made everything about this, but at the same time he couldn't pretend that it didn't matter or that he wasn't worried.

'Like... sex.' Blaine looked immediately and obviously uncomfortable, and he got out of the car without saying anything, and Kurt followed, voice raised as he went on, 'See? This is what I'm talking about.'

'Alright, let's do it now then,' Blaine yelled standing on the other side of the car and throwing his arms into the air. For one wild moment Kurt thought that by "do it" he meant "have sex", and he gaped, but then Blaine continued, 'Let's talk about it now. Will that make you happy?'

Kurt almost shouted something he would have been sure to regret, but then he caught Blaine's eye, and he let out a long breath, deflating a little and closing his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again, Blaine's expression had softened, and Kurt sent him a sad sort of smile. They were both getting way too worked up about this, and it wasn't helping. Blaine walked to the front of the car and leaned against the hood. A second later Kurt joined him.

'Look, Blaine,' he began, staring at his feet and speaking softly. 'I'm trying. But I'm kinda fumbling in the dark here. I haven't done this – any of this – before.' Kurt looked around at Blaine and their eyes met. Blaine smiled softly.

'Me either.' Kurt nodded, shivering a little in the cold December air.

'So... let's figure it out together. Come on.' Kurt nodded his head towards the front door. 'It's freezing. Let's get inside. I'm dying for some hot chocolate.' Kurt stopped outside the door, turning back to look at Blaine. 'But later, do you think we can talk? About the sex issue? It doesn't have to be big. Really, it doesn't. Just five minutes to figure out where we stand.'

'Okay,' Blaine nodded determinedly. 'I can handle five minutes.'

The actual conversation, when they got to it later in the afternoon, turned out every bit as uncomfortable as Kurt had expected. It felt strange for Kurt to be taking the lead in this, having always believed that, of the two of them, Blaine – despite being nine months younger – was the more sexually confident. In reality, however, Blaine was anything but, crossing his arms uncomfortably throughout most of the conversation and half the time looking anywhere but at Kurt – who, for his part, struggled to keep his stammering and blushing to a minimum. It was better to have the conversation now, though, Kurt felt, rather than wait for some passionate make out session to get out of hand. So yes, it was quite possibly the most awkward conversation the two of them had had yet, but it was clear and honest, and by the end of it both of them knew where the other stood, not to mention Kurt knew what to call certain body parts and which of them were off limits.

When Blaine got oddly quiet and thoughtful afterward, barely commenting on the rerun of *The Bachelorette* that they ended up watching, Kurt attributed it to the lingering awkwardness around the conversation. Trent had warned Kurt that Blaine didn't like conversation to focus on his transgender identity, and it didn't occur to Kurt that there could be more than that on Blaine's mind.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Part four*

#### ***Finn muses on Blaine and his own behavior towards him.***

When Finn announced on Friday after glee rehearsal that he wanted to drive to Kentucky and convince Sam Evans to come back to Lima and rejoin New Directions, he said that they needed star power, and he wasn't lying per se. Sam was an excellent performer, and they did desperately need members for the club, but the real reason Finn brought him up was that, as the club's acting captain, he felt like he should be contributing *something*, other than following Cooper Anderson's every order. Not that Cooper wasn't helping them, and it was awesome that he was doing it all for free, but Finn was still captain and he couldn't be seen to not be pulling his weight.

And besides, why did Cooper have to be *Blaine's* older brother?

Finn had had no particular feelings towards Blaine when he had just been this faceless name of a kid that Kurt went to school with and had crush on – except maybe mild annoyance, which wasn't really Blaine's fault, of course. It was just that Kurt had talked about him *a lot* and, as Finn's mother had taught him when he was six years old, too much of a good thing could actually be a *bad* thing – Finn just wished she would have told him that *before* he had eaten the entire tub of ice cream.

Anyway, the point was that he didn't have a problem with Blaine, and once he became Kurt's boyfriend, and Finn actually met the guy, he liked him well enough – or as much as you could like the guy that was dating your brother. You were supposed to be kind of protective of your sibling and seem a bit intimidating towards the guy, right? Granted, Kurt was only his step-brother, and had been for less than two years, and also Kurt was actually several months older not to mention a whole lot smarter than Finn, but Finn still couldn't help feeling big-brotherly towards Kurt. Maybe it was like an optical illusion where, because Kurt was so little and Finn was so big, Finn kept forgetting that Kurt was technically the big brother in the relationship. Or maybe it was because in the beginning when everyone had expected him to stand up for Kurt when he was getting bullied, Finn had failed so miserably, and now he was sort of trying to make up for it.

Whatever the reason, Finn felt protective, yes, but he had never felt the need to *actually* protect his brother from Blaine, because the dude seemed like a genuinely nice guy. Even when he had Finn's mom practically cooing over him and making Finn feel like an inadequate son, Finn couldn't find it in himself to hate the guy. Blaine was just so damned *likeable*.

But then Blaine had followed Kurt to McKinley and everything changed.

Finn was being an ass to Blaine. Somewhere he did know that, even if he tried to tell everyone, including himself, that he was just trying to protect the club from attention seekers and ball hogs (ignoring that he himself was dating one) and that he as a team captain knew what he was doing more so than Blaine did, so could he please sit down, fall in line and let Finn talk.

The thing was that as easy as it was to like Blaine, the person and the brother-in-law, as difficult it was not to resent Blaine, the performer. Because here Finn had worked hard for two whole years to become the singer and dancer the club needed him to be to take them to Nationals, and in waltzed Blaine Anderson with his enthusiasm and charm and lead soloist experience, and he was just instantly *better*? How was that fair? All Finn had on Blaine was his leadership qualities and experience, and if he let Blaine take that away from him, Finn had nothing. He would just be another decently talented vocalist and a mediocre dancer. Even Mike had turned out to have quite a decent voice on him, and Mike could dance – as in *dance*. As in he could probably get a scholarship to some fancy performing arts school, if his dad didn't force him to go to med school. What did Finn have? As of a month ago, his football career was officially going nowhere and his GPA wasn't exactly something to brag about either. All Finn really had was his glee club captaincy, and he wasn't about to give it up without a fight.

So for three months Finn had taken nearly every opportunity to assert his power over Blaine and to generally act like a jerk to him. It was only lately that Finn was starting to realize that Blaine had no intention of usurping him as a leader and that probably what he wanted out of glee club more than anything was to fit in and have fun. Also if anyone had a problem with Blaine's brother being part of the process, it was probably Blaine himself. Finn hadn't failed to notice that he had gotten significantly moodier since Cooper's arrival, and once or twice Finn thought he saw him biting back what probably would have been a snarky retort to one of his brother's many notes.

Honestly, the dude seemed kind of stressed lately.

Which was why Finn didn't say anything on Tuesday afternoon when he and Sam found themselves in a disagreement about the merits of body rolls. A month ago Finn would have probably thrown himself at Sam's idea, grateful for yet another opportunity to show Blaine where his place was, but now he wasn't so sure if he didn't just want to agree with Blaine. It wasn't like Finn could really do a body roll, anyway, or at least not one that wouldn't get him laughed off the stage. Before Finn could gather his thoughts, though, Cooper was cutting in.

'No, no. Sam, that's a great idea,' he said, clapping Sam on the shoulder. 'Where did you find this one again?' he asked, turning to Finn, and Finn nearly found himself blurting *In a strip club*, but bit his tongue. 'Kentucky? Well done, Finn. Way to show initiative.'

Blaine sent Finn a sour look at that, and Finn felt like defending himself and pointing out that he hadn't actually done anything this time, and he couldn't help it if the two brothers didn't get along, but instead he ended up just kind of shrugging awkwardly at Blaine and scratching the back of his head.

'Come on, guys,' Cooper called out to the group. 'Give it a try. Watch Sam.' Finn looked awkwardly on from the sidelines as everyone but he and Blaine tried out the new move, and Blaine gave an exasperated sigh when the reactions were largely positive.

'Come on, Blaine,' Cooper called from the other side of the room, where he was attempting to show Rory how to do it properly. 'Just try it out.'

'No, we don't need to resort to... *that*,' Blaine said, indicating Cooper's movements. 'It's cheap, you know, it's- it's selling out.'

'Honestly, Blaine,' Cooper chided. 'Don't be such a prude.' Blaine closed his eyes and made a strange movement with his head, as if to swat off a fly.

'I came back here to win,' Sam said next. 'When you're desperate, sometimes you gotta use your assets in order to get back the advantage. *This*,' Sam thrust his hips. 'is the advantage.'

'Of course that's what *you* think,' Blaine replied, taking a step closer to Sam. 'You have to think that in order to sleep at night.'

'What the hell does that mean?' Sam demanded, all color draining from his face. Finn stepped forward then, sensing where this was going and trying to intervene. And honestly, did Kurt have to share *everything* with his boyfriend?

'Guys, please... This is getting off-track,' he interjected, but both Sam and Blaine ignored him, their eyes fixed on each other.

'It means,' Blaine snarled. 'That *I'm not for sale*.' Sam's eyes flared in anger and he shoved Blaine hard, and Blaine pushed him back.

'Hey!' Cooper yelled, and he was on them immediately, breaking up the fight before it could escalate. He gripped Blaine by the arm, dragging him towards Mr. Schue's office, hissing in his ear, 'In here.' The whole group watched them in stunned silence, the only sound coming from Sam who was breathing heavily. A moment later the door slammed shut behind them and the blinds were pulled, blocking them from view. Finn turned to Kurt.

'Dude, what is going on with him? This isn't like him.' Kurt opened his mouth but no sound came out. He looked just as shocked as everyone else.

'I think I'd better go in there,' Mr. Schue said, stepping forward. 'See what's going on.'

'Don't,' Kurt warned. 'We'll take care of it.' Mr. Schue looked conflicted for a moment, watching as Kurt moved to go in there himself, but then he turned his attention instead to other boy.

'Sam, are you okay?' he asked standing next to him, and putting a hand on his shoulder.

'Yeah,' Sam breathed, visibly trying to calm himself down. 'I'm sorry, but he's got some nerve.'

'Yeah...' Finn said, more to himself than anyone, turning his head to glance towards the the closed office from where raised voices sounded, but no words that he could make out. He felt kind of responsible. Without really realizing he was doing it, Finn had walked over there, opened the door, entered and closed the door behind him.

Blaine and Cooper were standing towards the back of the room, facing each other, and Kurt was watching them from a few feet away, his back to the door. He didn't seem to register that Finn was there.

'What the hell is with you, Blaine?' Cooper was saying, voice raised in anger but not quite shouting. 'Starting fights? You were raised better than this.'

'That's right. Go ahead and tell me how I'm never good enough,' Blaine yelled at his brother. 'Stupid, screwed up Blaine. Always such a damned disappointment, right? Can't do anything right. Can't sing. Can't dance. Can't be a daughter. Can't be a son. Can't be a sister, or a brother. Can't be a girl. Can't be a boy. Can't be a boyfriend... Can't be anything but a freak.'

'Hey, little brother.' Cooper's hands were raised and his voice had lost its angry edge, now just trying to calm his brother down. 'I won't have you talk like that.'

Blaine, however was not about to back down and he rounded on Finn next. 'And you!' he snapped so harshly that it made Finn flinch, and both Cooper and Kurt startled, surprised to see him standing just inside the door. 'What is your problem with me, anyway? Ever since I got here, you've given me *nothing* but crap.'

'Honestly, dude, I was kind of jealous,' Finn replied as calmly as he could, remembering from his numerous fights with Rachel that, unless he wanted the fight to escalate, it was always best to keep himself as composed as possible. Blaine made a noise of disbelief as though he couldn't see how that was possible. 'I felt threatened. Your talent kind of freaked me out. Made me question whether or not I was good enough. Blaine, I'm sorry. I've been acting like a jackass to you.'

Blaine made an unimpressed gesture as if to say "well, yeah. Duh."

'It was stupid and childish, and I'm sorry if I've made you feel like, like-' Finn searched for words. He hadn't really understood most of Blaine's rant, but he knew that it wasn't good. 'Like a disappointment or...'

'I think you're giving yourself too much credit,' Cooper told him quietly as Blaine sank heavily into a chair.

'I'm just so sick of trying so hard all the time,' Blaine mumbled, resting his elbows on his knees and pressing the heels of his hands against closed eyes.

'Then don't,' Kurt said, rushing forward and kneeling in front of Blaine, pulling at his wrists and making him look up. 'Just be you.'

'What if I'm not enough?' Blaine whispered so quietly that Finn could barely hear – and he was beginning to feel like maybe he really *shouldn't* hear.

'Enough what?'

'Enough...' Blaine swallowed. 'Enough man. For them. For you.'

'You are, Blaine. You are. You don't have to try.'

Blaine had always been small next to Finn (well, so was anyone), but he seemed positively tiny right now. Even when he stood up to his full height, facing away from all of them, he appeared to want to sink into the floor. 'You deserve someone who can make love to you. Properly.'

Finn sucked in a breath. He still had no clue what was going on or why Blaine was upset, but he felt certain that he *really* shouldn't be here for this. However, during everything they had somehow all switched places, and now Finn couldn't make it to the door without attracting attention, which seemed even more awkward and rude than just staying put and pretending he wasn't here.

'Properly?' Kurt repeated. 'Properly is me and you, that's what's proper. Everything else is just details.'

'You don't have to pretend. I know,' Blaine choked out. 'I've seen way you look at me when you think I can't see.'

'Like I think you're amazing and brave?' Kurt replied without missing a beat. 'Like I admire your strength and courage to be who you are?' Kurt put a hand on Blaine's shoulder, urging him to turn around. 'Like I can't believe the crap you've been through, and I'm kind of in awe that you're still standing? Like that?'

There were tears in Blaine's eyes as he watched Kurt with a softening expression. Finn was once again overwhelmed with the feeling that he was watching something extremely private, and he wished he had the power of teleportation, but no one seemed pay him any mind. The two of them had eyes only for each other, and Cooper's gaze was fixed on his brother, a strange look on his face, that Finn couldn't quite read.

'I thought maybe...' Blaine mumbled but trailed off.

'I'm in this *with* you, Blaine,' Kurt stressed, his voice soft. 'When are going to get that through your thick skull?'

Blaine sighed. I'm sorry. I get so lost in my head sometimes. I'd braced myself for rejection, and then when it didn't happen, I was so confused, I guess I just didn't know how to handle it. And then it was just one thing on top of another, and- and I'm an idiot.'

'It's okay, I get it.' Kurt reached out to cup Blaine's face, wiping away a tear with his thumb. 'But next time you *talk* to me, okay? Cause you're not a freak, Blaine. And I've never loved you more.'

Blaine nodded, whispering, barely audible, 'Okay.'

'Okay? Promise me you're not just saying that. Because I need to know that I can trust you, and that includes trusting you to trust me. Otherwise this isn't going to work.'

'Okay, I'll try. I'll- I'll do better. I promise.'

'Kurt.' Finn pulled his brother aside twenty minutes later. Glee rehearsal was up and running again, and in one corner Blaine was talking seriously to Sam, evidently apologizing for his earlier words.

'You shouldn't have followed,' Kurt told him plainly when they entered the hallway, empty except for a small group of football players chatting at someone's locker.

'I'm sorry. I was worried,' Finn replied defensively. 'Still kinda am. What was all that about?'

Kurt narrowed his eyes at Finn. 'You don't know?'

'No!' Kurt was making him feel stupid. 'All I heard was a bunch of talk about being a man or something, and then a lot of crying. You'd think Blaine was dying or something. Wait, he's not, is he?' Finn added, suddenly frightened. Kurt had had enough sickness and dying in his life.

'No, he's not sick,' Kurt said so fervently that Finn had to believe him.

'Then what? I know it's probably none of my business, but it's just, that was kind of intense in there.'

'I know. But he's fine,' Kurt reiterated. 'There are issues, yes, but we're dealing with them, and he's fine. I can't say any more, because the secret isn't mine to share. But you don't have to worry, I promise.' Kurt made to walk back inside, but turned back to add, 'But still, don't repeat what you heard to anyone. Not even to Rachel.' Kurt thought for a few seconds. 'Especially not to Rachel.'

Finn was honestly still a little worried and as the afternoon wore on he kept a bit of a closer eye than normal on Blaine, and in fact over the next few days he kept watching for any sign that he should be concerned, but Blaine seemed fine, really. In the end Finn put it out of his mind, trusting in his brother. And besides, whatever it was obviously wasn't any of Finn's business. All he really needed to know was that Blaine was good to perform at Sectionals on Saturday, or else they would *all* have something to worry about. That was all that mattered, and if there was one thing Finn knew about Blaine, it was that he was always ready to perform. The rest was none of Finn's business.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### *Part one*

*Hold me tight and kiss me slow (My head gets so confused)*

***Blaine takes steps towards becoming more comfortable with his body and sexuality.***

*Coming out is the most liberating thing you have ever experienced. You're still only out to a small group of people, as you and your parents agree to take things one step at a time, but even though the world at large still sees you as "Amber" and probably assumes that you're a lesbian from the way you present yourself, it's a wonderful feeling finally being able to be honest with those closest to you, and the reactions you get are as different as the people you tell. Your parents, of course, are shocked and confused but ultimately accepting and willing to get you the help you need. Your brother makes the whole thing seem entirely insignificant, and if it isn't for the fact that he immediately starts calling you "Blaine" and "bro", you might suspect him of misunderstanding everything. As it is, you quickly realize that it's simply Cooper's way of saying that he just doesn't care what you are, as long as you're who you are. Sara, your best friend, reacts by throwing her arms around your neck and declaring that she will always love you, no matter what. Yes, it's a wonderful feeling, and you suspect it's probably the happiest you have been for a long time.*

*Which is why it's so confusing that you're also unhappier than you have ever been.*

*Since you were twelve years old, simply surviving and functioning like a normal person has become a skill that you had to learn and maintain. You developed coping mechanisms to help you deal with the feelings inside you – or maybe rather to help you not deal, because what you really did was ignore your issues, pushing them aside and choosing instead to devote all your time and energy to other things. Anything so you didn't have to think about the fact that someone somewhere – God or nature or whatever – screwed up big time. You buried yourself in school work, making you the top student in each of your classes and earning you the "teacher's pet" nickname for your trouble. You took to spending hour after hour in front the piano in your living room at home, perfecting your skill and your voice, taking on increasingly difficult pieces and winning the school talent show two years in a row. You learned how to detach yourself from your developing body, so the pain when you accidentally caught a glimpse of yourself in the mirror was less of a sharp stab to your core and more of a dull ache that was easy enough to ignore after a while.*

*It's different now though. Coming out makes everything real in a way it never was before. Before you could always hope that maybe – just maybe – this wasn't permanent, and you could still grow up to be normal and right. Deep down you knew it not to be true, but somehow you found comfort in the idea, so you clung to the hope with everything you had. Having said it out loud to another person now means admitting that this is never going to go away. That this is who you are. What you are.*

*And it means no longer being able to spend every day ignoring the issue, because now that you're out, you're expected to talk about it. You have started seeing a therapist who asks you to explain to her everything you're feeling and have ever felt, and every minute that you spend with your parents, you're confronted with the issue because, now that they know, they have a million questions and you also have to discuss what your options are as far as social and medical transition. They are trying to get the name and the pronouns right, but it's hard for them and they keep slipping up, and it's almost worse than when they were just calling you Amber because they didn't know any better. You can feel the issue hanging in the air at all times, constantly demanding attention and gnawing at you, even when you're not talking or when you're talking about something else entirely. It's just so there all the time, and sometimes it's all so overwhelming that you wish you never said anything.*

*The worst part is that it's getting harder and harder to detach yourself from the body you hate. Showers, getting undressed, and even peeing – it all gets more and more difficult, until one morning you step out of the shower, dry yourself off as usual and proceed down the hall to your bedroom, towel wrapped around you. There is a mirror in the door of your wardrobe and, when you reach out to open it, the towel slips and crumbles to the floor, leaving you naked and staring into a full body mirror. A month ago you would have just thought "huh" and gone about your business, but today the image paralyzes you to the point where all you can do is stand there, taking in every last detail that bothers you.*

*Your entire frame is too short. Your hips are too wide. Your waist is too tiny. Your thighs are too big. Your face is too round. Your feet are too small. Your lips are too plump. Your chest is too... there. And the less time spent on your genitals the better.*

*You have read and heard a lot of guys' stories, and the one advice they all give when it comes to transition – both social and medical – is patience. Changes don't happen overnight. You know this. And seeing their "before and after" videos does give you a lot of hope, but right now, as the minutes tick by and you keep staring at yourself – everything about what you see so wrong – it just seems hopeless.*

'God, I love your mouth,' Kurt mumbled as Blaine detached his lips from Kurt's and began trailing kisses up and down his neck.

'Mm... I love your everything,' Blaine said between kisses, too distracted by the way Kurt shivered beneath his touch to come up with a more eloquent reply.

It was Friday, the day before Sectionals. They had gone to Blaine's after school and, having found themselves confronted with an empty house – Blaine's mother working as usual, his father once again out of town and Cooper back in LA – the weekend had been less than an hour old before they gave in to each other. Innocent pecks had quickly given way to deep and passionate kisses and, before they had known it, they were lying on Blaine's bed pressed close together on their sides, their breathing heavy.

Blaine had one hand tangled in Kurt's hair, while he trailed Kurt's arm with the other, keeping his touch feather-light and caressing the soft skin tenderly. He pulled his head back a little, enough so he could look properly at Kurt. When their eyes met, Kurt smiled sweetly and lifted a hand to touch the side of Blaine's face, almost as though he wanted to make sure that Blaine was real.

'You're so beautiful,' Kurt said, his words so matter-of-fact and honest that it made Blaine's breathing hitch. They lay like that for a few moments, simply enjoying each other's closeness, before Kurt shifted closer still, kissing Blaine again and tangling their legs together. Blaine happily reciprocated and the strange fluttering sensation low in his stomach intensified minute by minute (or was it second by second? Hour by hour? Kissing Kurt had a way of making time lose its meaning). When they pulled apart for air, Blaine had a sudden devilish grin on his face and, as he let passion take over, he pushed Kurt onto his back and crawled on top of him, straddling his thighs.

'What are you doing?' Kurt asked, clearly taken aback by this turn of events. Friday nights – or any nights – didn't usually see Blaine straddling Kurt and eyeing his body hungrily.

'Taking steps,' Blaine replied, his voice low with undisguised desire. He leaned down and placed a swift, almost teasing, kiss on his boyfriend's lips, his hands roaming appreciatively across his chest. He could feel Kurt's excitement straining against his tight jeans but, rather than panic again, Blaine just felt dizzy with the thought that *he made Kurt react that way* – that Kurt was hard and excited because of *Blaine*. He tugged lightly at the dark vest Kurt was wearing. 'Okay if I take this off? And the shirt?'

'I- yeah.' Kurt's mouth fell open a little and his cheeks pinked. 'More than okay.'

'Good,' Blaine hummed, placing another soft kiss to Kurt's lips, before turning his attention to the buttons on Kurt's vest, popping each one slowly and deliberately. When they were all done, Kurt sat up a little so Blaine could push the thing off his shoulder. Kurt opened his mouth to speak, but Blaine was already in the process of neatly folding up the vest, and he placed it carefully on his bedside table.

'You know me so well,' Kurt said, smiling gratefully at Blaine.

'That I do,' Blaine agreed, grinning and pushing gently at Kurt's shoulders to make him lie back down and relax. Kurt was still wearing a white long-sleeved t-shirt rolled up to his elbows, and Blaine took a moment to appreciate the way it stretched tightly across his chest. He ran his hands from Kurt's shoulders to where his shirt met his jeans –*god*, his boyfriend was hot. Blaine snuck one hand under the shirt and kept it there as he leaned forward again to cover Kurt's mouth with his own, teasing the soft skin on the abdomen, and Kurt to moaned into the kiss. Blaine tugged at Kurt then, and they sat back up together, Blaine still straddling Kurt and their faces impossibly close. Kurt's face was flushed and his eyes were heavy-lidded and dark with want.

*Stop.*

Blaine froze, his hands on Kurt's waist, ready to pull at the shirt and continue their exploring. There was a strange ringing in Blaine's ears, and he was suddenly aware of how hard his heart was hammering. Part of his brain was screaming for him to stop and telling him that this wasn't what he wanted to be doing. At the same time though, a different part was repeating Kurt's endless reassurances to him, telling him that it would all be okay, and Blaine hesitated for a moment, confused by the two conflicting instincts. His hands played with the hem of the shirt, buying him time.

'Blaine?' Kurt spoke softly. 'Are you okay?'

'Yeah. Yeah...' Blaine replied automatically, distracted by the voice in his head that seemed convinced that the removal of Kurt's shirt was somehow a line that shouldn't be crossed. *Don't do it, don't do it, don't do it*, it chanted over and over, and Blaine swallowed, wishing it would just shut up. He had been doing *fine*.

'Hey, stay with me,' Kurt soothed, successfully cutting off the voice in Blaine's head. 'Do you want to stop?'

When their eyes met, the expression on Kurt's face was soft and tender, not a trace of annoyance or disappointment there. Blaine felt his Kurt's firm hand on the small of his back, grounding him, and all at once he knew beyond knowing that he was safe, that he would always be safe with Kurt. He heard Kurt's calming voice in his mind. *We'll be okay. Don't worry. Me and you, that's what proper.* And the words quieted the parts of him that were still so terrified of everything that was happening – of what could happen and of what he wanted to happen. They were still there, but quiet for now, and Blaine knew – *felt* – that if they just took everything slowly and one step at a time, he – they – would be okay.

'No, I don't want to stop,' he replied honestly, but finding that his voice shook a little and didn't sound altogether confident.

'Just promise me you'll never do anything because you think you have to,' Kurt persisted.

'I won't, I promise,' Blaine said, finding his confidence, and he finally stopped fiddling with the hem of Kurt's shirt and tugged at it, smiling when Kurt helped by lifting his arms above his head. The shirt removal ruffled Kurt's hair and, knowing that he was the only one who was allowed to see Kurt this way, Blaine found the look insanely sexy, and he folded the shirt a bit more hastily than he had the vest, tossing it on the floor, before cupping Kurt's face with both his hands, telling him in between kisses, 'I want you. So bad. You have no idea.'

'I think I do,' Kurt said as Blaine's hands and eyes wandered almost reverently across Kurt's chest, and Blaine unconsciously licked his lips. Kurt wasn't ripped by any means (which was just as well as far as Blaine was concerned) but years of dance practice and caring about his diet had left him well toned. His pale skin was hairless except for a thin line running down from his navel and under the hem of his pants (Blaine was beginning to understand why they called it a "happy trail"). Blaine let his hands explore the new territory, teasing one nipple and grinning wickedly when it made Kurt's breath hitch and his words catch in his throat. 'I'm- pretty sure- the feeling's- entirely mutual.'

'Mm, you should be shirtless always,' Blaine said, planting kisses everywhere on Kurt's torso.

Kurt smiled. 'Noted. But I'm not sure that would go over very well in school.'

'Darn. My dreams are dashed.' Blaine laughed.

'But speaking of shirtless,' Kurt went on. 'I wouldn't complain if you wanted to lose some clothes, too.'

Blaine straightened up, his eyes wide, and he felt a sudden rushing sensation in his stomach that had nothing to do with arousal. It took him a second but then he remembered something his therapist had once told him, and he chose to simply acknowledge it as a feeling and move on. He could refuse to let his fears be the boss of him.

'Okay,' he said after considering his answer for a moment. 'Not the binder though.'

Kurt nodded his understanding, and he watched Blaine as he pulled off his sweater vest and threw it aside on the chair beside the bed. Blaine became aware that his breathing had turned uneven, and he felt his heart rate pick up. He wasn't sure if it came from a place of anxiety or excitement, and maybe it didn't even matter. It was probably a little of both, anyway, he thought dimly as he fumbled with his bow tie, fingers shaking slightly.

'Here, let me.' Kurt gently brushed Blaine's hands away and, with nimble fingers, he undid the bow tie before tossing it on the chair. He began unbuttoning Blaine's shirt next and Blaine watched him do the work almost not quite believing that this was really happening, but Kurt kept reminding him by placing quick kisses on his mouth every few buttons. Soon there were no more buttons and almost without Blaine noticing it, Kurt slid the shirt off his shoulders, and then Blaine was shirtless except for the binder.

It felt... okay.

And suddenly it seemed like the silliest thing in the world to have been worrying about, when there were so many other, far more important things he could be doing. Like kissing Kurt. Kissing Kurt was always good. And kissing Kurt while rolling around (nearly) shirtless was even better than Blaine could have imagined. There was something about having Kurt so close, feeling skin against skin, that was doing indescribable things to Blaine. And Kurt presumably felt the same way, if the growing bulge in his pants was anything to go by.

'Can I... touch?' Blaine asked from his position above Kurt, indicating with his eyes what he meant.

'Yeah, okay,' Kurt replied, his breathing heavy and looking adorably flushed. 'If you want.'

'I want to,' Blaine said as he moved down on the bed and positioned himself on his knees, one knee planted between Kurt's. Blaine ran a hand down Kurt's abdomen, landing finally on his clothed erection. He pressed down and gave it an experimental squeeze, which made Kurt buck his hips and groan. So

Blaine did it again. And again. And again and again, varying the pressure and angle, noting what got which reactions, until Kurt was breathless, flushed and incoherent beneath him.

'Hey, no. Where are you going?' Kurt asked, very nearly whining, when Blaine moved from his seated position to instead lie on his side next to Kurt. 'Please don't stop.'

'You're adorable,' Blaine said with barely concealed amusement.

'And you're a tease,' Kurt said, pouting dramatically. 'I'm pretty sure what you're doing right now is torture. Or rather what you're *not* doing, I suppose.'

Blaine laughed and kissed Kurt once on the mouth before trailing his right hand down Kurt's torso, coming to a halt with his fingers barely touching the hem of his pants.

'What about this?' he asked in a low voice before he, feeling high with adrenaline and want and *Kurt*, so raw and exposed just for him, slid his hand swiftly into Kurt's (thankfully not *too* tight) pants. 'This torture, too?'

Blaine kept his eyes focused on Kurt, wanting to see his reaction, as he gripped his hard length and gave it a firm stroke. Kurt's mouth fell open and he let out a loud lewd moan, that made Blaine extremely thankful that they were alone in the house, and Blaine was pretty sure he saw Kurt's eyes roll back into his head.

'Yes, yes,' Kurt panted as Blaine continued his exploration. 'The best kind.'

'You're so gorgeous like this,' Blaine spoke low in his ear, his words raw and unfiltered. 'You should see yourself. So open and real and just- *filthy* and-' Blaine broke off when he heard a sudden loud noise downstairs, and he dimly realized that it must have been the front door slamming.

The front door.

'Crap.' Blaine snatched his hand back and sat up. 'My mom.'

'Your mom...?' Kurt asked dazedly, clearly not a hundred percent mentally present.

'Yes, my mom,' Blaine said somewhat impatiently, getting up from the bed while Kurt just kept lying there. 'Unless it's a burglar with a key or something, in which case I also don't want to be found like this. You're not exactly quiet,' he added with a little smirk as he pulled his shirt back on. Kurt blushed.

'Oh god, I didn't completely ruin it, did I?' he said, propping himself up on his elbows and looking mortified.

'No, you were perfect,' Blaine assured him, kneeling on the bed and kissing him. 'It was perfect.' He straightened back up and finished buttoning his shirt before adding as an afterthought, half amused and half apologetic, 'Except for the part where the ending was more of a cliffhanger than a resolution.'

Kurt let out a snort as he reached for his clothes. 'Only you could make what we just did sound half-way poetic.'

'Well, now I'm hurt,' Blaine said jokingly. 'I was going for straight up poetic. Touch of a fingertip and all that.'

Kurt's features softened and he sat up properly. 'You remember that?'

'Not to sound creepy, but I'm pretty sure I remember every conversation we've ever had.' Blaine grinned sheepishly and pulled his sweater vest over his head. He watched as Kurt put his own shirt back on, waiting until his eyes were once again on Blaine before continuing. 'In all seriousness though, I want whatever we do to be about the both of us, and not just about making sure I don't have a panic attack or something. It's a big step for both of us.'

'Good step though,' Kurt said, reaching for Blaine's hand from where he sat on the edge of the bed and giving it a soft squeeze. Blaine smiled, and he found himself thinking that even if he wouldn't exactly tell his mother the details of having had his hand in his boyfriend's pants, it *had* been beautiful and poetic in its own way.

'Hey, do you maybe want to stay the night?' Blaine asked, reacting to a spur-of-the-moment thought. 'I'm not saying- I mean, not with my mom in the house. But if you wanted to. Just to sleep.'

'Here? With you?' Blaine nodded, and Kurt smiled shyly. 'Yeah. I'd like that.'



## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### *Part two*

#### ***Kurt spends the night at Blaine's house for the first time.***

'Hi, boys,' Blaine's mother said as he and Kurt entered the kitchen a few minutes later. 'Are you staying for dinner, Kurt? I was going to order take-out.'

'Actually...' Blaine hesitated, just now realizing that (for obvious reasons) he had never asked his parents to let Kurt stay over before, and he didn't really know what their policy on sleepovers were. 'We were wondering if Kurt could spend the night. With me,' he added meaningfully.

Blaine's mother looked confusedly from one boy to the other as though she wasn't quite sure what the appropriate response was. It occurred to Blaine that maybe she thought it was one of those teenage trick questions where she was really supposed to say no, because Blaine didn't want to do it himself.

'It's okay, Mom. I asked him to. He knows, remember?'

'Right. Of course. Good.' She smiled fondly at Kurt. 'He sleeps on a mattress on the floor though.'

'Mom!' Blaine protested. 'I'm seventeen years old. Almost eighteen,' he added, knowing it was a bit of a stretch, when his birthday was in March, but it seemed to make his mother reconsider all the same.

'Your dad wouldn't like it,' she said slowly.

'Dad isn't here. Please, Mom?' Blaine looked imploringly at his mother, trying to convey with his eyes how much it would mean to him. It seemed like the right way to arrange their first sleepover; impulsive and spur-of-the-moment when it felt right, rather than planned days in advance giving both of them time to wonder if it was really a good idea.

'Fine,' she said finally, and Blaine made a quiet noise of triumph. He caught Kurt's eye, and they grinned happily at each other. 'Door stays open though.' She turned to Kurt. 'This okay with your parents?'

'I'll ask them now,' Kurt said when he had wiped the grin off his face. He pulled out his phone and gestured that he would make the call privately in the hall.

As Kurt left the room, Blaine moved to the other side of the kitchen island to stand next to his mother, leaning his arms against the counter. There was a small stack of take-out menus in front of her, which she had evidently been in the middle of choosing between, when Blaine and Kurt had interrupted her. Blaine smiled goofily. 'So where are we ordering from?'

'I was thinking... Thai... or Italian.' She held up two different menus. 'What do you think?'

'Thai, definitely,' Blaine said. 'Kurt prefers Thai.'

'Okay, then. Thai it is,' she said and put aside every menu but the one for the Thai place, which she spread out on the counter. They poured over the menu for a while, the silence broken only by the muffled sound of Kurt's phone conversation in the hall, but after a few moments Blaine's mother spoke again, her tone serious. 'Kurt – he's a good kid, right?'

Blaine looked up at his mother, confused by the question. 'Yes?'

'I just mean, he wouldn't try anything with you that you're not ready for?'

Blaine blushed. The last time he had had "the talk" with his mother, he had been thirteen years old, and given that he had still been in the closet at the time, the conversation had made him extremely uncomfortable. Or maybe it was just uncomfortable in general, he realized. 'No, Mom. He wouldn't.'

'And you can always say no, you know that, right?' she continued, her voice soft and keeping eye contact.

Blaine blinked. This was probably the most interest his mother had shown in his life in a long time, and he was torn between feeling sad and happy at the realization. He nodded. 'Yes. I know.'

'Good,' she said. 'And if you have questions... about anything... you can come to me, all right?'

Blaine bit back a rude retort about her bloated work schedule and instead smiled appreciatively. 'Thanks, Mom.'

She gave a tiny nod and Blaine thought he heard her let out a small sigh of relief. Apparently he wasn't the only one who found the topic uncomfortable.

'They said okay!'

Blaine and his mother looked around as Kurt strode back into the kitchen, all smiles, and Blaine's mother clapped her hands together. 'Wonderful! Slumber party it is.'

Blaine snorted and rolled his eyes. 'Mom, I said I'm seventeen. Not *seven*.'

'I know, silly,' she said with a fond smile. 'Listen, you boys pick whatever you want from the menu. A number three for me. I'm gonna go upstairs and take a shower.'

When she had left the room, Blaine grinned again at Kurt. 'I can't believe they said yes.'

'Me either,' Kurt said as he took Blaine's mother's place beside Blaine and glanced at the menu. 'Not that it was easy. My dad made me swear on my Lady Gaga boots that *yes*, there's a parent in the house and *no*, nothing "inappropriate" is gonna happen.'

Blaine giggled. 'Too bad something inappropriate has already happened.'

Kurt's lips quirked, but he kept his face and tone mock-serious when he replied. 'Yes, well, you're gonna have to keep your hands to yourself tonight, because I'm just not ready to part with those boots. I have nothing else that goes with that outfit.'

'If "keeping my hands to myself" is supposed to include cuddles, I'm afraid I can't promise that,' Blaine said, faking regret. 'I'm a cuddler. You have been warned.'

'Mm, I think we can work something out,' Kurt said, snaking an arm around Blaine's waist, drawing him closer. 'Besides, what my dad doesn't know can't, you know, give him a heart attack.'

When the food arrived half an hour later, the three of them ate together in the kitchen. As usual Blaine's mother was preoccupied with her laptop, but for once Blaine didn't mind, because Kurt was here, and he had eyes only for him. Eating together like this, knowing Kurt wasn't going to have to leave afterward, felt so wonderfully domestic. They talked and laughed and held hands across the table, and they took turns feeding each other bits of food. Blaine had a sudden flash of their future together, sharing an apartment in New York, where they would be able to do this kind of thing every day. He had never really dared to think about that before.

After dinner they left Blaine's mother to her work in the kitchen and went to the living room to watch TV, sitting close together, their hands resting warmly on Blaine's thigh, fingers intertwined. It wasn't long before Blaine started yawning, though. He dimly noted that he didn't even really know what they were watching – some rerun of some reality show or other – and he dropped his head onto Kurt's shoulder, closing his eyes every now and then, content to just be as close to Kurt as possible, enjoying the sound and the way his body shook when he laughed at the on-screen antics.

'Tired, honey?' Kurt asked after a while.

'No. I mean yes, but this is good,' Blaine mumbled, shifting a little as though that proved his point.

'Your neck's going to get all stiff if you keep sitting like that,' Kurt pointed out. 'And *then* what are we gonna do tomorrow?'

Blaine could hear the smile in Kurt's voice, and he wanted to joke that he was hurt Kurt only cared about his ability to perform, but he couldn't really muster the energy, so instead the only sound he made was a low 'Mmm,' as his eyes drooped again.

'Do you wanna go to bed?'

'Mm, no. 's too early. And you're watching that. I like when you laugh.' Blaine's brain was starting to go fuzzy.

Kurt chuckled. 'Okay, sleepy head. But at least get more comfortable. C'mere.' Kurt moved so he was leaning against the armrest and he stretched out his legs, spreading them a little and motioning for Blaine to sit in between. Blaine did so happily and he sighed in warm contentment as he lay back against Kurt's chest and his arms wrapped tenderly around Blaine's middle. 'Better?'

'Mm, much. Thank you.'

Blaine quickly drifted off to near sleep, half aware of his surroundings still, but losing track of time. Every now and then he would jerk awake slightly, wondering where he was and why he could feel another person's heartbeat, but then he would remember, smile to himself and doze off again. After a while he heard his mother's voice and he opened his eyes, looking blearily at her as she bid them goodnight, explaining that she had an early morning the next day. Blaine sat up quickly, then, suddenly wide awake, and Kurt startled behind him.

'But Mom, it's Saturday,' he protested, still blinking a little against the light in the living room. 'Sectionals. You said you'd be there.'

'I know,' his mother replied, her tone apologetic. 'I'm sorry, sweetie. But you know how it is.' That Blaine did. 'Since we landed that big contract, things have been extra hectic. I have to go in tomorrow, at least for a few hours. I'll be there next time, I promise.' She frowned in concentration for a moment before adding, 'When's the next time?'

'February. Regionals,' Blaine replied shortly. 'If we win tomorrow.'

Blaine's mother smiled. 'I'm sure you will.' She was trying to sound supportive, Blaine knew, but it felt empty and all he could think was *How would she know? She's never seen us perform.* 'I'll be cheering for you from the office.'

When his mother had gone upstairs, Blaine felt Kurt's comforting hand on his shoulder. 'You okay?'

'Yeah, it's fine.' Blaine sighed and leaned back into Kurt's embrace. 'I don't know why I'm even surprised anymore.'

'Has it always been like this with your parents?' Kurt asked quietly.

'I don't know. Sort of.' Blaine closed his eyes for a moment. 'My mom's sort of always been like this. Career before family. My dad was the one who wanted kids. So they had Cooper. I was never meant to happen, but my dad convinced her not to have an abortion.'

'They actually told you this?' Kurt sounded horrified, but Blaine just shrugged.

'They didn't have to. They fought about it often enough when I was little.'

'I'm sorry,' Kurt said, the arms around Blaine squeezing a little tighter. 'I never knew.'

'It's okay. It's not like I felt unloved or anything. I had Cooper. I know I complain about him sometimes, and he's a bit silly and full of himself, but he's a good brother, really. And Dad. I was always a bit of a... well, a daddy's girl.'

'So what happened? Kurt asked. 'With your dad, I mean.'

'Well, I told you, didn't I?' Blaine said, tensing a bit. "'Blaine" happened. Things got awkward after I came out and started living full-time as male. And then I went away to Dalton and barely saw him for two years. Things just haven't gone back to normal since.'

Kurt was quiet for a little while following this statement, and as Blaine turned his attention to the TV, he hoped the silence meant that they were done with the topic, but he knew they weren't.

'I know you think he's homophobic,' Kurt said slowly, as though he was choosing his words carefully. 'Or effeminophobic. I still don't really buy it though.'

'What do you mean you don't "buy it"?''

'I know I don't know him that well, but he just doesn't strike me as the type.'

'Er, Kurt?' Blaine said, lifting an eyebrow though he knew Kurt couldn't see because of the way they were sitting. 'You do remember when I told you about his family, right?'

'Well, yes,' Kurt conceded. 'But that's his family, not him. Plus didn't he also defy them by marrying your mom? And by not becoming some fancy lawyer type?'

'Yeah, those are two pretty big offenses. Guess he didn't want to risk striking out by adding another.' Blaine tried to keep his tone as even as possible.

'But he's never been anything but nice to me,' Kurt argued. 'And if we're comparing effeminacy here-'

'We're not,' Blaine said as he sat up and turned around to face Kurt, who watched him, a concerned frown on his face. 'It's different. You're not his son.'

'But have you tried talking to him? Explain where you're coming from?'

'And accomplish what? Blaine said, his voice tight. 'I know he's disappointed. I don't particularly need to hear him say it.'

'But what if he doesn't?'

Blaine stood up suddenly, rounding on Kurt and snapping, 'Stop trying to fix everything, Kurt. You can't.' A moment passed in which Kurt simply watched Blaine's sudden display of anger, an incredulous look on his face, but then Blaine closed his eyes, sighed and sat back down. 'I'm sorry. It's been a long week and I'm tired and cranky. I know you mean well, but can we please just drop the issue?'

Kurt nodded mutely, before turning off the TV and standing up, holding out a hand to Blaine. 'Let's go to bed, okay?'

Blaine nodded and took Kurt's hand gratefully, and together they proceeded upstairs, first to the bathroom where they brushed their teeth and Kurt borrowed what products Blaine had, remarking that, while he didn't usually let Finn near his products, he had made him promise to bring Kurt's own products to tomorrow's competition, so he could do a proper routine then. Afterward they went to Blaine's bedroom, where Blaine found a spare pair of pajamas for Kurt to wear, and he threw them on the bed in front of Kurt.

'You can get changed in the bathroom if you want.'

Kurt, however, was already in the process of removing his clothes and he quirked an eyebrow in response. 'Really, Blaine, you had your hand on my dick not five hours ago. You think I'm gonna get shy on you now?'

Blaine laughed awkwardly at that and grabbed his own pajamas. 'Okay, well, I'll just... go and...' He pointed towards the door, and when Kurt looked questioningly at him, he explained, 'I have to take off my binder when I sleep. I've already been wearing it too long today.'

'Oh,' Kurt said, catching on. 'I don't mind,' he said quickly. 'I mean, I won't look. I can turn around. You don't have to go.'

'Okay.' Blaine nodded, and as Kurt turned around, getting changed while facing the door, Blaine hurried through the process of removing his own clothes until he was stood only in his underwear and binder. He tugged his hand into his briefs and removed the packer, which he quickly hid away in a drawer. He usually just left it lying on the night table or the dresser, but he thought the situation was awkward enough already without his fake penis lying around the room.

Blaine hesitated before taking off the binder. He looked up at Kurt who had finished putting on his pajamas, but remained dutifully facing the door. Even though Blaine knew that Kurt wouldn't actually see anything, and that he wouldn't suddenly turn around screaming "GOTCHA", it felt like a lot to be getting undressed with Kurt in the room. Cooper was the only other person he had ever done that with since coming out, and even that had been difficult at first. It took Blaine a few moments to make the final decision, and when he did, he pulled off the binder in one quick movement, barely registering the relief to his back and chest, and made quick work of pulling on and buttoning the pajama top, before finally pulling on the bottoms.

Blaine glanced briefly in the mirror to check how visible his chest was. Thankfully he was fairly small-chested and the hormones had done their part to keep it that way, so he didn't have that much to hide, and the loose-fitting pajama top helped some, but the presence of a decidedly non-male chest was still obvious. There was nothing to be done about it, of course, and it wasn't like Kurt didn't know it was there, but Blaine still couldn't help the nerves that built up before he called out a soft 'Done,' allowing Kurt to turn around again.

Kurt, however, simply smiled at him and gestured at the bed, asking 'What side do you want?' and a few moments later they were lying in bed, Blaine on the left and Kurt on the right, the room dark and quiet around them. After a second Kurt shifted and Blaine let out an involuntary hiss when he felt his boyfriend's icy toes against his calves.

'You're cold,' Blaine whispered, though he was unsure why he should, since his parents' room was two doors down, and it was barely even eleven anyway.

'Mm, and you're warm,' Kurt mumbled tiredly and shifted again, slinging an arm around Blaine's waist and tugging at him until he got the message and moved to lie on his side, letting Kurt spoon himself around him. 'Deal with it.'

'All right, as long as you don't hog the covers,' Blaine said, smiling into the darkness.



'I make no promises,' came Kurt's response, and as Blaine felt Kurt's warm breath on the back of his neck, slowing down and steadying minute by minute, he thought to himself that Kurt could hog the covers all he wanted and keep Blaine awake with his cold toes all night long, and Blaine honestly wouldn't mind. As long as Kurt kept holding him like this, surrounding him and so reassuring in his mere presence.

*Today*, Blaine thought as he drifted off to sleep. *Today was good.*

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *Part three*

***It's the day of Sectionals and Blaine gets an unexpected visitor. Plus Rachel is worried.***

They left Blaine's house at nine o'clock the next morning, which left them plenty of time to get to the school and get ready in time for the competition at eleven o'clock. Most the club was already gathered in the choir room when they got there – including Finn who had apparently chosen to heed Kurt's warning to *not be late*, so Kurt would have time to go through his combined evening and morning routine before they all had to gather for last minute preparations. Kurt gratefully accepted the plastic bag of supplies that Finn held out, and he glanced through it quickly, checking that everything was there, before he zoomed off to the bathroom.

This left Blaine standing alone with Finn as Rachel was currently occupying Rory and Sam in one corner, talking animatedly at them, and Tina and Mike looked to be having a serious conversation in another. Both Finn and Blaine shuffled their feet kind of awkwardly, because while they had worked out their conflict following Blaine's outburst earlier in the week, neither could deny that there was some lingering tension while they both figured out how to act around each other, now that neither were trying to undermine the other or send him evil looks. There was also the fact that Finn had been present during Blaine's breakdown, and the thought unsettled Blaine a little. While Kurt had assured him that Finn hadn't understood what Blaine had been talking about, he surely knew that *something* was going on, and what if he repeated what he had heard to someone who might be able to figure it out? Blaine couldn't be outed. He just... No, he couldn't.

'Guys!' Sam skipped over to them finally, when they had exchanged stilted conversation for a long uncomfortable while, perhaps taking pity on them, and he flung an arm around Blaine's shoulder and patted Finn on the back with the other. He was beaming at them, clearly overjoyed to be back at McKinley. Or else he was just really happy to have escaped Rachel. 'Ready to kick some *ass*'?

Blaine laughed. 'Sure, Sam.'

'Yeah, we're totally gonna win this,' Finn said. 'The girls don't stand a chance. And as for The *Unitards*, well...'

'Yeah, the name kind of says it for you, doesn't it?' Sam chuckled.

'Well, I don't really know what a "unitard" is,' Finn admitted. 'But it sounds lame.'

Blaine caught Sam's eye and they shared an amused look, but before either of them could launch into an explanation of what exactly a unitard was, a voice from the door interrupted their conversation.

'Blaine,' it called, and Blaine wheeled around to see Cooper standing there, his hands in his pockets and still wet from the rain outside, having obviously just arrived. He looked more serious than Blaine was used to seeing him.

'Cooper?' Blaine approached his brother, feeling worry settle in the pit of his stomach. Cooper had left Lima yesterday and was supposed to be back in LA by now. 'What are you doing here?'

Cooper didn't reply but gestured with his head that they should talk privately in the hall, and Blaine followed him out.

Rachel had liked Blaine since their first meeting – actually since *before* they met, and Blaine was not even really a person, just the name of a boy Kurt had met at a neighboring school, because anyone who made Kurt smile that much was all right in Rachel's book. And of course meeting Blaine properly had been a delightful experience; with his easy charm and boundless energy and optimism, Blaine was very easy to like. However, for a long time he had remained a bit of an enigma, always happy and kind but never revealing much about himself in a strange combination of being open and closed off. It was only through working together on West Side Story and spending extended periods of time together, that the real Blaine had begun to slip through and Rachel could start to put together the pieces that made up this boy. Even though she couldn't help the feeling that Blaine still kept a lot of things to himself, she at least now felt that she could safely call him a friend regardless of his relationship with Kurt.

It was through those friend-colored glasses that Rachel watched now, a light frown on her face, as Blaine and Cooper disappeared into the hall, the door closing sharply behind them. She hadn't missed the concerned look that crossed Blaine's face upon seeing his brother – and wasn't Cooper supposed to have

gone back to LA? Something was up with Blaine – she had been noticing it for a while now – but she couldn't for the life of her figure out what.

Rachel excused herself from her conversation with Rory, barely noticing when he seemed oddly relieved, and she stood up, crossing the choir room to look through the window of the door Blaine and his brother had left through. Blaine had his back to the door, so Rachel couldn't see his face, but his stance seemed... tense, somehow. On guard.

'Rachel,' she heard Finn's voice from behind, reprimanding her. 'What are you doing?'

'Trying to find out what's going on,' she replied without moving.

'Well, don't.' Finn tugged at her wrist until she had to turn around and face him. 'It's kind of rude.'

'Aren't you worried about him?' she asked a bit louder than she intended to, attracting the attention of their fellow team mates.

'No. I'm not,' Finn replied determinedly, but it seemed to Rachel almost like he was trying to convince himself as much as her. He looked around the room for a moment, taking in everyone's curious looks, before grabbing Rachel by the wrist and leading her across the room, through Mr. Schue's office and out into a hall, around the corner from where Blaine and Cooper had gone, but far enough away that they couldn't hear or be heard.

'You clearly are,' Rachel said, folding her arms across her chest and narrowing her eyes at him. 'Do you know what's going on? You haven't said two words to me about what happened in Mr. Schue's office the other day.'

'Kurt asked me not to tell,' Finn said simply.

'I'm your *girlfriend*, Finn. You're supposed to be able to tell me things,' Rachel argued, and when Finn still didn't budge she went on, talking fast and spilling everything that had been on her mind lately. 'Look, I'm just *worried* about them, okay? I talked to Kurt last week and he as good as told me that something's going on, but he wouldn't tell me what. And then Blaine flips out on Sam for no reason and there's shouting in Mr. Schue's office, and I swear Blaine looked like he had been crying after. And now Cooper's here when he shouldn't be, and Blaine looks all worried, and I know Kurt said they're fine, but he seems preoccupied

all the time, his mind off somewhere else, and he barely even seems worried about NYADA anymore and it just- it all adds up, doesn't it?'

Finn, who had been watching her with that confused, overwhelmed look he sometimes got when she said too much too fast, opened his mouth to respond, but something behind Rachel caught his eye.

'Hang on for a moment,' he said and Rachel jogged after him as he strode down the hall where someone – a jock, judging by the letterman jacket – was standing with his back to them. He was poking his head around the corner, gazing down the hall where Rachel knew that Blaine and Cooper must be standing unless they had moved their conversation elsewhere. 'What do you think you're doing?' Finn asked sharply.

'Shh, I'm trying to find out what they're talking about,' the other boy said, and something about his tone made Rachel's blood run cold. 'Oh hey, Hudson,' he added, turning around as he seemed to register who was talking to him. Rachel vaguely recognized him as being one of the senior members of the football team that Finn captained, and the boy was definitely build like one.

'What are you doing here, JT?' Finn asked somewhat coldly. 'Don't tell me you've come to watch the competition.'

The kid – JT – let out a short bark of laugh. 'No, I just came to pick up some stuff from my locker, and I happened to catch that.' He pointed over his shoulder. An idea seemed to occur to him then and he leaned in, speaking in a conspiratory voice. 'That Blaine kid. You know him, right? I mean, he's in your little queer club, isn't he?' Rachel's eyes instantly narrowed in dislike. 'Does he seem... *off* to you?'

'What the hell is that supposed to mean?' Finn demanded angrily.

JT shrugged. 'I dunno. I can't put my finger on it. There's just something strange about him, and I don't just mean the gay thing, though that's bad enough-'

'Go home, Thompson,' Finn said, taking a step closer and his voice low and dangerous. 'Or anywhere that's not here.'

JT's lips quirked in an amused smile at Finn's reaction. 'You've noticed something too, haven't you?' Rachel looked quickly at Finn, and JT caught it. 'Wait, don't tell me. Is that what you and the missus were

talking about just now?' He met Rachel's eyes and there was a strange, unreadable look on his face. 'I'm telling you, there's something up with that kid.'

'Go,' Finn repeated. 'I'm serious.'

The other boy chuckled derisively. 'This isn't a football field, Hudson. You can't order me around.' The two of them stared at each other for a long moment, dislike clear in both sets of eyes, and Rachel was about to make a comment about disturbing displays of testosterone, but then JT seemed to let up. 'Alright, as you wish, my captain.' He took a step back and gave an over-pronounced bow, before hoisting his bag over his shoulder and turning to leave, calling over his shoulder as he went, 'Just keep an eye on the queer for me.'

'That... that was creepy,' Rachel said a moment later, her voice small and a little frightened. 'Why would he be... Finn, I didn't like that. What's going on?'

Finn looked thoughtfully in the direction JT had gone, but after a moment he shook his head. 'Nothing. JT's a creep, it's that simple,' he said as he led Rachel back down the hall where they had come from.

'It didn't seem like nothing.' Rachel insisted as she hugged her arms against her chest.

'I know this guy, okay?' Finn said, speaking in a calm, clear voice. 'JT – he's been on the football team for years, and he likes to screw with people's heads. It's what he does. He probably just overheard us talking and decided to have some fun. He doesn't even know Blaine; how's he supposed to have an opinion? It doesn't make sense.'

Rachel took a few seconds to digest Finn's words before finally relaxing. Of course, she was being paranoid, and JT was clearly having them on. 'I'm still worried though,' she said. 'For the same reasons I listed before. And you still haven't told me what went on in there.' She pointed towards Mr. Schue's office.

Finn sighed and shook his head. 'I told you. I can't. I don't even really remember most of it, and it didn't actually make a lot of sense to me.' He frowned to himself for a moment. 'But Kurt made me promise not to repeat any of it, and I'm sorry, but in this case brother trumps girlfriend.'

'Just tell me if I should be worried then.'

'You shouldn't,' Finn said firmly. 'Whatever is or was going on, they're working on it alone, and they're fine. And it's obviously none of our business anyway.'

'Kurt is my *best* friend,' Rachel said hotly. 'You're his *brother*. And Blaine is our friend too. How can it not be any of our business?'

'I don't know, and I'm curious too, don't get me wrong, but- but what if it's something really private and by snooping around, you're just making things worse?' Rachel could tell that Finn was getting a little impatient, and there was a clear note of finality in his voice. 'That's not being a very good friend. If we find out, it should be on their terms.'

'I just hate not knowing things,' Rachel said with a small sigh, but accepting defeat.

'I know,' Finn said, smiling fondly at her before pulling her into a hug. 'But you can't control when you find this out any more than you can control when you get the result of your NYADA application.'

'You think that's what I'm doing?' Rachel mumbled into his chest. 'Trying to control things?'

'Well, you do kind of have a history of that,' Finn said in a carefully even tone, and Rachel snorted despite herself.

Finn was probably right. She should stop obsessing about things that weren't her business. Besides, if it was something truly serious, Kurt would tell her, she was certain of it. It was probably something really silly and private, like – Rachel's cheeks pinked a little at the images that went through her mind at the idea – a sexual mishap, perhaps, which wasn't serious at all, just embarrassing.

Rachel was obviously panicking for nothing, she decided, and a short while later when Blaine strode back into the choir room, hand in hand with Kurt, looking trouble free and smiling widely, Rachel felt silly to have been worrying at all.

'What's wrong?' Blaine asked once he was alone with Cooper in the hallway.

'Nothing's wrong,' Cooper said, holding up his hands in a calming gesture. 'Not exactly.'

'Then what are you doing here? What happened to your audition?'

'Blew it off.' Cooper shrugged. 'I only got as far as Columbus before I decided to come back here. Figured I'd be remiss if I didn't come see all my hard work pay off.' He smiled, but Blaine thought it seemed forced, and he narrowed his eyes at his brother. Was that all? 'Plus someone's gotta film it for Mom and Dad. And maybe we can go over the footage later. Fix all the mistakes you're bound to make.'

Well, that was more like it, Blaine thought as he felt the buildup of the familiar bitterness and annoyance that he kept just underneath the surface these days, though he wasn't sure if it was directed more at himself or Cooper. 'Great, thanks. Listen, I gotta go. We're supposed to gather before the-'

'I'm *kidding*, okay?'

'What?' Blaine had been about to walk back inside the choir room, but he turned back to face Cooper now, frowning in confusion.

Cooper stuck his hands in his pockets again, looking uncharacteristically awkward, not quite meeting Blaine's eye, and Blaine could tell that he was about to say whatever it was that had had him looking so serious.

'We haven't really talked since... since that incident earlier in the week,' Cooper began, and Blaine didn't have to ask which incident he meant. 'But I wanted you to know that I heard you. I haven't been able to get it out of my head all week. What you said. It takes me a while sometimes to get things, but I catch up.' Cooper paused for a moment and caught Blaine's eye, holding his gaze as he continued. 'I know I can pretty tough on you when it comes to performing, and I may have gone a little overboard lately. But, Blaine, those things you said...' Cooper shook his head sadly. 'I never meant to make you feel like that, and it kills me to think that I did.'

Cooper sighed and slid to the floor, leaning against the lockers lining the hall. Blaine watched him for a moment, and he looked so distraught that it almost didn't register that his brother was apologizing to him. Blaine moved to sit next to him on the floor, but stayed quiet, not quite sure what to say.

'It's just, I see how talented you are, and I want so bad for you to go that extra mile and do it all. Broadway, movies, you name it. So I push. Clearly I'm not a very good teacher.' Cooper huffed out a short humorless laugh.



'No, you *are*,' Blaine said quickly. 'I've learned so much from you. We all have. It's not your fault. I just overreacted, because of- everything.'

'But I was part of it,' Cooper said, shaking his head again. It wasn't a question. 'I made a difficult situation worse.'

'Well, maybe you could work harder at not praising everyone but me?' Blaine said quietly, speaking honestly but hating how it made him sound like some attention-starved child. 'It makes it seem like I'm doing something wrong that nobody else is.'

'You're not. On the contrary. I just always thought you knew that.'

'It's okay, Coop,' Blaine said. It was odd hearing his brother speak with such vulnerability in his voice. Cooper was usually so in control of every situation he found himself in. 'I know you're just trying to help.'

'No. It's not okay. Like I said, I- I push, because...' Cooper trailed off and drew a long breath before launching into speech again. 'I can't stop bigotry. Grandma's right, I'm not clever. I didn't do that well in high school, and I did even worse in college. I don't know how to make the world a better place for you. But I do know the arts. So what I can do is help you take all that pain and anger and frustration – all that energy – and channel it into becoming a better performer. And then maybe in five, ten years, when you've taken the world by storm, it won't matter so much what the grandma Angelas and the uncle Petes of this world think, because- because you've proved them wrong.'

'Coop...' Blaine bit his lip. He felt like he should be saying something. Anything to express the rush of gratitude and affection he felt – had always felt – towards his brother. A way to describe what it felt like to know that he had someone so completely in his corner, and it didn't matter that said someone stumbled sometimes; he was still Blaine's person.

Before Blaine could think of anything to say, however, Cooper had risen to his feet again and was holding out a hand to help Blaine up.

'Thank you,' Blaine said, when he was back on his feet and standing in front of Cooper, and he hoped that Cooper realized he didn't just mean the hand.

'So we're good, right? You don't hate me?'

'Cooper,' Blaine said, almost reprimanding him, and he wrapped his arms around his brother in a tight, affectionate hug. Considering that Cooper was the one who had apologized to Blaine, it felt oddly like Blaine was comforting him now. 'I don't hate you.'

'Good.' Cooper was smiling again when they parted, and he pointed at the door to the choir room. 'Now go get ready. I'll be in the audience.'

'Do you want to come in?' Blaine offered. 'Give a last minute pep talk?'

'Nah, I'll leave you to it. You've got it in the bag, I think,' Cooper said with a wink and smile, before turning and walking down the hall, and as Blaine watched him go, he was suddenly seeing years of interaction with his brother, and what he had seen as nothing but criticism after criticism, in a new light, and something finally clicked into place.

'What are you smiling about?' Kurt asked in amusement as he appeared around a corner, the contents of the plastic bag clinking as he walked.

'Oh, you know, just thinking about the amazing people I'm my life,' Blaine said and took Kurt's hand in his, leading him back into the choir room. 'I'm kind of a lucky guy.'

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *Part four*

***After New Directions' Sectionals win, Blaine and Kurt decide to do some further exploring in private, and in the second half of a flashback, 14-year-old Blaine does some exploring of his own.***

After New Directions had – as per Cooper's prediction – won the competition, Cooper, having just a few hours left before he had to leave town again (for real this time), invited Blaine and Kurt out for lunch. Although part of Blaine wanted to blow it off and head straight back to Kurt's house (which Kurt had pointedly told Blaine would be empty until the morning) they agreed.

'So was I right or was I right?' Cooper beamed, when they had all settled into a booth at Breadstix. He was obviously in high spirits. 'In. The. Bag.'

Blaine grinned. 'Yeah. All your hard work really did pay off.'

'Like I knew it would, little brother. I don't invest my time in losers, you know.' He winked at them, and Blaine shared a look with Kurt, whom Blaine had quickly filled in about the conversation he and Cooper had had.

As they ate, the conversation circled mostly around the competition; the judges (laughing at the fact that one of them was an *actual* judge and whether that had been intentional or not), the opposing teams (The Unitards had been much less of a joke than the name suggested, and The Trouble Tones were no laughing matter either) and finally their own performance. It felt odd to Blaine having Cooper praise his work without following it up with a cascade of criticism, and Blaine thought Cooper might be overdoing it slightly, but he appreciated the gesture nonetheless.

'Anyway, I'd best be going now,' Cooper said finally when they had all finished eating.

Kurt chuckled. 'Yeah, you don't want to miss your flight. Again.'

'That would be tragic,' Cooper agreed. 'I'm sure LA misses me terribly by now, and I have, like, thirty desperate messages from my agent. But actually my flight isn't until eight.' He paused, and Blaine looked questioningly at him. 'I meant I have to go so you guys can feel free to go have sex.'

Blaine nearly choked on his drink and across from him, Kurt's mouth fell open. 'What?' Blaine sputtered, looking around the restaurant and checking to see if anyone was listening.

'Come on, don't deny it,' Cooper said calmly and emptied his glass. 'You've been sending each other lustful glances for the past hour, and been pretty obvious about it too.'

Blaine felt his cheeks burn in embarrassment – had they really been that obvious? Similarly, Kurt's face was growing steadily redder as Kurt busied himself with testing and contemplating the bendy nature of his straw.

Cooper went on, 'It's been fun torturing you guys, but I think I'll spend the last few hours at the airport.' He pulled out his wallet and placed a few bills on the table, more than enough to pay for all three meals, before sliding out of the booth and standing up. 'Have fun. But, you know, be safe and responsible and all that. See you at Christmas.' And with a smile and the barest hint of a smirk playing on his lips, Cooper turned around and was out of there, leaving both boys gaping after him.

'Well, he certainly knows how to make an exit,' Kurt managed to say.

'Yeah...' Blaine trailed off and quirked a suggestive eyebrow at Kurt, deciding that it was no use feeling embarrassed now that Cooper wasn't even here anymore. 'He wasn't wrong though,' he said in a low voice, and Kurt smirked in response.

'My house?'

Blaine nodded. 'Your house.'

Barely more than fifteen minutes later the front door of the Hummel-Hudson residence slammed shut behind them, and they were alone and in private at last. Blaine immediately rounded on Kurt, nearly shoving him against the door and planting a hungry kiss on his lips, wasting no time before pushing his tongue past Kurt's lips and deepening the kiss.

'Someone's eager.' Kurt smiled when they parted after a few moments, his breath warm against Blaine's lips.

'Well, excuse me. I've been wanting to do that since this morning,' Blaine said as he kicked off his shoes and hung his coat quickly.

'Then by all means, let's keep going,' Kurt said, following suit and shedding his own shoes and coat. 'Bedroom?' He held out a hand to Blaine, who took it eagerly.

'Definitely.'

Once inside Kurt's bedroom, however, with the door closed behind them (just in case), Blaine felt suddenly nervous and a little bit shy. Kissing passionately against the front door was all well and good, but a bedroom was a lot more suggestive, and it took Blaine's brain a few moments to catch up and disregard old instincts; to remember that this kind of intimacy was alright now – wanted even.

Then Kurt was standing in front of him and, without Blaine having to say anything, he took Blaine's hand in his, smiling sweetly and waiting patiently until the moment passed. Finally after what felt like minutes but was probably only a few seconds, Blaine swallowed and nodded once, letting Kurt lead him to the bed. Before long they were wrapped in each other's arms, limbs tangled together and tasting each other's lips as they traded slow and passionate kisses. Shirts were removed much less dramatically than the day before and when Blaine moved his hand between Kurt's legs and began palming him through his jeans, it felt like something he had been doing forever, while at the same time feeling so obviously fresh and exciting. Kurt's movements and the way his body responded to Blaine's touch were unpredictable but never surprising, and the noises he had Kurt making were brand new and intriguing but still so fundamentally *Kurt*.

When Blaine asked for permission to remove Kurt's pants, Kurt simply looked at Blaine through dazed eyes and nodded dumbly. Actually getting them off, however, turned out to be no small task, because Kurt's pants were *tight*, a fact Blaine usually appreciated as they didn't leave much to the imagination, and Kurt was very well shaped indeed. But now, as he tugged and tugged, Blaine felt more like crying in frustration and, feeling Kurt's eyes on him, watching his struggle, Blaine looked up to see his boyfriend's lips curled in amusement.

'It's not funny,' Blaine said, sticking out his bottom lip in a pout, but losing the fight to keep a straight face himself. 'It's supposed to be sexy. Or something.'

'Plenty of time for that,' Kurt said as he took matters into his own hands and peeled his pants off as easily as if they had been sweats.

Blaine gaped. 'How- how did you just do that?'

'Practice, honey,' Kurt replied with a smile and threw the pants on the floor along with his socks. Blaine caught Kurt's smile in a quick and messy kiss, before he pushed Kurt gently onto his back, kissing and caressing his way down Kurt's body until he reached the only clothed part of him, his growing erection straining beautifully against the black material. Blaine mouthed at it through the thin cotton underwear, grinning when Kurt gasped and rolled his hips in response.

'No more clothes,' Blaine mumbled finally and he hooked his fingers in the waistband of Kurt's briefs and pulled them off, and then Kurt was completely nude beneath him and Blaine almost (*almost*) swore at the sight. It was *glorious*. For a while – Blaine couldn't be sure how long – he just lay there, staring reverently and taking in every last detail, almost afraid to touch as if his touch would somehow tarnish the perfection he saw.

'I feel naked,' Kurt whined after a moment.

Blaine leaned over Kurt, resting a hand on either side of his head. 'That's because you are, darling,' he commented and kissed Kurt, nibbling lightly at his bottom lip with his teeth.

When the kiss broke, Kurt looked up at Blaine for long moment, his expression unreadable. He tugged softly at the neck of Blaine's binder, as if to test how tight it was. 'Isn't that uncomfortable?'

'No,' Blaine replied automatically before correcting himself. 'I mean, yes, of course. But it is what it is.'

'Can I see?' Kurt asked cautiously, and it took Blaine a moment to realize what he meant, and when he did, he sat back on the bed, hesitating; unsure. He had never thought this far ahead, and in fact all his fantasies up until now had all featured himself in the active role; always Blaine in control and making Kurt fall apart. The other way around... That was scary. Kurt sat up too and he caressed Blaine's bare arm lightly, drawing small, soothing circles. 'You can say no of course, but... I just want to see you. Will you let me?'

Very slowly, Blaine nodded.

Carefully Kurt reached out and hooked his fingers under the hem that ran just a couple of inches below Blaine's chest. When he began to tug at it, pushing it further and further up his chest, Blaine almost told him to stop, that it was too soon, but he also knew that no matter how long he waited, it was always going to feel like too soon, and he forced himself to stay calm. He raised his arms over his head when it became

necessary but lowered them again the moment he was free of the binder, giving Kurt barely a second to see anything before he crossed his arms in front of his now bare chest, covering himself.

'You're not gonna scare me away,' Kurt told him softly but with such conviction in his voice, and god, Blaine wanted so bad to believe him. 'I've already seen, remember? I'm not going anywhere.'

Kurt grabbed each of Blaine's wrists and gently – gently enough that Blaine could have resisted him easily – pried his arms apart until his chest was fully exposed, its appearance now neither completely male nor female. Dark hair spread from Blaine's stomach and sprinkled lightly across his chest, but the shape and the size of it was still unmistakably female in appearance.

'See?' Kurt smiled encouragingly. 'Still here.'

'It's gross.'

'Funny,' Kurt said as he urged Blaine onto his back and straddled his thighs, switching their positions from before. 'Cause from where I'm standing, you've never been more beautiful.'

Blaine, however, barely heard him over the blood rushing in his ears. He swallowed painfully, feeling trapped and claustrophobic under Kurt's weight, even though he knew perfectly well that he wasn't, and he fought hard to gain control of his breathing.

'Blaine, honey?' He heard Kurt's voice above him, pulling him to the surface, and he felt a hand on his cheek, urging him to look up at its owner. 'Relax. You're okay.'

Blaine swallowed again. 'I know, I'm sorry. I'm trying.'

'Do you want to stop?' Kurt asked softly. 'Or put the binder back on?'

'No,' Blaine said firmly. 'No, I can do this. I want to,' he added, cursing himself that he couldn't just be okay when he *wanted* to, and feeling bad that this was becoming all about him. 'I just need a moment.'

'Tell me what you're scared of,' Kurt urged him. 'Then maybe I can help.'

'I'm not- I don't know. I can't really...' Blaine trailed off, looking into Kurt's calm and caring eyes. 'You're really not freaked?'

Kurt broke their eye contact and looked pointedly at Blaine's chest for several long moments, then back up at Blaine. He laid a hand in the middle of Blaine's chest, the only established safe place in that area for him to touch. 'No,' he said simply.

Almost without Blaine noticing it, his breathing had slowed down and evened out, and Blaine gave a small, almost imperceptible nod, letting Kurt know it was okay to continue. Kurt leaned forward to place a tender kiss on Blaine's lips, and in the process something brushed against Blaine's stomach, and *oh, right*, Kurt was naked and hard and so so hot. As Kurt kissed his way slowly down Blaine's chest and stomach, Blaine became aware of the heat building low in his stomach and the growing ache between his legs. Not that he could or would do too much about it right now, but it felt kind of nice to know it could happen with Kurt – like his body was giving him permission. Kurt stopped his kissing when he ran out of exposed skin, and his hand brushed across Blaine's stomach, coming rest on the button of his pants.

'Can I?' he asked.

Blaine was breathing heavily again, but unless he counted the throbbing sensation between his legs, it wasn't from discomfort, and he could find no reason to refuse, the protests in his mind only feeble, so he nodded his head slowly.

'Tell me if you need me to stop,' Kurt instructed as he undid the button and pulled down the zipper. Blaine raised his hips to allow Kurt to pull the pants down until they pooled around his ankles, and then Kurt was running a hand across Blaine's still underwear-covered crotch, squeezing slightly. The sight made Blaine's head spin, and it almost didn't matter that it was an illusion. When Kurt reached a hand into his briefs, Blaine's heart skipped a beat and he almost yelped, but all Kurt did was remove the packer and put it aside on the night table, before turning his attention to Blaine once more. His hands rested on Blaine's hips, fingers stroking soft skin lightly, and he looked up, his eyes meeting Blaine's, silently asking for permission, which Blaine gave with a careful smile, though he couldn't help the small gasp that escaped his lips, when Kurt pulled down his last bit of protection, and Blaine was finally completely exposed.

There was silence for a moment as they both seemed to adjust to the situation. No matter what Kurt said, it had to be strange for him as well, and Blaine could see him trying not to stare. Blaine's hormone treatment had caused things to grow, which meant that he no longer looked completely female down there, but it was still a far cry from anything Kurt might have imagined when they first got together.



'Just... don't touch, okay?' Blaine said trying to ignore the snide voice in his head that whispered, *As if he'd want to.* 'I can't- Not yet.'

Kurt just smiled and crawled up beside Blaine and pulled him in for a long, deep kiss. Blaine was vaguely aware that his pants were still pooled around his ankles and tried to shrug them off without breaking the kiss. When Kurt realized what he was doing, however, he scrambled to the foot of the bed to help him, pulling Blaine's pants and underwear all the way off and throwing them on the floor next to his own, which left Blaine in just his socks.

'Well, that's just not sexy,' Kurt said, frowning dramatically, and he proceeded to pull the socks off as well, accidentally brushing a light finger across the underside of Blaine's foot.

'Tickles,' Blaine said, flinching involuntarily and giggling a little.

'Does it now?' There was an evil glint in Kurt's eye and before Blaine could think to snatch his feet back, Kurt had a firm hold on one ankle and started tickling him mercilessly.

'Nonononono,' Blaine gasped as he tried to kick his feet, but Kurt held him down easily.

'No, what?' Kurt teased. 'You're not ticklish?'

'Absolutely not,' Blaine said even as his eyes watered.

'No?' Kurt said, abandoning Blaine's feet to attack his waist instead, and Blaine yelped, rolling instinctively away from Kurt. 'I do believe you're lying.'

Blaine looked over at Kurt, who kept his evil hands to himself for now, instead watching him in amusement. Off guard. Blaine pounced then, flattening Kurt on his back and pinning his wrists to the mattress. He grinned. 'My turn.'

'I'm not ticklish, Blaine,' Kurt said with a tiny roll of his eyes.

'Maybe not,' Blaine admitted as he let go of Kurt's wrists and slid down the length of his body until he had a perfect view of Kurt's semi-hard cock. *God*, it was gorgeous, and all his to touch. 'But there are other ways to torture you.'

The second Blaine wrapped his hand around Kurt's length, Kurt's hips bucked into the touch and he let out a soft moan. 'Oh.'

Truthfully though, Blaine had no idea what he was doing. He had watched some porn, of course he had, so he wasn't completely in the dark, but he had never thought in detail about what he would do in this situation. However, Kurt's pronounced reactions to Blaine's every touch, coupled with Blaine's own instinct, served as a decent road map, and it wasn't long before Kurt was completely hard and panting.

'If this is torture, I think you're doing it wrong,' he managed to say. 'Not that I'm- *uh*- complaining.'

Blaine laughed. 'This isn't the torture part, Kurt. *This* is,' Blaine said and removed his hands from Kurt's body, so the only parts of them that were touching were their legs.

'What? Nooooo,' Kurt whined loudly. 'Don't stooooop.' Blaine just smiled and leaned down to press soft teasing kisses to the inside of Kurt's thighs, while his hands caressed his torso, finding and teasing a nipple. He pointedly avoided paying attention to the part of Kurt that needed it the most, and Kurt whimpered in desperation. 'Please.'

Blaine pretended to not to hear him and continued what he was doing, taking far too much pleasure in Kurt's desperate writhing, until finally, without stopping to warn Kurt, he took pity on him and, by way of licking a long wet stripe up the length of Kurt's shaft, he stopped teasing. He hadn't really planned on doing it, but it suddenly felt like the thing to do, and as Blaine took Kurt fully into his mouth, it seemed that Kurt most definitely agreed with him. His hands were gripping the sheets tightly and his speech had been reduced to incoherent babbling sounds.

Blaine worked him over to the best of his ability, making a mental note of what got the strongest reactions and trying to recreate those movements. Admittedly it was a bit clumsy, and once or twice Blaine had to take a break to process the thought that *holy crap, his boyfriend's dick was in his mouth, how did that happen?* Kurt had no objections, however, and before long, his breathing turned sharper and his hand found its way to Blaine's shoulder, patting wildly.

'Blaine, Blaine... I'm gonna... soon,' he managed to get out.

'Yeah?' came Blaine's reply, his own vocabulary a little limited as well, before he sank back down, redoubling his final efforts. He pulled away just as Kurt's orgasm began to wash over him, and Blaine

stroked him through it, watching fascinated as Kurt's whole body shuddered and he came with a long groan, spilling all over his stomach.

'That was... *wow*,' Kurt said once he had come down a little bit.

'Yeah,' Blaine agreed, collapsing next to Kurt on the bed.

'I was about to say *thank you*, but that sounds a little weird,' Kurt said, chuckling a little. 'But... thank you?'

Blaine laughed and pecked Kurt on the lips. 'Pleasure was all mine, darling.'

'Was it though? I mean, you didn't...' Kurt blushed a little, and Blaine caught on.

'Oh. Well, no,' Blaine admitted. 'But it's fine.'

'Are you sure? It doesn't seem right.' Kurt frowned. 'I want to make you feel good too.'

'I know, me too, but give me time? I don't know how long, but eventually, yes. If you still want. Besides,' Blaine said and smiled, feeling like his problems with his body was maybe not the best topic for post-orgasm pillow talk. 'I just got a bunch of new masturbation material, so I'm good for a while.'

*You know that you're not the only kid your age who has issues with their body. Half the kids in your class does in one way or another, and the other half probably just isn't broadcasting it. Sara, for one, has mentioned on more than one occasion that she thought she could stand to lose a bit of weight, and you see her sometimes pressing her hands against her ears in a futile effort to make them stick out less.*

*It's more than that though – you're not just looking to drop a few pounds. It's that when you look in the mirror, you don't identify at all with what you see. The person who looks out at you from behind lost and sad eyes feels like a costume that you're forced to wear – but at the same time you're painfully aware that's it's not, and the thought makes you want to scream. This is partly by choice, of course, because in order to preserve your sanity, you spent years living in your head as much as you could. The real you is buried and*

*shapeless, and your heart aches as you wonder whether you're ever going to see him, or if you will always feel this dichotomy between what's in your heart and mind and what the mirror shows you.*

*Except-*

*You take a step back as the word appears in your mind in large, bold, capitalized letters, and the thought is so intense that you accidentally say it out loud.*

*'No.'*

*You won't let that happen. You refuse to let yourself be a victim. If this is really your lot in life, then you are going to fight to be happy, dammit. You're not going to give up now just because the road seems long, and you're going to find a way to live with what you've got until you can start to change it. Like the song says – you're a fighter, and you've had enough. A sudden fire and willpower courses through, making you shiver, and when you look up into the stranger's face, you almost startle, because for a second there that was you looking back. The real you.*

*You take a step closer to the mirror then, nose nearly touching the glass, and you try to look for it again. It starts with the eyes. It takes a little while – you lose track of how long – but then you blink and there, those are your steely and determined eyes.*

*And actually, come to think of it, you don't dislike your eyes. You used to be so stuck on how your appearance is so similar to your mother's, while Cooper got your father's looks, but actually you like your own hazel eyes better than Cooper's pale blue ones. And there's your nose. Nothing wrong with your nose. Or your jawline. You cock your head and narrow your eyes a little. And maybe there's nothing wrong with your mouth after all. Heartened, you continue your search, picking out body part after body part, ranging from your arms (which are actually kind of hairy for a supposed girl, and maybe if you started working out more, you could get a bit of definition to them) to your bellybutton (because a bellybutton is a bellybutton and hey, it all counts).*

*Finally you take a few steps back to look at the whole and oh, there he is, and it's not just a brief flash this time. He stays, second after second, minute after minute, until you're sure that he's sticking around. You're still naked, and there's still a lot you don't like to look at, but the rest of it. That's you. The boy who has been trapped inside for so long.*

*Blaine.*

*Later that day Blaine goes to his father and asks him to take him shopping for clothes. Blaine needs new clothes, because baggy jeans and t-shirts just aren't him. Those were choices born out of panic in the face of dresses, skirts, skintight jeans and cute tops. Blaine is something else entirely. He isn't yet sure what, but he's itching to find out. After they leave the mall with five bags full of new clothes, Blaine's father asks if he would like to get his first proper male haircut, and Blaine nods eagerly, so they stop by a barber shop on the way home and ask if they happen to have an opening.*

*'My son needs a haircut,' Blaine's father says.*

*When Cooper visits for Easter, Blaine pulls him aside and asks him to help find a binder that will fit. It will be a while still before he can wear it in public, of course, but even just being able to wear it around the house sometimes – to look at his reflection, flat-chested and right – is going to feel amazing. They use Cooper's credit card, and Blaine promises to pay him back, but his brother just waves a dismissive hand and says to consider it a gift – a replacement for all those Christmases and birthdays where Cooper mistakenly got Blaine something girly and useless to him. And in an unusual display of unprovoked affection, Cooper pulls Blaine close, squeezes his shoulder.*

*'You'll be okay,' he promises.*

## CHAPTER SIX

### *Part one*

#### *The greatest gift of all (Out in the storm)*

#### ***Some days just suck.***

'Finally,' Blaine breathed out when the door closed behind them and they were alone in Kurt's bedroom at last. 'I thought it was never going to end.'

'God, me too,' Kurt said as he hooked his arms around Blaine's neck and his eyes drifted to Blaine's mouth. 'Is it bad that, while we were singing for those homeless people, all I could think about was getting it over with so we could come here and be alone?'

'Emphasis on come?' Blaine asked with a smirk, which was quickly swallowed by Kurt's mouth on his, kissing him so fiercely that Blaine stumbled backwards a little. The back of Blaine's knees hit the bed, and then they were tumbling clumsily onto the bed, Kurt falling on top of Blaine.

'I like how you think,' Kurt said in a low voice when he had pulled himself into a more dignified position above Blaine, straddling his thighs. He leaned over Blaine, his hands finding and intertwining themselves with Blaine's on either side of his head. At the look on Kurt's face – such a perfect mixture of lust, playfulness and love – a wonderful sense of warmth spread through Blaine's entire body, and he felt suddenly much more comfortable than he should be in this position, like he could keep lying here forever. After a week of exploring and experimenting whenever they could (Blaine had a newfound love for his mother's crazy work schedule), Kurt's weight on him was warm and reassuring, and his face was so close that Blaine could see nothing but him, as if they were each other's worlds.

When Kurt let go of his hands and raised himself a little to work on the buttons of his shirt, Blaine let out a strangled sound, finding himself caught somewhere between *No, don't go away, you're too far away already* and *Yes, good idea, more skin, please*, but before he could comment either way Kurt's shirt was gone and Kurt was kissing him again, hungry and open-mouthed, their tongues meeting and fighting for dominance.

Somewhere along the way – he barely remembered how – Blaine lost his shirt too, and Kurt maneuvered them to lie properly on the bed. Kurt stretched out on top of him, his entire body covering Blaine's now, and Blaine was sure that there was no better place in the world to be than right here. As they kept kissing, Blaine forgot all about Christmas songs and homeless shelters and *ugh*, "holiday roommates", and there was just Kurt and his mouth and the way he began to rock his hips against Blaine with increasing desperation until *oh*. Blaine let out a short gasp as a particular well angled thrust sent shivers through his body and alerted him to his own growing arousal.

Kurt removed his lips from where they had been working on Blaine's neck and moved his head to look at Blaine with a satisfied smile. 'Good?' he asked.

'I...yeah...' Blaine managed. His breathing had turned uneven, which rendered words somewhat difficult. 'Hold on.'

Kurt looked confusedly on as Blaine reached a hand in between them and into his own pants, where he fumbled for a second, not used to doing this while he was still wearing pants, but then he pulled out the packer and threw it towards the chair in the corner, where it landed with a soft thump.

'Better access this way,' Blaine explained, bucking his hips against Kurt's demonstrating what he meant, and they both groaned at the friction.

They continued like this with Kurt rocking against Blaine over and over, both of them moaning and panting, their voices seeming to melt together into one until Blaine could no longer confidently distinguish Kurt's noises from his own. Blaine's groin area – he never really knew what to call it – was throbbing and aching from the constant stimulation, and it was all so new and overwhelming. The sensations themselves weren't new obviously (Blaine masturbated often enough) but the fact that it wasn't his own hand bringing them about very much was.

Above him Kurt was completely lost in his own arousal, his eyes heavy-lidded and dazed with lust, and he planted open-mouthed kisses everywhere on Blaine that he could reach. His movements grew steadily more erratic until all at once he stopped, explaining between heavy breaths that he didn't want to finish just yet. Instead he reached his hand between Blaine's legs, resuming his work with his hand and fingers now. In response to the new way of being touched, Blaine's eyes flew shut and his hips jerked wildly.

'God, Blaine.' He felt Kurt's breath against his mouth and his lips pressing softly against it. 'You look amazing like this. I'm so glad I get to do this with you. See, this is what I was talking about. Me and you. That's all that matters. I love you so much.'

Kurt kept talking, his words coming fast and breathlessly, but Blaine heard him as if from a mile away. Everything he was hearing and feeling was so immediate and yet so distant at the same time, as though his body wasn't really *him* anymore. He could feel his mind beginning to shut off, removing all context and sense of self from the situation and focusing on the touch so perfect that it sent shivers through his whole body. When hands began tugging on his pants, he was aware of raising his hips helpfully, but he felt separate from it somehow, and when he was finally naked except for the binder that still covered his chest, it felt like it was someone else's body on display.

'Okay if I touch you?' he heard a voice ask, and he only dimly registered that the question was directed at him and that he should answer. 'I'd like to... blow you. I've- I've been researching.'

He opened his eyes, blinking a little against the light. He hadn't even realized that they had been closed for this long. The person who had spoken – Kurt – was sitting at the foot of the bed and was eyeing his body with so much love and want. He closed his eyes again, before nodding his head. *Yes, please. Make it feel good.*

He felt the bed shift as the other person moved to position himself between his legs. A hand came to rest warmly on his stomach and another trailed fingers up the inside of his thigh before brushing over his already so sensitive area, and a whimper escaped his throat. Soft kisses pressed against his belly, further and further down until he felt warm breath ghosting over him.

'Wait. No.'

Blaine's eyes flew open. This wasn't right. This wasn't how it was supposed to be. He looked down at Kurt who was lying between Blaine's legs, his mouth inches from Blaine's crotch, but at the sound of Blaine's voice, he looked up, concern on his face.

'What's wrong?' Kurt asked softly, a hand reaching to touch Blaine's leg in what was undoubtedly meant to be a calming manner, but Blaine was already scrambling to get up and away. He swung his legs over and sat on the edge of the bed, taking deep calming breaths and bracing himself with his hands against the mattress. This was all wrong. All wrong. 'Blaine?'



'I'm sorry, I just couldn't.' Blaine's voice shook a little. 'Not like this. I'm sorry.'

'It's okay.' Blaine heard Kurt's voice from behind, and he felt the bed shift as Kurt moved closer to him. His hand touched Blaine's shoulder lightly. 'Don't be sorry. Just tell me what the problem is, so I know what to do differently next time.'

'It's not you,' Blaine said quietly and shook his head sadly. In a way it would have been much easier if it had been Kurt – if all he needed to do was to give Kurt a few pointers on technique and then they would be good to go again. 'You were perfect. You are. Believe me, just knowing that you've seen my... everything, and yet you're still here? That's priceless to me.'

'Then what is it? Can you explain it to me?'

Blaine let out a long breath and thought for a moment, searching for a way to phrase it. 'When I do this by myself – touch myself – it's kind of like... like Blaine has to disappear for a while and I become someone else. Because the idea of getting pleasure from this part of my body that I don't *want*... It freaks me out. So that's where I went just now. I shut out everything – who, where, when – until there was just the purely physical aspect left.' Behind him Kurt had stilled, and Blaine shifted around to look at him. He took Kurt's hand in his own and squeezed gently, trying a smile. 'But I don't want it to be like that when I'm with you. I want to be able to look at you and think *That's my boyfriend and he's blowing me and he loves it*. But I'm just not there yet.'

'So you don't want me to touch you there at all?' Kurt asked and, though he tried to disguise it with concern, Blaine didn't miss the hurt in his voice.

'No, not "at all",' Blaine corrected quickly. 'Just not so... directly? I mean, I want to, eventually. God, Kurt, I wanna do everything with you. I want to let you touch me and make me feel good. I want you to-' Blaine hesitated, blushing a little, the word on his tongue so outside his normal vocabulary. 'to fuck me, to- to feel you inside me. That's what I want when I think about us. But right now I just *can't*. Not without either disappearing into my head or- or feeling *sick* with dysphoria.' Blaine swallowed thickly before continuing. 'But this – everything we're doing – it's forcing me to deal with it, and it's hard and it *hurts*, but it's good. I can feel myself getting better, more comfortable, each time. But it's just- it's just gonna take time, Kurt.'

'But for now?' Kurt asked tentatively.

'What we did first – with- with the frottage? I liked that. I think maybe because it was the both of us getting off at the same time? But we can do that more. If you want. And I want to keep finding ways to make you feel good,' Blaine added, desperate to not have everything revolve around him. He smiled but thought it came out more like a grimace than anything. 'I like blowing you.'

'I like it too,' Kurt said with a smile that was somehow both fond and suggestive. 'And thank you. For explaining it to me. I know I'll probably never really understand what it's like, but the more I do, the better we can make this work.'

Kurt reached out a hand to cup the side of Blaine's face, smiling when Blaine leaned into the touch and then forward until their lips touched. It felt familiar. Safe. They fell back onto the bed and ended up in an embrace, Kurt resting his head on Blaine's shoulder and his arm slung across Blaine's stomach. As they lay there, simply enjoying each other's quiet company until Blaine had to go home, Blaine absentmindedly ran his fingers through Kurt's hair and let his mind drift.

Coming out to Kurt was in many ways a very different experience from the one Blaine had had nearly four years ago, when he came out to his parents. In the case of the latter Blaine had asked them to disregard the perception they had had of him for fourteen years as a girl and a daughter and try to view him as a boy and a son instead. Kurt, on the other hand, had been told about Blaine's past and was asked to *not* let it alter his perception of Blaine. Where Blaine's parents had been encouraged to tell everyone they knew that they now had a two sons instead of a son and a daughter, Kurt was asked to keep quiet about his boyfriend's biological sex. And there was of course the fact that Kurt was in a romantic relationship with Blaine, which raised questions about sex and intimacy, something Blaine's parents were less immediately concerned with.

However, one thing was very much the same now as it had been four years ago. Coming out put Blaine's transness on the radar – specifically Blaine's own – in a big way, which he wasn't altogether comfortable with. It wasn't that Blaine wanted to deny that it was part of him. Rather he just preferred it not to take up so much space in his life. He hated that he and Kurt had to focus so much energy on trying to make him comfortable. Kurt was amazingly patient and understanding about everything, and it wasn't as if it was the only thing they talked about, but because Blaine's issues were still so unresolved, he could feel it lingering on the edge of every conversation they had. He hadn't blamed his parents four years ago, and he certainly didn't blame Kurt now, but when all Blaine wanted was to be a normal boy, it was beyond frustrating to spend so much time talking about the ways in which he wasn't.

It was a period of adjustment, he knew that. Things with his family had eventually settled into a sense of normalcy and routine, where "he" and "Blaine" came naturally and talking about getting his prescriptions filled and who was driving him to therapy didn't mean that Blaine wasn't a real boy, but simply that he happened to have been born into different circumstances than other boys and that was all right. He was confident that he would get there with Kurt as well. In time he would be able to engage in sexual activity with his boyfriend without feeling so hindered by his body. He would be able to enjoy his body for what it was rather than despite what it wasn't.

As much as Blaine wanted it to be, though, that time wasn't now.

'I'm sorry I'm such a mess,' he said quietly.

With the arm that was slung across Blaine's stomach, Kurt squeezed a little tighter as if to say *Don't be*, and he turned his head to place a soft kiss on Blaine's neck. 'Beautiful mess.'

The Saturday following the shooting of the Christmas special and the failed blow job got off to a bad start. Blaine felt cranky and irritable from the moment he got out of bed, and he let out a long frustrated groan when he had to spend a good minute wrestling with his binder, because it got all bunched up in the back as he was putting it on. Then he picked up his phone only to discover that it was dead, because he had forgotten to put it in the charger the previous night, and he had to resist the urge to throw it across the room. A moment later he groaned again when he remembered that the History paper he had barely gotten started on was due this Monday.

Blaine closed his eyes and took a deep breath to center himself. Apparently it was just one of those days. Those "off" days he sometimes had, not because he was trans but because he was human, and human beings had bad days. He was just a little bit out of sorts; nothing that a strong cup of coffee, a little determination and some cute text message banter with Kurt wouldn't be able to fix.

Hopefully.

Blaine put his phone in the charger and went downstairs to the kitchen. His mother, dressed in a morning gown and slippers, was in the process of making coffee when he entered and she called a cheery 'Morning,' over her shoulder when she heard him.

'Can you get one for me as well?' Blaine asked, stifling a yawn. 'Morning,' he added unenthusiastically, remembering his manners despite his bad mood. He sat down heavily at the table and tipped his head into his arms resting on the table.

'Tired, sweetie?' his mother asked as she put down the coffee in front of him a few moments later, and Blaine straightened up.

'Yeah, tired. Late night.' Blaine took a sip of his coffee and smiled gratefully at her. 'Thanks.'

They sat in silence for a while, both sipping their coffees. Blaine's mother was going through the mail, a large chunk of which seemed to be Christmas cards from friends and family, and she scanned each one before putting it down and making a note on her phone. Meanwhile Blaine's mind wandered to the previous night's escapades – or lack thereof – with Kurt and he debated with himself about asking his mother for advice on how to get more comfortable. He was not particularly thrilled at the prospect of discussing his sex life with his mother, but she was a grownup and she had told him that he could ask if he needed to. Maybe she would be able to offer some insight? And it was so rare that Blaine even had the opportunity to have a serious conversation with her; usually if she wasn't busy with work, she was tired *from* it or about to head *to* it.

'Mom?' he began and she hummed in response but her eyes were trained on the card she held in her hand. 'Remember when you said I could come to you? If I had any questions about se-'

Blaine frowned when he noticed the look on his mother's face. The card she had been holding had been put down away from all the rest, and her phone lay forgotten on the table. As she finished reading another, her lips pursed and her eyes narrowed before she discarded it on top of the other. The same thing happened with the next few cards, and she looked more and more displeased with each one.

'What's wrong?' Blaine asked but got no response. 'Mom?'

'Hm?' His mother finally looked up. She shook her head, forcing a smile. 'Nothing.' She made to reach for the pile of offending cards, but Blaine – not believing her for a second – was too quick for her. 'Don't,' she said sharply even as Blaine was already opening one.

'Oh,' he said when he saw the first line of text. *Merry Christmas John, Grace, Cooper and Amber!* It was from Blaine's uncle Peter and his family. Of course. Another card was addressed just to his parents but asked at the end to *Give our love to Cooper and Amber*. There were at least five more cards like this, most of them from people whose names Blaine remembered from his father's side of the family tree. His grandmother had actually included a pretty long section in her letter about how she hoped John and Grace were getting "Amber" the help that "she" needed.

'Don't read them, sweetie,' his mother begged him. 'You know they're wrong.'

Blaine swallowed thickly. 'I know.' He couldn't stop reading though, and he was strangely curious to find out whether the rejection – which was what it was, no matter how nicely wrapped in *We want to help you* it was – would hurt more or less as he went on. It wasn't less. 'Who's Parker? I don't recognize that name.'

'My cousin,' Blaine's mother told him stiffly. 'Don't worry. I *will* be calling him and giving him a piece of my mind. As for the rest...' She stood up and deposited her coffee cup by the sink before walking back to the kitchen table. 'I'll make sure your father sees them. Give them here,' she demanded in an uncharacteristically shaky voice, and she practically ripped the cards out of Blaine's hands. It reminded Blaine of the way she had shouted at his father following the Thanksgiving debacle, except today her rage was suppressed because there was no one present to take her anger out on.

As Blaine heard his mother thunder up the stairs, presumably to leave the cards in the master bedroom for Blaine's father to see when he came home tonight, he shook his head and sighed. She could yell at her husband and tell him to stand up to his family all she wanted, but it was not as if it was going to change anything. It never changed.

He got up from his seat to leave his half empty coffee cup next to his mother's and busied himself with making breakfast. He didn't feel angry. He didn't feel hurt. He didn't feel sad. All he felt was numb and tired. So, so tired.

He was in the middle of making French toast, when he heard his mother come back down a few minutes later, and he turned around to see her fully dressed, her bag over one shoulder.

'You're going to work?' Blaine asked, finding his voice flat and emotionless.

'Yes. Just a short day,' she said quickly. 'Things are extra crazy now right before Christmas. Which I *will* be home for, I promise. It won't be like Thanksgiving.'

'Right,' Blaine said, vaguely realizing that he hadn't taken in a word his mother had said. She stepped closer to him, giving him a long searching look, and Blaine averted his eyes.

'You'll be okay by yourself, right?' Blaine shrugged first, still looking past her rather than at her, but realizing this might not be altogether reassuring, he forced himself to look at her and nod in response. She smiled softly, before deciding this wasn't enough and pulling him in for a brief one-armed hug. 'Just don't let them get to you.'

'I know.' Blaine nodded stiffly before turning away. 'My toast is burning,' he said, not because it was – he wasn't hungry and he really didn't care – but because his mother's worries only served to drive the message of those cards home. It was easier if he could just be numb.

With his mother safely out the door, Blaine finished making his breakfast, before sitting at the table to eat. He had little appetite, however, and after twenty minutes of picking at it, he had still only eaten half of it. In the end he gave up and threw the leftovers in the trash. When he had finished cleaning up in the kitchen, he went upstairs intending to get started on his History essay, but found that he couldn't concentrate. For long minutes he stared blankly at the blinking cursor on his screen, unable to make his mind cooperate, and when he pulled out his textbook hoping for some inspiration there, he kept reading the same passage over and over without taking in any meaning at all. Finally admitting defeat, he snapped his laptop shut and put aside the book. He would just have to do the essay later.

Five minutes of pacing later Blaine went downstairs to the living room and spent a few moments searching the bookshelves before he found what he was looking for. Photo albums – two of them. Dusty and untouched for years. One was labeled with the years *1994-1999*, the other with *2000-2006* and both of them bearing the name *Amber* crossed over and replaced years later with *Blaine*. He took both of them upstairs to his bedroom, where he threw himself on the bed and started flicking through the oldest one.

It looked as though he had been a happy enough child, always eager to pose for his father's camera. Blaine ran his fingers over one that showed him riding piggyback on Cooper's shoulders in the back garden of their old house in Columbus. Long, dark pigtails were bouncing in the air, and a delighted smile lit up the small child's face, as though riding around on your brother's shoulders was all one could ever want in life. The short handwritten descriptions that accompanied most of the photos had not been edited since the name change, so this one still read *Amber and Cooper. Back garden, summer 1997*. Blaine would have been a little over three years old. Why couldn't he have just remained that happy child? Where and how had things gone so horribly wrong that *this* was what he was now?

Blaine kept flicking through the album, the photos filling him with a mixture of nostalgia and painful remembrance. He lingered for a while at one whose caption read *Amber and Jamie, Amber's birthday party 1999*. In the photo he was posing next to his then best friend – the one who would later claim that Blaine (well, *Amber* as he had been known then) was too much of a girl to be friends with. Blaine remembered that day. His parents had thrown him a huge party and his mother had insisted that he wear a dress for the occasion. Blaine had screamed and cried in protest, but his mother wouldn't budge. In the end he had given in, and his mother had looked at him with fondness, cooing how pretty her little girl was.

When Blaine reached the end of the first photo album, he switched to the newer one, continuing to study photo after photo of a pigtailed little girl in sundresses and a matching bright smile. Some of the photos Blaine inspected closely, as though some greater meaning or truth was suddenly going to reveal itself to him, and it was suddenly inexplicably important that he ascertain whether all those smiles were genuine or not. There was no deep meaning of course – they were just photos – and Blaine's face had always just automatically lit up in smile whenever he saw a camera pointed at him.

This was useless.

He threw the photo album on the floor in frustration and moved to stand in front of the mirror over his dresser. It was too small, however, so without really stopping to think about what he was doing, he picked the mirror from the wall and placed it on the floor against the dresser at an angle so it worked more like a full body mirror. There, that was better.

Except... Blaine frowned a little at the image he saw. Slowly he began removing his clothes, studying each new exposed body part before moving on to the next piece of clothing until finally there was only his underwear – his briefs and his binder – left.

It had been more than two and a half years since Blaine had begun transitioning medically, and a lot had changed. His muscles were bigger. He had more body hair. He had to shave regularly. Fat had redistributed to different parts of his body. Even the shape of his face had changed somewhat.

So why did it feel like nothing had changed at all? Why did it feel like he was still that girl with the pigtails and the yellow sundress? Even though he never had been.

Resisting the urge to smash the mirror in front of him, Blaine went instead to the bathroom where he shed the last two pieces of clothing and stepped into the shower. He spent long minutes under the hot water, and he turned the heat up a little higher than he was used to, dimly hoping that it would distract his mind. When that didn't work, he turned the water extremely cold instead, but all that did was make him cold *and* miserable. He kept standing there, however, minute after minute staring at his warped reflection in the plumbing in the wall.

Finally he stepped out and went through the motions of drying himself off. It wasn't until he raised his hand to run a comb through his hair, that he realized that his body was shivering with cold.

Back in his room he got dressed in a worn pair of sweats and an old t-shirt of Cooper's that had been left behind in the wash. He didn't bother with the binder. It seemed rather pointless. Finally Blaine sat down on the edge of the bed and heaved a deep sigh, before letting himself fall to lie flat on his back, staring up at the ceiling.

He knew what this was. Everyone had bad days; days where little things irritated them disproportionately, and Blaine didn't think his were much worse than normal people's. Sometimes, though, a simple bad day would turn into *this*.

Sometimes all it took was one stupid comment when he wasn't expecting it to make it feel like his whole world was crashing down on him and all he was left with was crushing despair and hopelessness. Like everything he had worked for and achieved in the last four years disappeared, and he was still that scared kid staring into the mirror, wondering when things were going to get better.

Blaine sighed and closed his eyes for a long moment. As tempting as it was to keep lying here all limb and apathetic, he knew he mustn't. It would just make it worse. Years of dealing with this on a semi-regular basis had taught him that much. There were only really two options for getting past these moments. The first was to simply charge forward and live through it – *fake it till you make it* – or, if that didn't work, the



other was to find a way to work the pain out of his system, which usually translated to either pounding furiously on a punching bag or to putting on sad music and allowing himself to just *cry*. He had already failed at the first option, and he was all out of punching bags, so in the end Blaine reached for his phone. He spent a minute scrolling through his playlists until he found a suitable one and put it on shuffle.

The first sound he heard was a melancholic sort of whistling, and Blaine's immediate reaction as he sank to the floor, leaning his back against the bed, was a peculiar sense of calm. However, it only lasted fifteen seconds until the singing started.

*I'm burned out and wasted*

*I'm tired of pacing*

*I'm busy erasing voices of the dead*

*Everything changes*

*And everyone's faceless*

*I wanna replace this darkness in my head*

Blaine blinked once and the first tear rolled thickly down his cheek, because that was it exactly. He felt tired to the *bone*. He was sick of dealing with dysphoria, sick of looking at a body that betrayed his past as the person he had never been able to be. He was sick of ignorant relatives and sick of being confronted with the world's hatred of people like him. He was just *done* with it. It was a scary feeling that felt an awful lot like giving up, and Blaine wanted rid of it. He liked to think of himself as an optimistic person under normal circumstances, and he always did his best to not give into despair. Giving up was not going to accomplish anything.

*Even fools, they say, can find a way out of the dark*

There was no logical reason that Blaine should be feeling like this right now. It was not as if he had anything new to be depressed about. In fact, with Kurt turning out to be so supportive and patient, things were arguably better now than they had ever been. Admittedly his school situation was not what it had been a year ago – at McKinley the classes were duller and the kids were meaner, but Blaine was hardly failing his classes and being stared at for being *gay* did not really touch him.

*Logically* Blaine should have been able to talk himself out of feeling this way by telling himself all the ways in which his situation did not in fact suck. Kurt was wonderful and supportive. Cooper was quite possibly the best brother anyone could hope for. His parents were... not everything he wanted them to be, but they had supported him from the moment he came out, and that was a lot more than a lot of kids in his situation got. And Blaine had plenty of friends. He was finally starting to find his place at McKinley, and he still kept in touch with a number of his old Warbler friends. Not to mention there was a whole online community always within his reach, ready to offer support and advice whenever he needed it. All in all there were a lot of kids out there who had it worse than him.

Knowing that, however, did nothing at all to make Blaine feel better.

*Help me out of the dark*

All it did was make him feel even more stupid and helpless.

When something dripped onto Blaine's phone, it was a second before he realized that it was his own tears; that he was crying properly now, even shaking with the force of it.

*Have I been a sinner?*

*A lover, a killer?*

*'Cause the world, I've discovered*

*It feels nothing like my home*

Blaine remembered the conversation the day after he had inadvertently outed himself to Kurt, in which Kurt had made Blaine promise to tell him next time he had a bad day. This was exactly what they had been talking about – in fact it was ten times what they had been talking about – but Blaine just couldn't bring himself to call Kurt.

*I wanna escape it*

*Or try to embrace it*

*I keep re-arranging everything I know*

He couldn't. What would he tell him? *My father's mean family sent some rude letters and now I'm really depressed* sounded silly and childish even in his head, and the thought that *that* was what had sent him over the edge this time made him feel pathetic and ashamed that he couldn't handle himself better.

*In a strange strange place*

*I'm lying on the edge of a star*

*In these violent days*

*I only wanna be where you are*

Blaine almost wished that his pain had some kind of physical manifestation. He wasn't afraid of physical pain. When the assault had happened nearly three years ago now, the worst part hadn't been the pain itself. What got to him was the helplessness, knowing he could do nothing to stop it, and it was the constant fear and the nightmares in the months after.

*Even fools, they say, can find a way out of the dark*

*Of the dark*

*Help me out of the dark*

Bruises and broken ribs he could at least show to someone and say *Look! This is why I'm hurting*. Physical pain seemed manageable. He would know what to do with that, but this – there was no easy fix to this. All he could do was to sit here and let the tears come, hoping that they would eventually run out.

He waited for the moment when the music turned inspiring and his usual sense of fiery determination overtook him. Determination to not let himself be a depressed mess and to make the best of his situation because being bitter hurt no one but himself. Today, however, it wouldn't happen. As song after song went by, the tears just kept rolling down his cheeks.

As one song faded out and gave way to slow piano music, Blaine considered turning it off and putting on some happy music instead, because this clearly wasn't helping. For long moments he stared at the phone in his hand, vaguely noting that his vision was blurred by tears, and the music just kept playing.

*Something is said, it sits in my head*

*It's been there too long, it's killing me slow*

*It's rolling around, it's pushing me down*

*It's keeping the good part of me closed*

He should turn it off. Except the mere thought of happy music made Blaine want to vomit. Right now wasn't fun, but it didn't require anything from him and there was safety in that. Happiness meant making an effort, having to stay strong, and it was exhausting.

*Can't you see that when I find you, I'll find me*

Kurt. He had become Blaine's rock. Something to hold on to when he felt himself slipping. Blaine felt himself inexplicably tied to Kurt in a way that went far beyond mere high school sweethearts. He wondered if that was what people meant by "soulmates".

*I need you to know today, I'll wait for you always*

Kurt. If only he were here now. Blaine wouldn't ask him to come though. Not for this. Not when there wasn't really a problem, and Blaine was just being weak and oversensitive. It was the weekend before Christmas. Kurt would have better things to do than to babysit Blaine.

*My only weakness, is knowing your secrets*

*And holding them close, and hold them tight*

Kurt. He knew Blaine's secret and accepted it, but up until now he had only seen Blaine have a few minor freakouts. What if he took one look at Blaine like this and ran away? This wasn't the Blaine Kurt had met and fallen for. That Blaine was strong and composed, charming with an easy smile. That Blaine still existed – this mess wasn't who Blaine was, and it wasn't indicative of who he wanted *them* to be either. He wanted them to be boyfriends – equals – not a patient and his caregiver. If only he could explain that to Kurt.

*I know the way to silently make you*

*Smile with my eyes, when you're trying to fight*

Then again, if they really were soulmates the way Blaine's heart told him, then wasn't Kurt just as tied to Blaine as Blaine was to him? Maybe that meant that Blaine wouldn't have to explain.

*I'll wait for you always*

*Cause when I find you, I'll find me*

Maybe that was the point.

## CHAPTER SIX

### *Part two*

#### ***Kurt gets a phonecall that breaks his heart.***

Kurt was sitting on his bed with a book in his lap, fighting his way through his English homework, when he felt his phone vibrate next to him. He picked it up and smiled when he saw the familiar photo of Blaine grinning up at him.

'Hello, handsome,' he greeted his boyfriend with just a hint of flirtation in his voice.

'Kurt,' the voice on the other end choked out, and though Kurt recognized it as Blaine's, it sounded nothing like his boyfriend. Kurt's smile disappeared in an instant, and he sat up straight, tense and alert.

'Blaine? What's wrong?'

'Nothing,' Blaine said quickly but then he added in a weak voice, 'Everything.'

'What happened?' Kurt was already on his feet and moving around the room, his heart beating painfully hard in his chest. He opened his closet and picked out a pair of shoes, past caring if they went with his outfit, his only concern that they were easy to put on. 'Blaine, honey, talk to me.'

'Nothing happened. Not really. It's just- I can't make it stop.' Blaine sniffed before letting out a shaky breath, and Kurt's heart *ached* to hear him like this. How long had Blaine been by himself with this – whatever "this" was – while Kurt had gone about his day without a care in the world beyond *God, Shakespeare is boring?*

'Are you alone?' Kurt asked, his voice tight and worried, as he grabbed his bag and hurried downstairs. 'Is your mom home?'

'She went to work. I can't disturb her. Her work is important.' It scared Kurt just how empty Blaine's voice sounded.

'Blaine, *you're* important,' Kurt said sternly as he threw on his coat, but Blaine just laughed hollowly. Kurt's eyebrows shot up. 'I'm coming over.'

'No, you don't have to. Just hearing your voice helps,' Blaine said quickly. 'You're probably busy.'

'Don't be silly. I'm coming over.' Kurt swallowed. He really didn't like the way Blaine sounded. It was beyond just sad or upset. He sounded *broken*. 'I'll be right there. Just- don't do anything.'

Kurt wasn't sure where the last three words came from. He didn't really believe that Blaine would hurt himself. Did he? Kurt shook his head in an attempt to clear his mind. He didn't know what he believed right now. All he knew was that his Blaine was alone and in pain.

'Okay. I won't.' Blaine's voice was barely more than a whisper, and Kurt bit his lip before hanging up and calling over his shoulder to whatever family member might be near that he was going out for a while. When he opened the door to hurry out to his car, he almost ran straight into the mailman who turned out to have a package for him. Kurt couldn't remember what he had ordered lately, but accepted the package distractedly and brought it along with him in the car.

The distance from his own house to Blaine's had never felt longer. The roads seemed endless and every red light had Kurt on pins and needles. Was this something Kurt should have seen coming? Blaine had seemed down the previous night, but Kurt had been so pleased to hear him talk in more detail about the way he experienced sex and what he wanted. Their first conversation two weeks previously had been extremely superficial – Blaine's contribution having consisted mainly of clarifying that no parts of his body should be referenced in female terms, declaring that touching his chest was a big no-no, and explaining that as far as he was concerned, he only had the one hole down there – so Kurt had taken this new burst of talking from Blaine as a step in the right direction.

What if Blaine felt that Kurt had pushed him there? Kurt was trying so hard to find a balance between *I really want to have sex with you* and *We can wait as long as you want* to make sure that Blaine knew that Kurt wanted him while also respecting his boundaries, but sometimes it was hard to know when to push and when to hold back.

Kurt desperately hoped that he wasn't making things worse for Blaine.

When Kurt finally made it to Blaine's house, he let himself in with the key that the Andersons kept under one of the potted plants on the front porch, before taking the stairs two steps at a time and hurrying down the hall to Blaine's bedroom.

Blaine was sitting completely still on the floor with his back against the bed, hugging his knees against his chest and his face buried in his arms. He was dressed only in sweats and a t-shirt, and his hair was damp and unstyled.

'Blaine...' Kurt uttered, heartbroken at the sight in front of him, rushing forward and dropping his bag and keys carelessly on the floor as he crouched down in front of the smaller boy. He tugged a little on Blaine's arms. 'Blaine, look at me.'

Blaine only tightened his grip around his knees, before a muffled 'Can't,' reached Kurt's ears, and Kurt got the strangest feeling that Blaine was somehow ashamed. Kurt swallowed, wishing he had thought to educate himself on how to deal with moments like this. He should have called Trent on the way over. Or Cooper. Or anyone. He felt completely out of his depth. What was the right approach? Kurt didn't like to force Blaine to do something he didn't want to, but neither did he like what was happening now. In the end Kurt sat down next to Blaine.

'Come here,' he urged softly, patting his lap and tugging on Blaine's right arm. 'You don't have to look at me.' Slowly Blaine relaxed his grip and tipped his head into Kurt's lap, lying on his side, facing the door. He breathed out slowly, but he still felt tense when Kurt rested one hand on Blaine's bare arm while the other tangled in his damp curls. 'What can I do?'

'Just... keep doing what you're doing.' Blaine's voice was hoarse and ragged, as though he hadn't spoken for days. He coughed once to clear his throat. 'Just be there. Don't go away.'

Kurt squeezed reassuringly around Blaine's arm. 'I won't. Never.'

They sat in silence for a while, Blaine not talking and Kurt deciding not to try and force him. Kurt took the time to look around the room, only now noticing that the room was a bit of a mess; the mirror that usually hung over the dresser stood leaned against it now, clothes were strewn across the floor, and a foot or so away from Kurt lay an open photo album. Kurt stretched to pull it closer and glanced at the photos, all of a dark-haired girl around ten years old. Despite the smile on her face, Kurt thought there was something sad about her.



'Who's this?' he asked softly. 'In the photos.'

'That's me,' Blaine mumbled. 'Her.'

Kurt took a second to process what Blaine was saying and realize that he was looking at childhood photos of Blaine – or "Amber" as the captions read. He mulled the thought over for a moment, before surprising himself by not finding it more off-putting than he did. Not that he really knew how to respond. The only thing his brain would come up with was *You made a cute girl*, because he had, but it seemed like rather an insensitive thing to say.

'I was trying to find it,' Blaine went on. 'Where I lost my way. Turned into this. Wrong.'

'Well, you're not going to find it,' Kurt replied without even thinking.

'I know,' Blaine said in a hollow voice. 'I didn't turn wrong. I always was.'

'No,' Kurt said firmly, and this time he did force Blaine to turn and look up at him. Kurt stared into those hazel eyes and he wanted to cry and look away from the sheer emptiness there, but he forced himself not to. 'You never were.'

Blaine held Kurt's gaze, his eyes puffy and bloodshot, but he sent Kurt a smile that seemed genuine, if a little weak. Kurt stroked through Blaine's hair, taking pleasure in the lack of gel that meant he could do that for once and commenting idly, 'You didn't do your hair today.'

Blaine raised a hand to his head as though he was only just now realizing this and his cheeks flushed a little. 'God, I'm sorry. It's terrible, I know. I was just-'

'Shh, stop it.' Kurt placed his hand briefly over Blaine's mouth to make him stop talking. 'Why do you do that? Put yourself down all the time?'

Blaine opened and closed his mouth a few times, before he found words. 'I- I don't- Not all the time.' He closed his eyes for a moment. 'I don't know. Habit?'

'Well, stop it,' Kurt scolded. 'I like your hair.'

Blaine's smile this time was almost a grin, and it lit up his entire face, his eyes once again alive and dancing and *Blaine*. The tight feeling in Kurt's chest, the one that had taken hold and been building since Blaine's first broken word to him over the phone, lessened and Kurt finally felt like he could breathe again.

He smiled softly down at Blaine. 'There he is.'

From there it was almost easy. As Kurt chatted about this and that, Blaine listened and responded, his contributions perhaps fewer and a bit more muted than under normal circumstances, but gradually the tension in his body subsided until it felt almost like any other afternoon of warm snuggles.

'Okay, let's get you up,' Kurt said finally, patting Blaine's stomach. Blaine, however, curled around on his side and gripped Kurt's shirt tightly.

'No, don't wanna,' he whined. 'You make such a comfy pillow.'

Kurt laughed. 'You really are feeling better, aren't you?'

'No, I'm sad and depressed,' Blaine pouted, but his lips quirked and Kurt could tell that a smile was threatening to erupt. 'So you have to do as I say.'

Kurt pretended to consider Blaine's words. 'Hm... Sure you're not just taking advantage now?'

'What? Me? Never.' Blaine stuck out his bottom lip in a dramatic pout.

'Ri-ight.' Kurt trailed a finger down Blaine's bare arm. Kurt could play dirty too. 'Just like I'd never do *this*,' Kurt said as he brought his fingers to Blaine's ribs, making Blaine yelp and practically leap into the air.

'Okay, I'm up. I'm up!'

Kurt smirked as he, too, stood up. 'Thought so.' They looked at each for a moment or two before Kurt's expression turned serious and he stepped closer to Blaine. 'You are okay though, right?'

Blaine nodded and kept his tone cheerful as he responded. 'Yeah, I'm fine. I'm sorry if I scared you. It doesn't usually get this bad, I swear. I don't usually get this... helpless.'

Blaine gave an awkward half-shrug before he moved past Kurt and picked up the photo album from the floor. Kurt watched quietly as Blaine collected the other one from the bed and placed them both neatly on the desk, before picking up the clothes that were spread across the floor, his movements swift and sure.

'Can you tell me what happened?' Kurt asked and Blaine stopped in his tracks, his shoulders visibly slumping. Kurt imagined that Blaine would still be feeling somewhat raw and vulnerable, and he realized that Blaine probably wouldn't want talk about it, but neither could they just go back to normal as though nothing had happened. Kurt still didn't really know what had actually happened. He felt rather like he had walked into the climax of a movie without knowing the details of the story.

Blaine was still facing away from Kurt when he replied. 'I don't know. Nothing big.' He paused, before correcting himself, 'Nothing unexpected. Just stupid relatives catching me off guard.'

'What did they do now?' Kurt demanded, feeling anger rise in his chest. Some people really needed the *If you don't have anything nice to say* mantra drilled into their heads.

Blaine sighed, clearly too tired to get upset about it again. 'Nothing. Just the usual. It wasn't even anything compared to what happened at Thanksgiving. For some reason it just hit me harder today.' Before Kurt could process Blaine's words, let alone think of a response, Blaine grabbed the mirror by the dresser, asking, 'Can you help me with this?'

Kurt opened his mouth to speak, but found that he didn't know what to say, so instead he just stepped forward and grabbed the other end of the mirror, and for a minute they struggled in silence to get it back on the wall. It only just occurred to Kurt then what Blaine might have been doing with it, and the thought made him suddenly intensely sad.

Once the mirror hung safely on the wall, Kurt turned to Blaine and regarded him for a moment, head cocked thoughtfully. 'Do you ever wonder where it comes from? All of it.'

'You mean why I couldn't just be a girl?' Blaine asked quietly.

'Well. Yes.'

Blaine looked at Kurt for a long moment before turning to the dresser, apparently looking for something to wear, and Kurt was starting to think that Blaine was simply going to ignore the question, when he finally spoke. 'I used to make myself crazy thinking about it. Wondering if things might have turned out

differently somehow.' Blaine turned away with a stack of clothes in his hands, pulling off his t-shirt and sweats, and began to get dressed. 'There are plenty of theories of course, but no one knows for sure what causes it. In the end it doesn't really matter. It's not like I can change it.'

Blaine turned back around and rummaged through a dresser drawer, still only clad in underwear and binder, and Kurt marveled for a second at how much more comfortable Blaine seemed around him now compared to a mere week ago.

'Would you?' The words tumbled out before Kurt could wonder if the question was inappropriate, and Blaine looked at Kurt in question, idly fixing his packer into his briefs. 'I mean, if they found a "cure" tomorrow, something that could make you cis, would you take it?'

Blaine frowned. 'That depends. Cis male? Yes. Cis female?' Blaine looked thoughtful as he pulled on his pants. 'I don't know. I feel like that would fundamentally change who I am, and I don't like the idea of that. Besides...' Blaine smiled warmly. 'Then I wouldn't have you, would I?'

'True.' Kurt returned the smile playfully. 'I am a lot to lose.' Blaine grinned and Kurt sat down on the bed, letting Blaine finish getting dressed in silence, only speaking again when Blaine was fixing his bow tie in the mirror. 'Do you think it's ever going to stop? The dysphoria.'

'Someone has a lot of questions today,' Blaine replied, lifting an eyebrow.

'Sorry, I can stop if it makes you uncomfortable,' Kurt said quickly. 'It's just, I still feel like I have so much to learn.'

'I'm not a science project, Kurt,' Blaine said evenly as he turned around.

'I know. I didn't mean it like that.' Kurt bit his lip as he felt himself getting nervous, and he blurted out the next sentence. 'I just really want to do this as perfectly as I can. I don't wanna be the one to make things worse for you, you know? So... I ask questions.'

Blaine's expression softened and he smiled in that fond way he sometimes did when he thought Kurt was being adorable and a little bit silly. He kneeled in front of Kurt so they were on the same eye level and he rested his hands on Kurt's thighs. 'I know. But it's only been three weeks, and you're doing fine, Kurt. More than fine.'

'Really?' Kurt said before he could stop himself. He had kept a calm exterior for Blaine's sake, but Kurt rather felt like he had stumbled his way through the last few weeks, never sure if what he did or said was the right thing.

'Really.' Blaine smiled warmly and it was remarkable how this was the same boy who Kurt had just been comforting. While Kurt had both seen and felt the change as Blaine let go of his... issues (Dysphoria? Sadness? Depression?), he suspected that at least part of Blaine's current cheer was an act – not for Kurt, but for *himself*. Blaine leaned in for a brief kiss before joining Kurt on the bed. 'Anyway, to answer your question. I think it gets less and less in time. And getting top surgery's gonna help a lot. Whenever that'll be,' he added with just a hint of bitterness.

'Your parents still not keen on the idea?' Kurt asked sympathetically, and Blaine shook his head.

'My dad apparently thinks I'm going to regret it, or he has some sort of moral objection to cosmetic surgery.'

Kurt frowned. 'That's simplifying it a little, isn't it? Calling it "cosmetic".'

Blaine laughed humorlessly. 'Yeah, try telling him that. Listen,' he said, his tone getting brighter as he stood up again and bounced on the balls of his feet. 'What do you say we go somewhere? Maybe go to the movies or something? I'm kinda sick of this room by now.'

'Sure, just-' Kurt looked at Blaine for a long moment while he worried his lip, wondering if now was the time and how to even articulate what he wanted to say. 'Can I say something first?'

'Okay...' Blaine flopped back down on the bed, looking questioningly at Kurt. 'What is it? You look serious.'

'No, it's not,' Kurt assured him quickly. 'Well, it is. Serious. But not *serious* serious. Just serious.' Blaine raised his eyebrows in amusement. Great, Kurt was already fumbling his words. Didn't this just bode well? Kurt took a deep breath. This didn't have to be awkward. 'It's about sex. Is that okay?'

Blaine's expression darkened the tiniest bit, but he nodded all the same. 'Sure, go ahead.'

'It's... the whole top/bottom thing.' Kurt paused, but Blaine had no discernible reaction, so he plunged on. 'The thing is when you mentioned yesterday that you wanted to bottom, I was confused at first. Not-' Kurt

hurried to add. 'Not because you're trans or anything like that. I figure gender doesn't really have lot to do with sex or sexuality, does it?'

Blaine nodded. 'No, I mean yeah, that's right.'

Heartened, Kurt continued. 'It's more that whenever we do stuff, you seem to prefer kind of... being in charge. Maybe that's a simplified way of looking at it, but I just sort of assumed you'd want to top, so I was a little thrown by that.' Blaine's eyes widened and his mouth fell open a little as though he wanted to say something but didn't know what. 'Not in a bad way. At all,' Kurt added, feeling too embarrassed to say what he really meant. *Yes, I would very much love to fuck you.* 'I was just surprised. But I've been thinking, and I think I understand now. The control. It's not that you want it necessarily. It's that you *need* it in order to handle things.'

Kurt looked to Blaine for confirmation, and Blaine nodded nervously. He looked rather like a deer caught in the headlights. 'Is this the point where you ask me to give it up?' Blaine asked quietly. 'To just let go?'

'No,' Kurt said softly. 'I mean, it makes me a little sad if it's not actually what you want. But,' Kurt stressed. 'I'm not going to force or pressure you to do something you're not ready for. That wasn't where I was going at all. If you feel like you need to be in control – to be the more... active one of us, then I'm going to let you. Until you're ready not to be.'

'O-kay...Thank you?' Blaine said slowly. 'Why do I feel like there's more coming?'

'I thought maybe you'd like to try topping,' Kurt said, tripping over his words slightly.

Blaine stared at him for a long hard moment. 'No, I'd love to, but... well, I can't, can I? Not without...' Blaine made a vague gesture towards his crotch.

'Right. That's where this comes in.' Kurt slid off the bed and picked up his messenger bag from the floor, fishing out the package he had received just before leaving home and handing it to Blaine, who took it warily. 'I was going to give it to you for Christmas, but uhm... it's probably better not opened in front of your family, anyway.'

Blaine laughed nervously. 'What is this, a sex toy or something?'

'Yes. And no.' Blaine lifted an eyebrow. 'Just open it, Blaine.'

'Okay, then,' Blaine said and did as asked, struggling with the copious amounts of tape for a while before he was finally able to pull open the box and look at its contents. His expression was unreadable as he held up a small bag in black fabric bearing the words *Peacock Products*.

'It's a three-in-one kind of a thing. "Pee, pack and play,'" Kurt explained when Blaine pulled out the item, staring at it. Kurt watched him anxiously, hoping that his gift wasn't offensive somehow. 'I thought you might want to give the STP thing a chance. This one's supposed to be really good. But if it's not, it's also a regular packer, and it comes with a harness and a rod thingy-' Kurt fumbled through the small mess on the bed and held up a plastic see-through rod the same length as the shaft. '- to make it hard, which means we can use it in the bedroom. I mean, if you want. We don't have to of course, but I ordered it earlier this week when I thought you'd be topping, but maybe you'd like to try it anyway? Maybe it could help somehow?' Kurt was rambling nervously now, his words coming fast and breathlessly. Blaine still hadn't said anything. 'And I heard that it's good for a top to try bottoming, so it might even help me for when - if - you're ready to let go. I don't know, tell me if I'm way off base here. I just thought-'

Kurt swallowed the rest of his sentence when Blaine held a finger to his lips and smiled at him. 'Thank you,' he said as he pulled Kurt in for a hug. 'I'd love to try that sometime.' He turned his attention to the items on the bed, sifting through the papers with interest, scanning through the notes on proper use and cleaning. When he got to the receipt, however, his face fell. '*Kurt*.'

'Give me that.' Kurt yanked the piece of paper out of Blaine's hand. 'You weren't supposed to see that.'

'But you can't- That's a lot of money, Kurt. I can't afford something like that.'

'That's why it's called a gift, Blaine,' Kurt told him as he stuffed the receipt into his bag.

'I know, but what I got you-'

'I know what you meant. And don't worry about it, okay? In a way it's kind of for the both of us, isn't it?' Blaine smiled incredulously, shaking his head a little. 'Anyway,' Kurt said standing up and pulling Blaine with him. 'Come on. I believe you said something about a movie? And unless I'm mistaken there's a bag of popcorn and a large can of soda with our name on it. I'll even let you pay if it makes you feel better.'

## CHAPTER SIX

### *Part three*

***It's the last day of school before the holidays and Blaine has a couple of things to get off his chest.***

Tuesday was the last day of school before the holidays and when his last lesson of the day ended, Blaine approached his locker to collect what he would need over the holidays. Before he could open it, however, his phone buzzed in his pocket, and he pulled it out to find a text from Sebastian.

*Merry xmas. I for one know what I want this year. There's even a whole song about it. ;)*

Blaine rolled his eyes. He had hoped that Sebastian would ease up on the flirting in time when Blaine didn't reciprocate, but it had been six weeks now and Sebastian still texted him almost daily. It was starting to look like Blaine might have to have a serious talk with him after all. Blaine sighed. Confrontation was not one of his strongest suits. He didn't have to do it now though, he told himself – Christmas did seem like entirely the wrong time – so Blaine pushed the thought out of his head for now and sent off a polite reply to Sebastian's text.

As he put his phone away and opened his locker, gathering his things, Blaine's mind drifted to another conversation he dreaded. Well, *dreaded* was maybe not the right word, but he couldn't deny being a little nervous about it. Big gestures were so much easier to deliver in song. When he was on a stage, he felt confident and in control, the world his for the taking. Blaine doubted that he could be as impressive when it was just him and his words. He reached into his bag and pulled out the small red box, careful not to tear off the golden bow decoration on top. Well, and that, he supposed – him, his words and a silly homemade ring.

'What's with the box?' Rachel's voice came from behind Blaine who wheeled around quickly, relieved to find that Kurt wasn't with her. Rachel raised an eyebrow. 'Jumpy today, are we?'

'Sorry, I was just... checking.' Blaine looked up and down the hallway again, making sure that Kurt wasn't approaching before telling Rachel in a low voice, 'He thinks he already got his present. It's supposed to be a surprise. For Kurt, I mean,' he added stupidly. As though that wasn't obvious.



'I'd guessed,' Rachel said with an indulgent sort of smile, the kind that Blaine was usually the one to send her. 'So what is it?' She pulled at his wrist and took a step forward, inspecting the box more closely. A second later she let out a soft gasp, and she looked up at Blaine, her eyes wide. 'No, wait... Is that- Is that a *ring* box? *Blaine*, oh my god.'

'Rachel, relax,' Blaine said, shushing his friend. 'It's not like I'm proposing. It's not even a real ring.' Rachel's brow furrowed in confusion at these words. Blaine shrugged. 'I couldn't afford it.'

While Rachel took a moment to gather herself, Blaine smiled at her never-ending enthusiasm, even if he did sometimes find it a little overwhelming. 'Okay, so... if you're not proposing, then what? What's the occasion?'

'He is. Kurt being Kurt. So I'm... promising. I don't know, it's silly,' Blaine said, losing his confidence a little and making to put away the box, but Rachel stopped him and pried it from his hand. 'He's probably going to laugh at me.'

'He is not. Kurt's a romantic and you know that,' Rachel scolded before opening the box, and from the way her expression softened, the ring might as well have been a real, live puppy. 'Blaine. You made this?'

Blaine felt his cheeks grow hot. 'Yeah.'

Rachel kept staring at the ring for a long moment, a strange unreadable expression on her face. 'I'm an awful person,' she said finally, and she seemed to be speaking to herself more than Blaine.

'What?'

Rachel looked up at Blaine as though she had half forgotten that he was there. She forced a smile as she closed the box and gave it back to him. 'He's gonna love it. And I'm sorry, but I really have to go find Finn now.'

'O-kay,' Blaine said, watching perplexed as she turned to leave only to turn around again and pull Blaine into a brief one-armed hug, before hurrying off down the hall. As Blaine watched her go, he saw her passing Kurt heading in the other direction, and when Kurt turned to stare after her, Blaine hastily stuffed the box into his pocket.

'What's up with Rachel?' Kurt asked when he reached Blaine's side. 'Is she still upset about the pig?'

'I have no idea,' Blaine replied truthfully, giving a small laugh as he closed his locker. He considered Kurt for a moment before grabbing him by the wrist and beginning to lead him away. 'Come here for a second.'

'What's wrong?' Kurt said, looking immediately worried, when they had found a relatively quiet corner of the hallway.

'Nothing,' Blaine said, holding his hands up in calming gesture. 'On the contrary. I... wanted to give you something. Since it's Christmas.'

'But you've already given me my present,' Kurt reminded him. 'And I loved it. I told you, I don't care about-'

'I know. But it's not that kind of present. I wanted to say something. The thing is...' Blaine paused for a moment as he slid his hand into his pocket, running his fingers over the surface of the box. 'The thing is we've kind of been all about me lately, and I felt like you deserved something a bit more personal than a scarf, just to-'

'I told you, I love it-'

'Please just let me finish?' Blaine pressed, careful to keep his voice soft, and Kurt nodded. 'What I wanted to say is, well, *thank you*. For sticking by me. For your patience and understanding. I know I'm a lot to deal with sometimes.'

'Blaine...'

Blaine smiled. 'It's okay. You know it's true. But that's not the point, anyway. The point is that it goes both ways. The point is that I love you, and the way you've made me feel – I'm gonna work as hard as I can to make you feel that way too. Which is why...'

Blaine removed his hand from his pocket, taking the box with him and holding it out to Kurt whose eyes widened and mouth dropped open as he accepted it.

'While this is not an engagement ring,' Blaine clarified as Kurt opened the box and his eyes fell on the ring inside. 'consider it a promise ring. I made it out of gum-wrappers. Juicy fruit.'

'Wrigley's. My favorite.' Kurt sighed, clearly touched, and Blaine felt his nerves calm a little. Kurt really wasn't laughing. 'Is that a bow tie?' Blaine nodded happily. That detail had not been easy. 'But what are you promising?'

'To always love you. To defend you even if I know you're wrong. To surprise you.' Blaine's lips quirked – he had certainly managed that, hadn't he? 'To always pick up your phone call no matter what I'm doing. To bake you cookies at least twice a year.' At these words Blaine's throat constricted a little and his voice nearly broke as he recalled their baking session three weeks ago. 'And to kiss you, wherever and whenever you want. But mostly just to make sure that you remember how perfectly imperfect you are.' Blaine smiled, swallowing down the lump in his throat. 'I know it's nothing like what you got me, but-'

'I love it,' Kurt declared and threw his arms around Blaine's neck, hugging him tight. 'Merry Christmas. It's our first Christmas together.'

'The first of many,' Blaine replied with a soft smile as they pulled apart, noting to himself that a mere month ago he wouldn't have dared to think something like that, let alone say it out loud.

They exited to the parking lot together and as they stood between their respective cars (parked next to each other naturally), Kurt glanced around quickly. The only other people in sight were a group of freshman girls talking and giggling fifty feet away and one jock hanging out by the school entrance. Kurt looked back at Blaine, a playful smile on his lips, and he tugged on Blaine's jacket, bringing them closer.

'You know that promise about kissing me whenever and wherever? I'm cashing in.'

Blaine glanced quickly over at the jock but then back at Kurt. The jock was alone and far away, and what was he going to do, anyway? 'Are you now? Well, I guess I have no choice then,' Blaine said in a low voice as he leaned in for a quick peck. Despite its chasteness, it felt like an important victory.

They parted to their separate cars, and Blaine made the trip home in an unusually good mood, humming along to the Christmas music on the radio. When he entered the house and his father appeared from the kitchen to ask if he was ready to get started on the tree, Blaine even had a genuine smile for him, the likes of which he hadn't sent him since before Thanksgiving. 'Sure. I'm just gonna go drop my stuff upstairs.'

When Blaine joined entered the kitchen two minutes later, his father was in the middle of peeling potatoes, and despite their difficult relationship, Blaine couldn't help but be grateful that his father was home again for a while. Without him it was not often that Blaine got a (decent) home-cooked meal.

'A letter came for you, by the way,' his father said over his shoulder. 'It's on the table.'

Blaine frowned as he picked up the letter from the kitchen table. Who would be writing to him? But there it was, addressed in neat cursive letters to *Blaine Anderson*. He opened it to find a clearly home-made card bearing the words "*MERRY CHRISTMAS*" and a drawing of a Christmas tree with plenty of presents under it. As he read the note inside, a smile spread slowly across his face.

'So who's it from?' his father inquired curiously, appearing behind Blaine.

'Paige and Jessica,' Blaine replied, still smiling. 'You know, cousin Lucy's kids? Listen to this: *P.S. Sorry about our family. Grownups are dumb.*'

'They're great kids,' Blaine's father agreed.

'Yeah, I just hope they stay that way,' Blaine said quietly as he put the card back in the envelope and made a mental note to write back to the girls and thank them. 'But with this family...' He trailed off as his father shifted uncomfortably behind him, and Blaine turned to face him. 'Have you talked to them at all? About... me?'

'Well, no,' his father admitted. 'I will, of course. But Christmas just seems like the wrong time for it, doesn't it?'

Blaine huffed out a breath of disbelief before shooting back at his father, the anger in his voice surprising even himself, 'Just admit it, you're never going to.'

'Blaine, I-'

Blaine closed his eyes for a moment, focusing all his energy on not getting angry and upset. His day had been going so well. And it was Christmas. Right now really *wasn't* the time for heated confrontations.

'Never mind. I'm sorry. Let's just go get the tree before it gets dark,' Blaine said tersely, and without checking to see if his father was following him, he stalked out of the kitchen and into the backyard.

His father did follow him, however, and soon they were working quietly together on digging up the tree that stood planted in their backyard. The year before Blaine's father had had the idea to plant the tree rather than throw it out when they were done with it, and see if it would stay alive during the year. And if it did, he had joked, they would finally be able to "get their own tree".

They managed to retrieve the tree without too much difficulty, and once it stood safely in the living room, they set to work decorating it.

'How come we never seem to do this anymore?' Blaine's father asked after a while.

Blaine shrugged, keeping his attention on the tree. 'Well, it's only Christmas once a year, so...'

'No, I mean this. The two of us doing something together that isn't simply driving you to Columbus.'

Blaine kept silent as he turned to pick up another couple of baubles, deliberately not looking at his father as he did so. He couldn't think up a lie on the spot, and when the only honest reply he could come up with was *Well, actually I don't really want to spend time with you anymore*, honesty didn't seem like the way to go either.

'You're all moody today,' his father said, clearly going for light-hearted teasing as he poked Blaine in the side, but Blaine just found it annoying. 'Everything all right? This isn't like you.'

'Yeah, you'd know all about that, wouldn't you?' Blaine muttered under his breath, knowing he was being rude but so tired of his father always telling what to do and how to act.

'Blaine. Tone,' his father reminded him gently. 'If you have something to say you can be mature about it.'

Blaine glared over his shoulder at his father who was sorting out a piece of tinsel. 'Yeah, well. Maybe I'm sick of being mature.'

'Okay, *what* is your problem?' his father asked, patience clearly wearing thin as he tossed aside the tinsel.

'You!' Blaine all but yelled as he turned around to face his father finally. 'You're my problem. You don't *know* me.'

'Hey, at least I'm trying!' his father tossed back. 'Meanwhile all you seem to do is push me away.'

Blaine blew out an exasperated puff of air. 'If I push you away it's because you're looking for someone who isn't there.' He turned away again, adding quietly, 'Like I said, you don't know me, and you haven't for a long time.' Blaine was already regretting bringing the issue up at all. This was never a conversation he wanted to have.

They worked in silence again for a while, and Blaine – feeling both grateful and disappointed at the thought – assumed that his father had chosen to let the issue lie, but when he spoke again it was in a careful, almost sad, voice.

'We kind of drifted apart after you went away to Dalton, huh?'

Blaine hummed. 'I guess.'

'I know I work a lot. I'm sorry. It was never my plan,' his father said quietly, and Blaine could feel his eyes on him from the other side of the tree.

'It's fine.'

'I feel like we don't spend nearly enough time together anymore,' Blaine's father went on, and why couldn't he just drop it? 'I miss the way we used to be before you went to Dalton.'

'Dad. It's fine,' Blaine said tensely. 'I know you have to work.'

'What if I didn't? Or at least not as much?' Blaine didn't respond. The problem wasn't that that Blaine and his father didn't spend enough time together – it was that they didn't know *how* to. 'Remember Jeffrey Ford? My boss? Well, he's retiring, which means his position is opening up. I was thinking of applying for it, and with my seniority I'd probably get it. It'd mean more of the boring paper work stuff and a long commute, but... I'd get to come home every night.'

Blaine looked up despite himself. He knew that while his father might regret not being home more, a large part of him also *liked* the constant traveling. 'You'd do that?'

'Does that surprise you?'

'I-' Blaine began but he caught himself. He averted his eyes but didn't turn away as he spoke in a quiet voice. 'It doesn't matter. You don't wanna spend time with me.'

'What makes you say that?' His father sounded genuinely puzzled.

Blaine folded his arms across his chest, focusing on the tree branches that separated them as he replied. 'You'll only end up disappointed again.'

'Disappointed?' His father stepped out from behind the tree and walked around to look at Blaine properly. 'Again?'

Blaine swallowed. 'I couldn't be the daughter you wanted, and I obviously can't be the son you want either. So I've stopped trying.' Blaine shrugged before raising his head to meet his father's eyes. 'There's a reason we stopped doing things together, and it wasn't just Dalton.'

'Blaine... what?' His father looked suddenly pale and shaken. And Blaine was annoyed, because *really*?

'Your little bonding sessions a few years ago? The sports, the fishing, the car stuff. How you never have anything positive to say about the things I do unless it's, like *boxing* or, I don't know, watching *football*.' Blaine paused to glare at his father, finding that his breathing was heavy and his heart hammered almost painfully in his chest. 'None of this is familiar to you?'

'Bond- That wasn't- I was trying to let you know that it was okay liking those things. I was trying to show support.' Blaine's father sighed and sank down on the coffee table. 'I thought maybe you were still kind of hiding yourself.'

'Why?' Blaine said, beyond caring how harsh he sounded. 'Because I didn't turn into Cooper 2.0? I'm not like him. And I don't want to do that stuff with you.'

'That's okay. No one's asking you to be like Cooper.' His father smiled carefully. 'We already have one of those.'

For a long moment Blaine just stood there with a piece of decoration – he had forgotten what exactly – clutched in his hand, hanging limply at his side. Now that his father wasn't actually shouting at him to go learn how to be a man, Blaine didn't really know how to respond. 'Well, it kind of seemed that way,' he mumbled awkwardly.

'Is- is that why you stopped talking to me?'

'I felt like you're the one who stopped talking to me,' Blaine admitted as he sat down next to his father, who had his head in his hands, seemingly lost for words. 'So you don't think I'm...' Blaine swallowed painfully. 'a disappointment?'

'Disa-' His father whipped his head around to look at Blaine, his eyes big and sad. 'Blaine, you're my kid. I'll always be proud of you, no matter what.' He squeezed Blaine's shoulder and attempted an encouraging smile, but when he let go, he seemed to deflate a little, and Blaine could tell that something more was on his mind.

'But you wish I was straight,' Blaine guessed after a while.

'Yes,' came the immediate answer, but then his father seemed to realize what he had said. 'No! No. I don't know. You just gotta understand that it's a lot to wrap my head around. That you were born female.' Blaine winced involuntarily at the word. 'But you say you're a boy. I can understand that. Well, not really, but, you know, I sort of get it. But then you still want to kiss boys and sing show tunes and – I don't know – read *Vogue* and dress like, well, like that.' He gestured at Blaine's outfit. 'It's all sort of girly, isn't it?'

'Vests and bow ties are girly now?' Blaine meant to answer with an edge of sarcasm but it came out more sad than anything. 'I must have missed the memo.'

'Well, you know what I mean.'

'You mean effeminate,' Blaine said. 'Gay.'

'I guess. Yes. Don't get me wrong, I've nothing against gay people. I'm not my family. You know I'm not.' It seemed important to him that Blaine agree with this. 'My only point is that aside, I guess, from the boxing, your current interests wouldn't have been that unusual for a girl. You could have just stayed that way and avoided a lot of bad things.'

Blaine stared at his father as the words sank in, and he took a moment to consider just how wrong he had been about his father, but how close he had been to the truth at the same time.

'They're not related though, gender and sexuality,' Blaine said finally. 'Or even gender and gender expression.' He paused for a few seconds, wondering how best to explain himself. 'Dad, you've met Kurt.'

'Yes...' Blaine's father was clearly not seeing the relevance.



'And can we agree that in many ways he's more effeminate than I am?' His father gave a half-shrug in agreement. 'But you're not calling him a girl.'

'I'm not calling you a *girl*, Blaine,' his father said defensively.

'You kind of are though,' Blaine pointed out quietly.

'I'm just trying to understand here,' his father said, and Blaine stood up, a little annoyed. He was tempted to retort that he had been out for nearly four years, so his father was rather late to the game, but Blaine resisted, realizing that since he himself hadn't exactly been in a rush to talk about things either, it might be a little hypocritical. Instead he stood in the middle of the room, looking at his father and considering his words for several moments.

'You're right,' he said finally. 'I could have avoided a lot of taunts and bullies and bruises. I could have avoided countless doctor visits and needles and therapy and stress about people finding out. But all of that is nothing – nothing – compared to the alternative.' Blaine paused. The next part he hadn't told anyone save for his therapist, and he hadn't planned on that ever changing. 'Dad... If I hadn't come out when I did and been allowed to start transitioning... If I had had to go on like I was... I'm- I'm not sure I would be here right now.'

Blaine forced himself to keep eye contact with his father as he watched his words sink in and take effect. He could practically see his father's heart break, and Blaine hated that he had felt the need to tell him. Hated the way his father looked at him next. But it was *needed*, because apparently his father hadn't actually understood him all these years.

'I wasn't- I wasn't "there",' Blaine said, feeling his eyes burn, and he had to look away as his father stood and moved closer to him. 'But the thought did cross my mind. Once or twice.'

'Oh, Blaine...' His father's voice broke as he said his name, and Blaine felt his father's warm hand on his shoulder shaking a little. 'Are you saying- It was that bad?'

'I'm saying it might have been. If things hadn't changed.'

'I- I didn't know.' The expression on his father's face was pained. 'God, I didn't know.' The next thing Blaine knew, he was pulled into a tight, warm hug, and god, he couldn't remember the last time his father hugged him like that. 'I'm so sorry.'

When they parted Blaine wiped his nose on his sleeve and sat down in a nearby armchair, gathering himself a little. 'I guess I could have explained things better,' he said. 'Back then. I just always thought it was obvious, you know? That who I am, who I like, and what I do – they're three separate things. That saying I'm a boy isn't about being allowed a certain set of hobbies. That when I say I want top surgery, it isn't somehow about fitting in with the guys at school. I'm never going to, not really. And that's fine.' Blaine held his hand to his chest as he continued. 'I want these gone because they're not part of me. Because every time I see them in the mirror I get this sinking feeling in my stomach, like... "oh, right – God made you *wrong*."'

'Hey, come now. Don't,' his father scolded softly as he crouched on the floor in front of Blaine. '*You* are not wrong. Call it a...' He looked around the room, evidently searching for a word. 'A birth defect.'

Blaine couldn't help but laugh a little. 'Isn't it the same thing?'

'No. It's not,' his father insisted. 'Just- Please stop using that word about yourself. All right?'

Blaine nodded as he fell back into the chair. He felt drained from this entire conversation – but in a good way, he supposed. 'I can't believe I spent all this time thinking you resented me.'

'And all this time I thought our only problem was my being away from home all the time,' his father said, shaking his head.

Blaine offered a wry smile. 'Guess we're both really bad at communicating, aren't we?'

'That's the Anderson men for you,' his father said with a wink and a chuckle as he stood up and turned his attention back to the half-finished tree – and Blaine saw what his father did there. He felt kind of like singing from the rooftops, but instead he settled for fishing out his phone and typing a quick message to Kurt.

*Dad and I finally talked. You were right. He's mostly just a bit clueless xD I love you. Call you later.*

'Come on, let's finish with this,' his father said from across the room. 'You can text later.'

'Coming! Just...' Blaine called back, his eyes still on his phone as he got the notice that Kurt had read his message. The reply came in a moment later.

*Of course I'm right. :) Really though, I'm glad. Can't wait to hear about it. Love you too. xo*

'Bla-aime...' His father's voice drifted across the room again as Blaine finished reading Kurt's text. There was a note of impatience in his father's voice, but Blaine could tell it was more fond than annoyed. 'I want to get this done, so we can get started on dinner soon.'

'You're gonna cook?' Blaine asked, faking surprise as he skipped over to the tree, grabbing a golden bauble from the box on the coffee table as he went. 'Really? Are you *sure* you're not really a woman?'

Blaine's dad laughed loudly and punched Blaine playfully in the shoulder. 'Brat.'

## CHAPTER SIX

### *Part four*

#### ***It's Christmas in the Anderson household.***

Christmas at the Anderson household was looking to be a considerably quieter affair than Thanksgiving had been. Apart from Cooper, the only guest was going to be Blaine's aunt Joy, his mother's younger sister, and although she was capable of taking up as much metaphorical space as half his father's family put together, Blaine liked her much more. His maternal grandmother had also been invited, but she had declined with the explanation that her (much younger) boyfriend had invited her on a cruise that she couldn't possibly say no to. At the news Blaine's mother had simply shaken her head fondly and mumbled, 'Good for her.'

First to arrive on Wednesday, three days before Christmas, was Cooper. It was nearly midday and Blaine and his dad were setting up for lunch, when the doorbell rang. Skipping into the hall and opening the front door, Blaine saw Cooper's face light up in a bright smile as though the brothers hadn't seen each other for months, and he greeted Blaine with a hearty, 'Blainey!'

'I'm getting a little old for that nickname, don't you think?' Blaine complained, only half-serious, as Cooper stepped inside and dropped his bags on the floor.

'Would you rather I go with "Squirt"?' Cooper asked as he hung up his jacket, and though Blaine couldn't see his face, he could hear the smirk in Cooper's voice.

'No, no. Blainey's fine,' Blaine said quickly and Cooper laughed.

'Thought so,' Cooper said as he pulled Blaine into a hug, warm despite Cooper's still cold body from the freezing temperatures outside. 'Besides, you'll never be too old for nicknames as far as I'm concerned, cause you'll always be my little brother.' Cooper was going for light-hearted, but Blaine didn't miss the slight emotion in his brother's voice.

'Aw, look at you, getting all sentimental on me,' Blaine teased. He knew that his brother had a big heart, but Cooper rarely made it too obvious, preferring action over words.

'Shut up,' Cooper huffed out. 'I'm preparing for an audition.'

'Right. Of course you are.' Blaine sent his brother an exaggerated wink.

Cooper snorted. 'Little bastard. Anyway, it's Christmas – I'm allowed to be a little sentimental.'

'Wasn't complaining.' Blaine threw up his hands in mock surrender, before gesturing with his head in the direction of the kitchen. 'Come on, Mr. Actor, we're having lunch. We can bring up your stuff later.'

'We? Who's we? You and Dad?' Cooper asked, clearly surprised at the news that the two of them were spending time together, because of course last he knew, Blaine had barely been willing to *speak* to his dad.

Blaine smiled brightly. 'Yep. We talked.'

'Indeed we did.' The sound of their dad's voice from the kitchen doorway made both brothers turn around as he continued, speaking almost casually. 'Turns out I'm an idiot.' He shook his head slightly before looking over at Cooper. 'Hi, son. Good to see you.'

As his dad and Cooper hugged hello, Blaine said in a loud whisper, 'Careful what you say, Dad. Coop's feeling emotional today. I'm afraid he's gonna start crying next.'

'You little-' Blaine ducked around them and into the kitchen before Cooper could get to him, but he heard Cooper yell after him, 'That's it. No present for you this year!'

The three of them spent the afternoon together, watching Christmas specials on TV and catching up on each other's lives. When New Directions' Christmas special came on, a hush fell over the room as all conversation died and Blaine's dad and Cooper watched the show with interest. Blaine, meanwhile, alternated between cringing as he watched himself on TV and feeling overwhelmed that *he was on TV*. When it was over, Blaine's dad practically showered the whole thing in praise. Blaine suspected his dad was feeling guilty for the past few years and was overcompensating a bit as a result – not that Blaine was complaining.

Cooper, too, was impressed, it seemed.

'That was *really* good,' he said as the program ended and went to commercials, and while it really did sound like he meant it, Blaine saw him bite his lip as though to stop himself from saying something.

Blaine chuckled. 'Go on then.'

'Well, you did miss a step or two during *Let It Snow*,' Cooper said, clearly relieved to get it out of his system. 'But it really was great. You and Kurt should definitely get your own show. It'd be fantastic.'

Blaine snorted and rolled his eyes fondly. 'Alright, lay it on thick, why don't you.'

Around three in the afternoon they heard the front door slam and Blaine's mother's voice greeting them from the hallway. A few moments later she poked her head into the living room.

'Merry Christmas, guys! I'm officially on holiday. Look.' She held up her phone. 'Phone's off and everything.'

'Very impressive, dear,' Blaine's dad said as he stood to greet his wife with a chaste kiss.

Meanwhile Cooper spoke low in Blaine's ear, his voice quivering amusement. 'How much do you wanna bet that we catch her in the act at least once before the week is out?'

Blaine giggled. 'I am so not taking that bet. Do you think I *like* losing money?'

'Is Joy not here yet?' Blaine's mother asked before Cooper could answer, and they both looked up and deliberately *not* at each other lest they give each other the urge to laugh.

'Actually we were just wondering where she were,' Cooper said. 'We were debating whether she got lost on the way or just got distracted by all the pretty lights.'

The boys all laughed openly, while Blaine's mother pursed her lips though they quirked a little in amusement. Before she could decide whether or not to reprimand her son, however, the doorbell rang and they all milled into the hall to greet the new guest.

Physically it was quite obvious that Joy was related to Blaine's mother – they had the same build, same thick, dark hair and similar facial features – but that was pretty much where the similarities ended. Where Joy was bubbly and talkative and a big fan of physical affection, Blaine's mother tended to be a lot more reserved, although the latter often loosened up a little around her sister, which Blaine secretly appreciated.

Joy deposited her many, many bags on the floor before greeting each of them in turn with a warm hug.

'And Blaine,' she said, reaching him last. She took half a step back and surveyed him for a moment. 'My how you've grown. I remember when you were a little girl in pigtails.'

'Uh...' Blaine was unsure how to respond as he felt the familiar rushing sensation in his stomach that always came whenever someone felt it necessary to point out that they used to think of him as a girl. Around him smiles had turned stiff and his mother looked like she was gearing up to say something.

'Joy,' she said warningly.

'You really were such a cute little thing,' Joy went on, not hearing her sister and seemingly lost in nostalgia.

'Yeah, well. Things change,' Blaine said a little stiffly. He forced a smile. His aunt didn't mean anything by it after all.

'Mm... Don't they just?' She smiled affectionately at him for a few more seconds, before shaking herself out of it and turning to her sister. 'Mom sends her love, by the way – and lots of guilt presents it seems.' Joy gestured at the small pile of bags on the floor. 'She's sorry she couldn't make it.'

'I wouldn't be if I had a man like Tom chasing me around,' Blaine's mother replied, happy of the change of subject and sighing dreamily.

'Hey, I'm standing right here, you know,' Blaine's dad interjected, an affronted look on his face.

'And you're very handsome too, dear,' Blaine's mother assured him with a gentle pat on his chest, and the whole room erupted into laughter at the look of mock confusion and hurt on her husband's face.

It occurred to Blaine that he so rarely saw his parents together that he struggled to really see them as such; as his *parents* rather than as his mother on one hand and his father on the other – his parents, yes, but separately so. Sometimes he almost forgot that they were in fact married and it was kind of nice being reminded now that they still very much loved and trusted each other.

In fact over the next couple of days as Christmas Eve approached, Blaine thought he might just agree with Rachel and her *Best. Christmas. Ever.* idea. He was out and transitioning. He had Kurt. Cooper was Cooper. His mother wasn't working. (His mother wasn't *cooking*.) His father finally felt like his *dad* again. All in all Blaine had a hard time imagining what could possibly make this Christmas any better.

Assuming of course that he didn't take his aunt into consideration.

Joy as a house guest was very different from his dad's side of the family. She brought color and, well, *joy* to the house in a way even the ten Thanksgiving guests hadn't quite managed (before or after the day had turned sour), and Blaine really did like her a lot. However, he also thought that she could do with a thorough round of sensitivity training, because while Blaine was sure that his aunt wasn't being purposely insensitive, she did manage to make them all uncomfortable a few times during the day and then again on the first night that they all had dinner together.

'You know, Blaine,' she said not long after they had all sat down. 'I'm very interested to hear more about your transition. It's all very fascinating to me.'

Blaine tried hard not to let his frown show. His transition was a lot of things, including difficult and necessary and wonderful and frustrating, but he had never thought of it as *fascinating*. However, he kept his face perfectly impassive, steeling himself for an onslaught of questions, because at least she wasn't looking to fix him.

His mother had less patience, however, though her voice was light, if a little tense, as she spoke. 'He's not some freak show of a zoo animal that you get to gawk at, Joy.'

Joy rolled her eyes fondly. 'That wasn't what I was saying, Gracie. I have gay friends, so I completely get it. It's not something to be ashamed of.' She patted Blaine's arm lightly, while Blaine stared at her in



confusion. What did having gay friends have to do with understanding trans issues? 'I'm just interested to know what the whole process is like.'

So Blaine explained about his therapist in Columbus, about getting the okay to start hormone treatment and about the changes that had happened both physically and mentally since then (although he left out the parts that had to do with his nether regions and his sex drive – some things were just too private to share with family over dinner).

'Amazing,' Joy exclaimed when Blaine finished. 'Who would have thought that when Amber was two and she danced around in that princess dress, that this was what was inside her.'

Blaine blinked and his stomach turned into knots. He didn't want to say anything, because he knew that his aunt respected who he was now, but he couldn't help but be annoyed at the casual way she referenced his past as a "girl".

Blaine's mother, meanwhile, was a lot more direct. 'Joy,' she said sternly. 'Name. Pronouns.'

Joy turned to her sister, confused and maybe a little bit embarrassed. 'Well, he was "she" and "Amber" then, wasn't he?'

'Yes, but...' Blaine's mother closed her eyes for a moment as though she just couldn't get over how slow her sister was. 'It's actually quite upsetting for him to hear his birth name no matter what part of his life you're referring to, so we've decided that it's just always going to be "Blaine" and "he". He was always Blaine even if none of us knew it at the time.'

Blaine caught his mother's eye in a rare tender moment and Blaine's heart wanted to burst in his chest. She might have shortcomings as a mother – she was distant, constantly busy with work and often quite businesslike in her interactions with her sons – but she understood Blaine's gender issues in a way that his dad was only really beginning to, and it was moments of protectiveness like these that made Blaine truly appreciate that he *was* loved and wanted by his mother.

The rest of the dinner went smoothly as the conversation drifted to other, less sensitive subjects. Cooper entertained them all by talking about what was coming up with his commercial and updating them on the auditions he had been going to, while his dad mentioned his possible promotion, going off on a tangent about what he and his retiring boss used to get up to in their younger days.

Joy only spoke directly to Blaine again when they had finished eating and were clearing the table.

'I must say, Blaine, you have grown up to become a fine young man,' she said, clapping him on the shoulder, and Blaine got the impression that she wanted to make up for her earlier mistake. 'Some day you are going to make a girl very, very happy. She'll be lucky to have you.'

Blaine chuckled and he almost felt bad for correcting her. She was trying so hard. 'Thank you, but actually I'm gay. I have a boyfriend.'

Joy's mouth fell open in surprise. 'You're...? Boyfriend? But why wouldn't you just stay a girl then?'

Before Blaine could respond with anything more than a look of exasperation, Blaine's dad, who had been following the conversation from a few feet away, cut in eagerly. 'Wait, I can answer that. I know this one.'

Blaine couldn't hold back the short loud laugh that escaped his throat. It felt good to have his family back.

Blaine went to bed on Christmas Eve with a huge smile on his face and it was still there when he woke early the next morning. He rolled over to look at the time on his alarm clock. 5:26 – much too early for anyone else to be up. He briefly entertained the notion of going back to sleep, but then his stomach did a funny swoop as he remembered; *Christmas morning – presents* and he knew it would be impossible to fall asleep again. Blaine felt almost like he was a child again, except with none of the anxiety that had followed him around and with all of the excitement that came with being a kid on Christmas morning and knowing there were presents and guaranteed family breakfast in the near future. He lay there for a minute or two, letting the feeling wash over him, before he kicked off the covers and began to get dressed.

The house was quiet as Blaine stepped out of his room and looked down the hall, taking in the three closed bedroom doors. He had half a mind to burst into his parents' bedroom and threaten to throw a temper tantrum unless they got up right now, but he was pretty sure that wouldn't be appreciated so he restrained himself. Instead he tiptoed downstairs to the kitchen where he started making coffee, before taking it to the living room and turning on the TV, flipping the channels for a while before settling on cartoons (he was channeling his six-year-old self after all). Every once in a while he would sneak a glance

over at the tree in the corner of the living room and the presents underneath, before quickly looking away again as though he was afraid of getting caught.

After an hour or so Blaine's phone buzzed with a text message from Kurt.

*Merry Christmas, honey :) jsyk I'm wearing your presents right now.*

Blaine's phone buzzed again a second later, this time with a photo of Kurt, and Blaine was so fixated on Kurt himself (his boyfriend was hot, okay?) that it took him a moment to register that Kurt was indeed wearing both the gum-wrapper ring and the designer scarf that Blaine had managed to track down and buy at a reasonable price.

*Beautiful. :) Merry Christmas, Kurt. (I'm wearing yours too but you'll forgive me if I don't send photo proof right now ;))*

Blaine could just imagine stripping off his clothes to take a picture, only to have Joy come downstairs at just the wrong moment. He shuddered at the thought of all the new questions that might pop up in his aunt's mind should that ever happen.

*:( Well, as long as I get to see it in person at some point...!*

Blaine smiled as he began to type, *Oh you will, I promise*, and his mind flooded with images of Kurt naked under him on the bed, hard and panting and- Blaine shook his head and tried to pull his mind out of the gutter, reminding himself that *It's Christmas. Wholesome family time. Baby Jesus. Behave*. As he struggled against his hormones he heard a door open and close upstairs and a moment later someone walking down the stairs. He shook his head one last time, forcing the last unsavory thoughts away as he finished the text. *I have to go. Family waking up. Talk later.*

*Can't wait ;)* came Kurt's reply barely ten seconds later, and Blaine grinned as he put away his phone.

'Morning!' his aunt called from the hall, and Blaine could hear the smile in her voice as she poked her head into the living room, saying in a sing-song voice, 'Merry Christmas.'

'Merry Christmas,' Blaine replied, his smile bright and genuine as he twisted on the couch to face her. She looked tired but happy, and Blaine gestured in the direction of the kitchen as he told her, 'There's coffee in the pot if you want any.'

'Great. Thank you,' she said gratefully, stifling a yawn as she slipped away into the kitchen. Blaine heard her move around for a few minutes before she joined him in the living room, clutching a cup of coffee. Ten minutes later Blaine's mother came downstairs, greeting them with a cheery 'Merry Christmas!' and his dad came shortly after that.

'Just Cooper left then,' his mother declared as his dad settled into his favorite armchair. She chuckled. 'Big surprise there.' The rest of them smiled knowingly. For all his energy during the day, Cooper could be a challenge to get out of bed sometimes.

'Remember when you were little, Blaine?' Blaine's dad commented, smiling in fond amusement and explaining to the rest, 'He used to have a rule where if Cooper wasn't awake by seven on Christmas morning, Blaine would go wake him up himself. And quite violently so.'

As the adults chortled, Blaine grinned sheepishly. 'What, I like Christmas, okay? I don't know what he thinks he's doing sleeping it away like that.'

'I know. Past *seven*,' his dad teased. '*Crazy*.' Blaine stuck his tongue out at him.

'So, Blaine,' Joy said, clapping his leg. 'Is that rule still in effect? It's...' She looked at her watch. '7:14.'

'As much as I'd like to, I don't think he would find me jumping on top of him quite so amusing now as he did then.'

'Right. I see,' his aunt said seriously, a slight quiver of her lips the only thing betraying her. 'Because that *is* obviously the only way to wake someone up.'

'Well yeah. Obviously.' Blaine grinned.

Lucky for Blaine and his six-year-old sense of patience (or lack thereof), it was only fifteen more minutes before Cooper bounced into the living room, wide awake and exclaiming, like an over-excited child, 'Presents! Yay! What are we waiting for?'

Blaine rolled his eyes, though it was fond rather than annoyed and he stood to join his brother by the tree (because, yes, *presents*). 'Honestly, and you call *me* "little".' At least Blaine was able to contain himself somewhat.

'Well, you are. Look at you,' Cooper said, grinning as he puffed himself up to his full height and used his hand to point out Blaine's relative shortness. 'You're tiny.'

'I am not. You're just stupidly tall.' Blaine pouted, adding after a moment's thought, 'I could still grow.'

Cooper opened his mouth, possibly to argue, but his dad, probably wanting to avoid a longer back-and-forth of brotherly teasing, butted in, 'Why don't you boys just get started on the presents?'

So they did, and soon the living room floor was littered in wrapping paper and stray presents. Blaine was sitting on the floor next to the tree, grabbing presents and handing them to their rightful owners. Next to him was a neat pile of already opened presents; books, CDs, vinyls, DVDs and clothes. Cooper had decided to approach the situation with some dignity after all and was sitting calmly (well, mostly – it *was* Cooper) in his dad's chair, while its owner bounced around the room with his camera, taking pictures every few seconds and 'Oooh'-ing every time there was a present for him. Joy was chatting loudly and cheerfully at every possible moment, and Blaine's mother watched the whole thing with a bemused expression and a mild air of "at least this is only once a year."

When there was nothing but pine needles left under the tree, Cooper clapped his hands together and declared, 'Breakfast! I'm starving.'

Blaine's dad, however, held up hand. 'Not quite yet, son.' He exchanged a look with his wife before sitting next to her on the couch, setting aside his camera as he did. 'We have one more thing. For you, Blaine.'

Blaine looked at his dad in confusion and then back under the tree, making sure there was no missed present.

'It's not wrapped, sweetie,' his mother said gently. 'There wasn't really anything *to* wrap. It's...' She looked to her husband, silently urging him to go on. Blaine frowned, his mind going a million miles an hour and yet not quite getting anywhere. He glanced at Cooper and Joy. Neither seemed to know what was happening, though Cooper was literally on the edge of his seat, his mouth half open as though he expected something huge.

'You know, son,' - Blaine's heart swelled at the word, he couldn't help it – 'I may not be the sharpest tool in the shed, but I've really been an idiot, haven't I?' Blaine said nothing, still confused as to where this was going, and he watched as his dad took a deep breath before plunging on. 'But no more. From now on you

and me we talk, all right? I'm gonna make sure of that. I'll be better at stuff. I'll- I'll listen and we'll do the stuff *you* want to do, okay?'

Blaine nodded. 'So... that's it?' he said, feeling a little disappointed. It was nice and everything, but they had sort of already covered this.

'No.' His dad gave a soft laugh. 'It's not.'

'Then what?' Blaine urged. 'You're kinda killing me here, Dad.'

'You have an appointment in San Francisco next week.'

His dad paused dramatically, and Blaine stared blankly at him for a few long seconds. What was in San Francisco? Wait-

'With Dr. Blackstone.'

'No way,' Blaine interjected and his mouth fell open.

'Now, this is just a pre-op appointment, but if all goes well-'

'Oh, my god.'

'-and there are no unforeseen issues-'

'Ohmygod, ohmygod.' Blaine was practically hyperventilating.

'-he's going to do your surgery early next year.'

As he sat on the floor still, Blaine made a series of incoherent noises before he was able to produce words. 'I can't- I thought- Oh god, are you serious?' Blaine asked as he stood up, legs shaking a little. Some part of him still needed his dad to confirm that this was for real.

'I'm sorry I've been so pigheaded about this,' his dad said, standing up too. 'But I understand now that there's no sense in waiting. In short: Yes, you are having top surgery as soon as we can manage it.'

'Thank you so much.' Blaine's voice broke as he flung his arms around his dad's neck. 'You have no idea what this means to me.'

'That's just it. I do have an idea now and- Blaine? Are you crying?' His dad pulled back to look at him, and Blaine laughed through the tears that he had barely noticed.

'I guess I am. I just- Wow. I did not expect this.' Blaine looked over at his mother whose eyes were soft and misty as she watched the two of them.. 'Mom,' he choked out as he met her in an embrace.

'About time, huh?' she murmured into his neck. 'He can be a stubborn man, your father.'

'Are you sure we can afford it though?' Blaine asked, tensing a little as he looked between his parents. 'It's not exactly cheap, and with all the money you spent on Dalton...' During Thanksgiving Blaine had realized that his grandmother had not actually been the one to pay for his private school tuition the way his parents had led him to believe, and he felt a little guilty that they had been forced to spend that kind of money on him.

'It's fine, son,' his dad said. 'We have funds laid aside for this kind of thing. We may not be rich but we're not exactly poor either, you know. So don't worry about it. This is something that you need. We're your parents and we're giving it to you.' His dad smiled and clapped him on the shoulder. 'So stop complaining and just accept it.'

'Right. Okay.' Blaine breathed out the tension. 'I can do that.' He paused for a moment as it overwhelmed him again that *he had an appointment with one of the chief specialists in FtM top surgery*, when last he had known it was going to be until his eighteenth birthday before his parents were even going to *entertain* the notion of surgery.*He was having top surgery.*

There was no doubt about it anymore. This really was the best Christmas ever.

It was a little after ten when Blaine rang the bell at Kurt's house. As he waited for someone to open the door, hopping from foot to foot to stave off the cold, he suddenly got nervous, wondering why he hadn't

thought to warn Kurt that he was coming, or ask if it was even okay for him to just drop by like this. It was Christmas Day after all. He couldn't expect to just-

'Blaine!' Carole exclaimed as she appeared in the doorway. 'What are you doing here, hon? Is everything okay?'

'Yes, it's fine.' Blaine gave her his best smile. 'I just need to talk to Kurt if that's okay.'

'Sure, of course. I'm sorry, come inside,' she said, stepping aside to let him in. 'It's freezing out.'

'Thanks.'

'Kurt!' Carole called up the stairs as Blaine was taking his shoes and jacket off. 'Blaine's here!'

'Blaine?' came Finn's confused voice as he appeared in the hall from living room, joined a moment later by Burt.

Blaine gave an awkward wave and a nervous smile. 'Uhm, merry Christmas. I'm just here to-'

'Blaine?' He looked around at the sound of Kurt's voice to see its owner descending the stairs, a look of mild surprise on his face. 'I didn't expect to see you until tomorrow.'

'I know, I'm sorry to just barge in like this, but I really needed to see you.' Kurt cocked his head, looking curiously at Blaine as though trying to read what was on his mind. 'I have something important to tell you, and I really didn't wanna wait.' Blaine looked around between all four of them as he shuffled his feet nervously, hoping that he wasn't messing up some important family tradition by being here.

'All right,' Burt said, and Blaine was confused when he looked almost amused. 'Just don't stay up there for too long. We're having lunch as a family at noon so-'

'I completely understand,' Blaine said quickly before Burt could get to the part where Blaine needed to be gone before then. 'Don't worry, I won't be long. I'll be out of your hair before you know it.'

'Kid.' Burt put a hand on Blaine's shoulder. 'Don't you dare. I said family lunch.'

'I... what?'



'You know...' Burt looked around at the others, a half-smile on his lips. 'I think he's a bit dense this one.'

Blaine frowned in confusion, turning to look at Kurt when he felt him take his hand, squeezing gently. 'Honey, he's asking you to join us.'

'Oh. Because...' Blaine flushed. 'Oh. Thank you, sir.'

'Hey, knock it off,' Burt reprimanded softly. 'I thought I told you to stop that. It's Burt.'

'Right. Sorry, sir.' Blaine felt his ears burn as he blushed even deeper. 'I mean, B-Burt.'

Burt just chuckled at that, while Kurt pulled at Blaine's hand, giving his dad a look and telling him, 'We'll work on it.' Blaine let Kurt drag him upstairs, nodding at Burt and smiling politely at Carole (while avoiding Finn altogether) as he went.

'Why does my dad make you so nervous?' Kurt asked once his bedroom door closed behind them, a small smile playing on the corners of his lips. 'You went red as a tomato down there.'

Blaine gave a mortified grimace as he sank down on Kurt's bed. 'I don't know. I guess I just want him to like me.'

'Everyone likes you, Blaine,' Kurt said rolling his eyes, and Blaine wasn't sure whether it was at that or the idea that Burt might not. 'Anyway, what did you want to talk about?'

'Right. That.' In his fumbling in front of Kurt's family, Blaine had forgotten for a moment why he was here, but he stood up now and the excitement and happiness that had been crashing over him in waves for the past couple of hours came back in full force. A wide smile spread across his face and he had to restrain himself from bouncing around the room.

Kurt raised an eyebrow, looking at Blaine in confused amusement. 'I'm guessing it's something good?'

'It is. Really, really good.' Blaine grinned and Kurt gave him an impatient look. 'My parents they- I'm having top surgery! I have a pre-op appointment in San Francisco next week!'

'Oh my god, *Blaine!*' Kurt squealed, jumping up and throwing his arms around Blaine. 'That's amazing. I'm so happy for you. But wait, what- how did- What happened?'

'They just- after all the normal presents. They said they had one more thing for me.' Blaine shook his head a little, still having a hard time believing that it had really happened. 'I guess it was me and Dad working things out that did it. God, I just can't even- It's gonna be a few months still until the actual surgery, possibly until summer because of school and recovery and all that, but... it's really happening, Kurt. Do you realize how long I've dreamt about this?'

'Since puberty I'm guessing,' Kurt said his voice high and actually breaking a little with emotion.

'Yeah,' Blaine said, overcome suddenly with love for the boy who stood in front of him, his face reflecting all the happiness Blaine felt. '*Yeah.*'

'So tell me about it,' Kurt said, sitting down on the bed and pulling Blaine to stand in front of him. 'I want details. When are you leaving? Who's your surgeon? Is he/she good? How's the surgery done? Anything you're worried about at all?'

Blaine regarded Kurt for a moment as he considered the possibility of sitting down to discuss and explain everything now. As much as he wanted to though (and they were going to of course), there was something a lot more pressing on his mind right now. Well, maybe not his *mind*...

'Later,' he said, his smile almost a smirk as he straddled Kurt's thighs, tangling a hand in Kurt's hair and pulling him closer with it. 'Right now I'd rather do this.'

As Blaine kissed Kurt, slow and passionate, pushing him into the mattress and rutting his crotch against Kurt's, something felt different. He didn't know if it was the promise of this long awaited surgery – the hope it inspired – or if it was just *time*, but as he moved together with Kurt, he felt somehow freer, less restricted, than he ever had.

'I...' Kurt panted, his face already flushed. 'I'm not sure we should be doing this right now. My- my family-'

'...is downstairs,' Blaine finished for him, feeling inexplicably bold as he continued to palm Kurt through his jeans.

'But they could- *oh*...' Kurt gave a soft moan and seemed to forget the rest of his sentence after that.

'Are they really going to come in here without knocking?' Blaine asked, speaking low in Kurt's ear and planting soft kisses at the sensitive skin there.

'Maybe not,' Kurt admitted. 'But I might.'

'What, come without knocking?' Blaine snorted. 'That doesn't even make sense, Kurt.'

'You-' Kurt bit his lip to keep from making a noise before letting out a long breath, his voice higher than normal when he spoke, 'You try making sense while your boyfriend is jerking you off like there's no tomorrow.'

Blaine raised an eyebrow. 'Is that a challenge?'

'Is that an invitation?' Kurt asked, eyes full of cautious hope as Blaine leaned down to kiss him.

'Yes,' Blaine said, needing no time to consider for once, and the next thing he knew he was lying on his back with Kurt on top of him, eyes dark and so full of want. Blaine squirmed a little as he reached into his pants, removing the packer – the one from Kurt, and wow, why was that suddenly so hot? – and tossing it aside. He brought his hand to the back of Kurt's neck, pulling him down for a brief kiss. 'Hands. Frottage. Eyes up here,' he instructed shortly.

Kurt placed a soft kiss on Blaine's lips, and he smiled sweetly as he rested a hand high on Blaine's chest. 'I know.' Somehow, even though they were both fully clothed, the moment felt more intimate than anything they had shared so far, and Blaine struggled for a moment to define why. The moment held... promise, he decided. Of something more. Something mutual.

Blaine was ripped from his thoughts as he arched into the first touch of Kurt's hand, biting back a moan.

'So hot,' Kurt breathed as he moved his hand over Blaine's crotch, somehow knowing all the right ways to touch, all the while rutting his own against Blaine's hip. 'C'mere.' He caught Blaine's mouth in a sloppy, wet kiss, swallowing the soft moans that Blaine couldn't tame.

Blaine lost track of how much time went by like this. All he knew was that he was with Kurt, and Kurt was touching him like he meant it – and Blaine was desperately turned on.

'Still with me?' Kurt's voice was soft and a little worried as he slowed down his movements some. Blaine was confused for a moment until he became aware that his eyes were closed. He opened them, meeting Kurt's in steady gaze.

'Yes. Definitely. I just- Please, Kurt,' Blaine begged unsure what he was even asking for.

Reassured, Kurt became teasing as he placed soft barely-there kisses along Blaine's neck, warm, slow breath tickling his skin as Kurt spoke low into his ear, 'Please, what?'

'You can- Under- *uh...*' Teeth scraped his earlobe and Blaine momentarily lost track of where he was going. 'Ah...Under the clothes. If you want.'

'Are you sure?' The worry was back a little bit as Kurt watched him uncertainly.

'Yes. Please, I just need- need more.'

'Okay then.' Kurt smiled and kissed Blaine's nose, and it was such a small, silly gesture but it made Blaine's heart flutter with sudden emotion. Kurt trailed his hand down Blaine's torso, and he undid his pants without once taking his eyes off Blaine's. 'Your wish is my command.'

Blaine's breath caught in his throat and his heartbeat quickened as Kurt slid his hand further and further south, and then it was *there*, touching and teasing in a way that was so different and so much better than anything Blaine had ever achieved on his own.

And Blaine wanted to return the favor, to make Kurt feel even half as good as Blaine felt right now, but Kurt was pressed flush against him, making it impossible for Blaine to reach properly – and at any rate Kurt seemed to be managing quite well on his own, thrusting his hips and giving occasional soft moans. Instead Blaine brought his hands to Kurt's sides and slid them down his slender body, coming to rest on his ass. He squeezed the soft flesh there, eliciting a satisfied groan from Kurt.

'Shh.' Blaine laughed as he held a hand over Kurt's mouth, whose corners twitched into a smile.

'Kinky,' Kurt mumbled behind the hand, eyebrow raised.

'Maybe next time.' Blaine grinned as he removed the hand.

'Next time?' Kurt smirked, and Blaine saw it in his face before he felt it; the way two fingers brushed against him just right, making his whole body shiver. 'I like the sound of that.'

'I d- *uh*. I forgot what I was saying.' Blaine's hips jerked, wanting more, more, more. 'God, Kurt, I'm- so close. Please. *Uh*. God, so close. Please. Don't stop,' he babbled, barely aware what he was saying.

Ten seconds later it was Kurt's turn to silence Blaine as orgasm rolled over him and he came with a shout, hips stuttering and eyes wide open as they looked into Kurt's. Afterwards Blaine had just enough mental wherewithal to reach between them where Kurt was still desperately hard, and he swallowed Kurt's noises in a passionate kiss as he, too, came with a shudder.

*So this is what they call afterglow*, Blaine thought to himself ten minutes later as he and Kurt lay close together still. Blaine brought a hand up to Kurt's face, brushing a stray bit of hair behind his ear, and Kurt watched him, a soft, curious smile on his lips.

'What?' Blaine asked, smiling back.

'Nothing. Just... I don't think I've ever seen you this happy.'

It spoke volumes to Blaine that Kurt said this *now* and not before when he had been grinning and bouncing around like a lunatic. Not that he hadn't been happy then. It was just that that had been a feeling of immediate, reactionary joy, and this right now – the way he felt so perfectly at peace and content as he looked into Kurt's eyes – was so much more profound. The fact that Kurt recognized that, that he saw this quiet contentment exactly for what it was, made everything that much better. Rather than say any of this out loud to Kurt, however, Blaine just smiled.

He knew he didn't have to.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *Part one*

*You're stuck in the middle (Now it's us, now it's we)*

***It's New Year's 2011, and Blaine is in San Francisco for his appointment. Meanwhile, in 2008, 14-year-old Blaine starts high school.***

### *September*

*'Are you sure you don't want me to drive you?' The expression on Blaine's mother's face is anxious as she fusses with the collar of his jacket.*

*Blaine smiles and rolls his eyes. 'It's fine, Mom. It's high school. I'm not going off to war. Besides I'm walking with Sara.'*

*'Okay.' She gives a small sigh as she abandons Blaine's collar finally and looks at her watch instead. 'I do have to get to work... Just- be prepared, all right? Kids can be mean.'*

*'They'll understand. I'll be fine.' Blaine shrugs. 'It can't be worse than before, right?'*

*Five minutes later Blaine is standing outside Sara's house and, left with nothing to do but think about the day ahead of him as he waits for his best friend to come out, he does get a little nervous. Other than Sara and his friend Tyler from the PFLAG group, none of the students know that he goes by Blaine now. He suddenly wishes he had seized some of those opportunities over the summer to come out to his friends from middle school. But no, he thinks, this is good. Everyone will know what's going on when they see him and when they do the roll call. It'll be fine.*

*'Morning!'*

*Blaine is pulled from his thoughts by a bright voice and he looks up to see Sara skipping down the pathway to him. She greets him with a hug and a kiss on the cheek, before stepping back to take in his appearance. There is little androgynous about it anymore.*

*'Wow. So handsome.' She runs a hand through his short, dark curls. 'If I were even remotely straight...'*

*'Then I'd still be gay,' Blaine finishes for her. He grins. 'But thank you. Come on, let's go. We don't wanna be late for our first day.'*

*Blaine turns and starts a brisk walk down the street. A moment later Sara falls into step beside him.*

*'Nervous?' she asks, keeping her voice light.*

*Blaine shrugs. 'A little. It's kinda daunting,' he admits. 'But it's exciting, isn't it? High school. We made it finally.' His voice gets breathy and excited as he continues, 'Cooper says I should find the arts teachers and make sure to make a good first impression within the first week, so they know I'm serious and stuff. And I can't wait to get started on lessons. English first, right?'*

*Sara snorts. 'You are such a dork. But yes. We have English and History together first thing. And then we're on our own for the rest of the day.'*

*At her last words, Sara's expression turns anxious in a way that reminds Blaine of his mother, so he takes her hand and squeezes reassuringly. 'It'll be fine. For both of us. You'll see.' Sara still doesn't look completely convinced, and as they round a corner and the school building comes into view, Blaine adds, 'Worrying isn't going to help anyway.'*

*'No, but I just think-'*

*'Come on, frowny,' Blaine says exasperatedly, tugging a little at his friend, quickening their pace. 'And smile. You never know when a cute girl is gonna look your way.'*

*Blaine and Sara spend the first twenty minutes in their new school, trying to get acquainted with it; mapping out important locations such as their lockers, the cafeteria, the library and today's classrooms. Ironically their running about the school ends up confusing them more than anything, and for their first lesson they accidentally head to the library instead of the English classroom with the result that they are very nearly late. They step inside the classroom just as the bell rings, and the teacher scowls at them as she points to two empty seats at the back of the room.*

*'What was that you said about good first impressions?' Sara mumbles as they start towards the seats, curious heads turning to stare after them.*

*'All right, class. Eyes up here, and let's get started,' the teacher says, and as she goes on to introduce herself and the class, Blaine settles into his seat and gets his things out, finishing just as his teacher announces that it's time for roll call. Blaine's stomach does a sudden back-flip, and he really, really hopes that everything went as it should, and the teacher doesn't somehow have his old name on her list.*

*'Allen, Catherine.'*

*A girl Blaine knows well enough from middle school raises her hand. 'Cathie's fine.'*

*The teacher ignores her as she continues, and Blaine is certain that he's next. 'Anderson, Blaine.'*

*Blaine can't help the smile on his face as he raises his hand. He forces himself to look confident when about a dozen kids – all kids that he knows from middle school – turn to stare at him. His smile falters a little when he hears Cathie whisper to the girl next to her, 'It's a girl,' loud enough for half the class to hear, and heat rises in his cheeks when half a dozen more heads turn to look. He swallows and avoids meeting anyone's eye, keeping his attention on the teacher.*

*'Chase, Neil,' the teacher continues a second later, and then the moment is over and Blaine breathes a sigh of relief. He glances left at Sara who smiles encouragingly at him. It's not that bad, he thinks to himself. The people who knew him before are bound to wonder at first. It's only natural.*

*By the second lesson, however, his classmates' curiosity has only intensified, and when the teacher calls his name, a few people actually begin snicker. Blaine kind of wants to sink into the floor.*

*'Cut it out,' Sara turns and hisses to the boy behind her. 'It's not a freaking joke.'*

*During lunch Blaine and Sara sit with a group of other freshmen, made up of a mixture of kids he knows from middle school and people he has never met before today, or else doesn't remember.*

*'So, Amber,' Cathie addresses Blaine, her voice falsely pleasant. 'Her real name,' she explains to the group and Blaine's eyes narrow. 'Had a nice summer?'*

*'It's Blaine now,' he replies, ignoring the question but keeping his tone polite. He doesn't want to make any enemies. He knows he has to be patient with people. 'You heard the teachers.'*



*'Why?' Cathie asks, like it's the most idiotic thing she has ever heard, and around the table heads perk up in interest.*

*'Because...' Blaine feels his face heating up again. He hates having to explain himself like this, and he knows this won't be the last time he's made to. He forces himself to meet Cathie's eye as he replies. 'Because I'm transgender. Because I'm actually a boy.'*

*'I- Okay, wow.' Cathie clearly doesn't know what to say, and loses a bit of her cocky attitude. Around the table people are exchanging looks with each other.*

*'Yeah.' Blaine swallows a mouthful of food with difficulty. 'So I'd appreciate it if you'd address me as such. And also not go around telling people my old name.'*

*'Okay I- I guess we'll try,' Cathie says and looks uncertainly around at their classmates. 'Right?'*

*As all eyes turn to him once more, Blaine catches a few dirty looks, but most of his classmates just shrug and return their attention to their food. No one wants to be the one to say anything. One girl that Blaine doesn't know throws him a supportive smile, and Blaine smiles back nervously. He feels Sara's reassuring hand on his leg under the table.*

*'Breathe, sweetie,' she whispers, and as Blaine does as told, he is able to relax somewhat and finish his meal without choking on it. He has just swallowed down the last bite when he hears a voice call his name.*

*'Blaine, buddy! There you are.' It's Tyler, and he smiles widely as he takes a seat at the end of the table. 'How are you? How's your first day going?'*

*'It's been...interesting,' Blaine says. 'By the way, Sara, this is-'*

*'Hey, Amber, who's your friend?' a girl calls from the other end of the table, and Blaine glares down at her. The boy next to her pokes her in the side. 'What? He's cute and I'm single.'*

*'No, I mean...' The boy giggles as he tries to address just the girl next to him, but his voice carries easily down to where Blaine is sitting. 'We're supposed to call her Blaine now.'*

*'Excuse me?' Tyler says before Blaine himself can react.*

*'Ty...' Blaine warns, not really sure why, but he has a bad feeling about this.*

*'It's okay,' Tyler tells him quietly before calling down the length of the table, 'I think you meant "him" there, huh, buddy?'*

*'No. I didn't. She's a girl so...'*

*'You do realize that "Blaine" is a boy's name, right?'*

*'So?' the boy says, defiant even though the older boy clearly intimidates him a little. 'That doesn't magically make her a boy.'*

*Blaine who has been staring at his empty plate looks up. 'No, I am a boy,' he says firmly. Did he not just explain this five minutes ago? 'I always have been, regardless of my name or anything else.'*

*'That's insane,' another boy says suddenly.*

*'Watch who you're calling insane,' Sara growls, chiming in for the first time.*

*'I said it's insane. I didn't say she was.'*

*'He,' Sara corrects.*

*'Whatever. I'm just saying. It's kind of crazy, isn't it?'*

*'No, it's not,' Sara retorts. 'Just because you're too stupid to understand it-'*

*The next moment three more people speak up at once and within thirty seconds it has turned into a small ruckus with people chiming in left and right about how weird it is, and why can't Blaine just be a tomboy like Sara? It escalates into a full-blown discussion on the merits of Blaine's identity, and Blaine himself is ignored or else treated like a being of lower intelligence, who has no say in anything. Sara and Tyler are firmly on Blaine's side, of course and a few of his classmates tentatively suggest that maybe they shouldn't judge, but the whole thing makes Blaine want to disappear, though he can't make himself just walk away either.*

*When Blaine comes home later that afternoon, his father is in the driveway, standing on a step-ladder, fastening the old basketball hoop to the garage wall. Great, Blaine thinks, another bonding activity.*

*'Hey, buddy,' his father calls. He still isn't quite used to the new name yet, so he uses a lot of nicknames. Other than "buddy", Blaine has heard "champ" and "sport" a lot over the last few months. 'How was school?'*

*Blaine opens his mouth and for a moment he's about to mention everything that has gone wrong today, but then it hits him that he has just been to school as Blaine for the first time, and he can't help but let that override all the negatives. So some people called him the wrong name and pronouns. So some people thought he was weird. So it isn't going to be as easy as he might have hoped. So it's going to take time and effort and patience. He can do it. Blaine can do it.*

*'It was great,' he says, smiling up at his father, and it doesn't even feel like that much of a lie.*

Blaine was getting jittery, he couldn't help it. He was leaned forward in his chair, his arms resting on his legs, which were bouncing restlessly up and down. He looked at his watch. Five minutes to go. How had only one minute passed since last time he checked? He glanced up at the clock that hung on the wall opposite him in the waiting room. Yes, five minutes was correct.

Next to him his mother was reading emails on her phone, and Blaine was getting annoyed with her. Could she not see that he needed her more than her job did right now? They had agreed that just one parent should accompany Blaine to his appointment today, and Blaine had been happy to have his mother here, since she knew better than anyone what to be concerned about and what questions to ask, but right now he wished that they hadn't left his dad and Cooper back at the hotel.

'Ugh, do you really have to that right now?' he muttered irritably, low enough that he didn't think anyone else in the waiting room could hear him.

His mother startled a little and looked up, taking in Blaine's stiff posture. 'I'm sorry, just...' She pressed a few more buttons, before putting the phone away in her purse. 'There. Look, it's done. I'm here now.'

'Whoop-dee-doo,' Blaine replied, voice heavy with sarcasm. A second later he breathed out heavily and leaned back in his chair. 'Sorry.'

'Are you nervous?' his mother asked, sounding mildly surprised.

'Yeah,' Blaine admitted with a sigh.

'You'll be fine,' his mother told him, patting his thigh, but it sounded automatic and it wasn't at all what Blaine needed to hear.

'Blaine Anderson?' the voice of a young woman called and Blaine looked up, his pulse quickening. 'Dr. Blackstone will see you now.'

'...that I qualify for the keyhole procedure, which means hardly any scarring,' Blaine finished, beaming around at his family. It was New Year's Eve, and the whole family was halfway through dinner in the hotel restaurant. Blaine had spent most of it excitedly re-recounting the consultation of the previous day.

In hindsight Blaine didn't know what he had been nervous about. True, the inspection of his chest had not been fun. He was so used to doing everything he could to ignore its existence, that having someone touch and talk about it so candidly felt awkward to say the least. But of course it had all been for a good cause, so Blaine had been able to withstand it without too much difficulty.

'Wow, Blaine,' Cooper said, mock-impressed. 'Tell us again, because I don't think we heard you the first five times.'

Blaine grinned. 'Shut up. I'm allowed to be excited. It's kind of a big deal, you know. Most guys have to live with significant scarring, so I'm actually really lucky.'

'I know, I'm just teasing.' Cooper bumped his shoulder against Blaine's. 'You can go ahead and tell the whole story for a sixth time if you want. Hold on.' Cooper put down his knife and fork, turned sideways towards Blaine and spread his arms wide as though to say *lay it on me*. 'All right, I'm ready. Go on.'

Blaine snorted and shoved playfully at his brother. 'You're ridiculous.'

'Well, of course. Life would get boring otherwise,' Cooper said seriously, and Blaine chuckled in response.

He was just so... happy. *He was having top surgery.* He really, really was. It didn't even matter much that his surgery – scheduled to take place a few days after Nationals – was nearly five months away, because it was real now and it was *happening*. Waiting didn't seem so bad when he had a concrete date to look forward to. Blaine looked over at his parents across the table, noticing them exchanging a look and a smile.

'What?' he asked.

His father smiled. 'Just that... it's been a while since we've heard you call yourself "lucky".'

'Oh.' Blaine's grinned sheepishly. 'Well, it's all about perspective, isn't it?'

Blaine supposed he could choose to be bitter about the whole thing. He could choose to complain that other boys didn't have to have surgery to help them be comfortable in their own bodies. He could point out that it was unfair that his parents had to fork out thousands of dollars for it. Admittedly there *were* days where he was inclined to think that way, but where did that kind of thinking really get him? Nowhere good. So he chose a different perspective where there were plenty of things to be happy about. Like the fact that he had been able to start his transition while he was still a teenager – plenty of people were well into their twenties, and even thirties and beyond. Or the fact that his family – his immediate family at least – supported him. Or the fact that his parents even *had* the necessary money, let alone were willing to pay, for his surgery. There was a lot to be thankful for, yes.

The conversation soon turned to other things the new year held in store for the Andersons, including Blaine's father's possible promotion, his mother's "exciting" plans to revolutionize her department, and new "plot" developments for Cooper's commercial. After dinner Blaine and Cooper were allowed to go off on their own, once Cooper had promised not to take Blaine anywhere too crazy and to not get him drunk.

'And be back before midnight!' their dad shouted after them as they were leaving, and Cooper gestured with his hand to show that he had heard.

As they had no real plans for the night except for – as Cooper said - *fun*, they spent a while just wandering around the streets, amusing themselves with observing all the drunk people, and debating which ones would still be awake come midnight. Eventually they came across a comedy club that had a show just starting and they decided to check it out. The place was packed so they had to stand and Blaine couldn't really see well, but it was still great fun, and Cooper allowed Blaine to drink from his beer (exploiting the loophole that strictly speaking their parents hadn't forbidden Blaine from *drinking*, as long as he didn't

get *drunk*). Blaine thought it might be the best New Year's Eve ever, which he made sure to let his Facebook friends know in all caps, and he texted Kurt multiple times throughout the night, each message containing at least eight happy smileys in various forms.

When the show had ended, Blaine and Cooper found themselves once more out on the cold street, wondering where to go next. Midnight was still two hours away. Cooper looked thoughtfully around, and after a moment his eyes fell on a sign across the street and he got a mischievous glint in his eyes. Blaine followed his gaze.

'Coop, no,' he protested.

'Come on, Blaine. Live a little. It's New Year's Eve!'

Cooper tugged at him a little, but Blaine remained standing where he was. 'I can't get in anyway. I'm underage, remember.'

'Don't worry. I'll get us in. Dude, come on. You *cannot* leave San Francisco without having visited at least one gay bar. I'm pretty sure it's, like, law or something.'

'But...' Blaine trailed off as he finally let himself be dragged across the street. He wasn't sure why he was protesting except that his experience at Scandals had been a bit of a mixed bag, leaving him not particularly eager to explore gay bars and clubs further. Of course there was no reason to assume that tonight was going to be remotely similar, so in the end Blaine decided to keep an open mind and let Cooper lead him inside.

The place looked nothing like Scandals. It was huge, modern-looking and absolutely packed with people. Talking and laughing and the faint clinking of glass could be heard through the loud rhythmic music that played to a full dance floor. There was a large crowd around the bar, and it took them quite a while to get serviced – a while Blaine spent alternating between taking in his new surroundings and trying to convince his brother to let him have a beer, arguing that Cooper was the one who made him come here in the first place. Cooper kept saying no until finally Blaine played his wild card and looked at him with those big, sad eyes that had worked so well for him when he had been younger and wanted something.

'All right, *one* beer,' Cooper finally caved after ten seconds of it. 'But that's *it*, and only because it's New Years Eve and because you played dirty. I want you coherent when we meet back up with Mom and Dad.'

Blaine grinned. 'Deal.'

By a small miracle the two of them managed to find a seat each by a table in the corner, where they sat for a while, chatting as much as the music allowed them to, but mostly just amusing themselves by watching people make fools of themselves on the dance floor. Blaine kept remarking every few songs how much he loved the current song in question, and every so often a guy would come over to their table and proposition one (or both) of them, but of course they always left disappointed with the information that Cooper was straight and Blaine had a boyfriend. One particularly desperate-looking man in his early twenties, when told this, gave an exasperated sigh (or so Blaine assumed – he couldn't actually hear it) and asked why they were even there then.

'You know, he's got a point,' Blaine said when the man had left looking rather dejected. 'We *are* kind of just sitting here.'

'Then go,' Cooper offered. 'Tear up the dance floor. I'll mind the drinks.'

'But-'

'And Kurt won't mind,' he said, reading Blaine's protests. 'Just keep it PG, yeah?'

'Aw, do I have to?' Blaine said as stood up, his eyes flicking to the dance floor and back to his brother as he pretended to be put out. 'I was really looking forward to grinding up on some random guy.'

Cooper snorted and gave a tiny roll of his eyes. 'Just go. Before I decide to go instead and you can be the one to sit here and guard the drinks.'

'All right, all right. I'm going,' Blaine said with a grin before taking off towards the still crowded dance floor.

At first he felt a little awkward and self-conscious about being on his own, but once he realized that no one really cared who you were with or not, he quickly felt his inhibitions slip away (and he was starting to feel that beer too) until there was just him and the music and feeling wonderfully free and hopeful about the new year.

'I love San Francisco,' Blaine declared an indeterminable number of minutes later as he flopped back down in his chair next to Cooper. Blaine's smile faded a little, however, when his words got no reaction from Cooper who was looking oddly serious. 'What's up with you all of a sudden?'

'What?' Cooper seemed to snap out of his thoughts, and a second later he was smiling brightly again. 'Oh, nothing. Just tired, I guess.'

'Well, then get not-tired, big bro.' Blaine smiled and shoved lightly at Cooper. 'It won't do to fall asleep before midnight. Go get another drink or something.'

Cooper's eyes flicked around for a few moments before settling on the bar across the room. 'Yeah, I guess I'll do that. Need anything?' he asked as he stood, adding with a teasing wink before Blaine could say anything, '*Non*-alcoholic, I mean.'

Blaine grimaced. 'Oh, you're no fun.'

'And you're underage,' Cooper reminded him.

Blaine sighed dramatically. 'Fine. Coke then, please.'

Cooper grinned and gave a short bow before turning and walking off towards the bar. In the meantime Blaine fished out his phone, intending to send off another happy text to Kurt, but he was distracted by a voice close to him.

'This seat taken?'

Blaine looked up at the owner of the oddly familiar voice, and his mouth fell open in surprise.

'*Sebastian?*'

'Hi,' Sebastian said – casually like this was the Lima Bean and not a random gay bar in San Francisco – as he took Cooper's seat, setting his drink aside on the table. Blaine just stared dumbly at him. 'Happy New Years.'

'Happy Ne- What are you doing here?'



Sebastian leaned back in his – no, Cooper's. Where was Cooper? – chair, looking perfectly relaxed and watching Blaine's astonishment with mild amusement. 'Here in San Francisco or *here* specifically?'

'Both. Either.'

Sebastian shrugged. 'Came to San Francisco with some friends. Wasn't going to celebrate New Year's in *Ohio*. That's just sad.' He paused for a moment in which he seemed to be imagining this. 'As for *here* – I saw your Facebook update that you were here. I was in the area. Thought I'd come say hi.'

'What, and you just dragged your friends along with you?'

'What? My friends? Oh yeah, they're around here somewhere.' Sebastian made a vague gesture with his hand as though he didn't really care where the heck his friends were. 'What about you? Why is Blaine Anderson spending New Year's Eve in San Francisco? I thought you'd be hanging out with pretty boy or something.'

'Oh.' Blaine hadn't thought to prepare a story for what he was doing in San Francisco of all places. 'I was going to but we- I...'

'Wait.' Sebastian perked up at Blaine's hesitation. 'You guys didn't break up, did you?'

'What? No! Of course not.'

'Well, damn.' Sebastian took a swig off his drink and his shoulders slumped slightly in disappointment. 'I thought you might've finally come to your senses.'

'Sebastian,' Blaine said. It was hardly chastising at all, but his tone was serious and even.

'What, I'm *kidding*. Jeez, Blaine, lighten up, huh?' Sebastian rolled his eyes, but a satisfied smirk crossed his face a moment later. 'You'd think I'd struck a nerve or something.'

Blaine almost laughed out loud, because Sebastian was so far from the truth it was ridiculous. He was about to respond, when he caught sight of Cooper returning to the table, carrying two bottles and his eyes fixed on Sebastian in an angry glare.

'You,' he said to Sebastian once he was close enough to be heard over the music. Blaine watched as Cooper set down the bottles with a loud clatter and he frowned in confusion at his brothers greeting, because Cooper had never met Sebastian, or even seen a photo.

'Me,' Sebastian replied with a slight raise of his eyebrows.

'*Leave*,' Cooper said, and Blaine was surprised by the harshness of his tone.

'Cooper, what...?'

Cooper turned his gaze on Blaine for the first time since returning. 'While you were out there,' - Cooper's eyes flicked to the dance floor - 'I caught him staring at you-'

'Admiring,' Sebastian corrected, his tone conversational.

'—*staring* at you, and it was creepy.'

Sebastian gave an exasperated snort. 'Oh, come on, man. Overreact much?'

'Stalk much?' Cooper shot back.

Blaine held up a hand to stop Sebastian from responding. 'Cooper, it's fine. I know him. This is Sebastian.'

'Sebastian?' Cooper asked, his eyes widening. He pulled over a chair from a nearby table, and his expression when he sat down was one of curiosity, as though he had just stumbled upon something incredibly fascinating. 'So you're the famous Sebastian?'

'Aw, you mentioned me to your brother? I'm touched.' Sebastian grinned and leaned into Blaine a little, his hand on his thigh. His mouth was close enough that Blaine could smell the alcohol on his breath, and Blaine tried not to wrinkle his nose at it. 'Any particular way I should interpret that?'

'Yeah, okay, you know what, buddy?' Sebastian's attention turned towards Cooper as he addressed him, his voice unusually firm and authoritative. 'I think you do need to go.'

'Oh, you think so?' Sebastian said, his tone challenging.

'Yes, I think you're drunk and pathetic, and you're only going to embarrass yourself further by staying.'

'Who's embarrassed? I'm not embarrassed.' Sebastian shrugged and turned his attention towards Blaine once more. 'Anyway, we were just discussing- what were we discussing? Kurt! Yes, Kuuuurt,' he drawled out and Blaine raised a perplexed eyebrow. He was beginning to suspect that Sebastian was more than a little tipsy. 'Your pretty boy boyfriend, Kurt. You deserve better, Blaine.'

'Kurt is amazing,' Blaine said – hotly, despite realizing that Sebastian was probably to be taken even less seriously than usual.

Sebastian let out a dismissive puff of air. 'For a girl maybe. Just the way he *dresses*, Christ. You need a *real* man, B.' Blaine's frown was growing deeper and deeper with each word, and since when was he "B"? 'Not some gender confused sissy poor excuse of a-'

Cooper stood up suddenly and he grabbed Sebastian by the arm, hauling him with. 'Seriously, man. You need to *go* now.'

Sebastian – still steady on his feet – took a step closer to Cooper so their faces were inches apart. His face was screwed up in anger as he practically growled, 'Or what?'

Cooper remained utterly calm, except for the fact that he now laughed openly in Sebastian's face. 'Is that supposed to sound threatening? You gonna fight me now?' Blaine, who was watching the scene unfold with his mouth open and unsure what to think or how to react, could see why provoking a fight might be a bad move on Sebastian's part for several reasons. He might be the taller of the two, but Cooper was older, broader and probably stronger.

'What if I am?' Sebastian shot, clearly not one to admit defeat.

'Jesus Christ, kid. Just *walk away*,' Cooper nearly shouted, and Blaine could tell that his brother had finally lost his patience and was snapping. 'Take your pathetic little crush and go find someone else to harass. Don't take your miserable life out on us. It's not *our* fault you've got no friends, and mommy and daddy couldn't stand the sight of you any longer, so they shipped you off to boarding school two states over and left you to spend the holidays alone.'

Sebastian's jaw had tightened and his chin raised a little, but otherwise he showed no discernible reaction to Cooper's frankly rather harsh words. And Cooper's wasn't even finished apparently.

'I bet no one even noticed, did they? When you stole your state attorney daddy's second credit card and skipped across fives states just pursue your sad, pointless crush on a boy who's just too polite to tell you that you're the most annoying person he knows and to just. Back. The. Fuck. *Off.*'

For a short moment Sebastian's gaze fell on Blaine still sitting dumbstruck at the table, his eyes, which were usually dancing with mischief, looking suddenly soft and sad, and it struck Blaine that the other boy looked genuinely hurt by Cooper's words. Blaine opened his mouth, but hesitated, unsure what to say exactly, and a second later Sebastian's eyes narrowed at him, and he turned on his heel, stalking off towards the bar.

'That was... kind of unnecessarily harsh,' Blaine said as Cooper reclaimed his seat, his breathing heavy enough that Blaine could hear it over the still blaring music.

'So? He's a creep. He actually followed you to a different state just to get you on your own.'

'You don't know that. It could be a coincidence,' Blaine countered, unsure why he was defending Sebastian except that maybe he emphasized a little with Sebastian's apparent issues. 'He said he was here with friends.'

'Really? Where are they?' Cooper gestured around the bar, and how should Blaine know? It wasn't like he knew who the friends in question were. 'You're so naïve, Blaine.'

Blaine shot his brother an annoyed look as he made a grab for his coke, his jaw tightening and his eyes averting as he took a swig from it.

'Okay, I'm sorry,' Cooper said after a moment. 'Don't get me wrong, I think it's admirable that you still see the best in people, when you and I both know you've already seen them at their worst.' Blaine turned his gaze back over at Cooper who was looking at him imploringly. 'But just- People like this Sebastian dude... He's nothing but bad news, and I just don't want you getting hurt, okay?'

'So... I should just hurt him instead? Is that what you're saying?'

'No, just...' He trailed off as he reached a hand into his pocket, drawing out his phone. 'You know what I mean. Shit, it's Mom. What time is it? God, it's nearly midnight. Come on.'

As the two of them hurried out of the bar and made their way across town, Cooper texting their parents to tell them they were running late but were there soon, Blaine found himself pondering Cooper's words to him. He had never really given it much conscious thought, but he supposed it was true that he tended to do that. "See the best in people." And maybe it was particularly remarkable coming from him given some of the things he had experienced at the hands of some of them. Or maybe that was precisely why it *wasn't* remarkable, because Blaine knew what it was like to be pre-judged, to have people assume they knew everything about him before he had even said two words to them. Why should he want to make others feel that way too? He wasn't naïve. He was neither deaf nor blind to Sebastian's words and actions, but was it so wrong if Blaine felt bad for him now and wanted to text him and apologize for his brother? If he wanted to believe that there was more to Sebastian than throwing around insults and bad pick-up lines?

Or *did* that make Blaine naïve?

As he and Cooper made it to their parents just in time for the final countdown, however, Blaine dismissed the thought and turned his attention instead to the new year ahead of him, thinking of the things it would bring. Top surgery. His and Kurt's first anniversary. *Other* first things. Possibly a national show choir championship if they all worked really hard. His dad might get that promotion and start being home more. Of course the year would also bring his boyfriend going off to New York and leaving Blaine behind to finish high school on his own, and that thought didn't exactly fill Blaine with joy, but it was still more than six months away. They would cross that bridge when they got to it. If there was one thing Blaine had learned over the last five weeks, it was that Kurt really did *love* him (and my, how the thought still made him shiver), so they would make it work. Breaking up wasn't even an option.

The point was, Blaine thought to himself, shaking his head as he realized that he had gone off on a tangent, that 2012 was going to be a good year. Looking around at his family, he smiled as the clock struck midnight and the sky lit up with fireworks. A great year. Blaine admired the sky for a moment before fishing out his phone from his pocket and texting Kurt, fake-apologizing for California's slowness and wishing his wonderful, wonderful boyfriend a happy New Year.

The *best* year.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*Part two*

October

'Lesbian.'

'Dyke.'

'Tranny.'

'It.'

*Everyone knows.*

*The school is split into three. The hateful people who find Blaine disgusting and have no problem sharing this openly and frequently. Those who are neutral or positive and look uncomfortable with some of the words that are hurled at Blaine, but who don't want to stand up for Blaine in public. And then there are those who think the whole thing is one big joke that still isn't showing any signs of getting old for them.*

*Blaine can't go anywhere without getting stared at. It isn't everyone all the time – people do still have their own lives after all – but every time he walks down a hallway invariably someone will turn their head and give him a Look.*

You're disgusting.

You're a freak.

You're fooling no one.

*At least once a day he walks down a hallway, or into a classroom, or past a lunch table, and overhears someone talking about him in hushed tones or interrupting their conversation to yell something offensive at him.*

*'Yeah, she thinks she's a guy or something,' he hears one classmate whisper to two others one day, when they're sitting in Math waiting for the teacher who is running late.*

*'Gross,' one boy says.*

*'Weird,' says another.*

*And Blaine doesn't say anything. He never says anything.*

*Of course everyone takes good care not to say anything in front of the teachers or to otherwise do anything that's strictly against regulations, so even if Blaine wanted to complain to the faculty he would have no leg to stand on. People are allowed to talk amongst themselves after all (and who says they're even talking about Blaine anyway?) and Blaine can't force other people to be friends with him. He's an outcast and there's nothing the teachers can do about that. Assuming they would even want to.*

*The teachers are professional enough not to say anything to him directly, but Blaine is sure that at least some of them agree with many of the sentiments thrown around between the students. Certainly some of them struggle with the pronouns sometimes, and it hurts even worse coming from the teachers who are supposed to set an example for the kids. The teacher in question will always correct themselves, and that at least is something, but to Blaine the damage is sort of already done at that point. It always takes him at least a couple of hours to pick himself up from an incident like that, and no amount of backtracking ever changes that.*

*Another time Blaine is at his locker when he hears a girl giggling nearby.*

*'Can you see her boobs? I know they're there. I asked someone who was in gym with her last year. She's with the guys this year, you know.'*

*Blaine stiffens in his search for a particular book and stares blankly into the back of his locker. He can't let them know he's bothered. Can't show weakness.*

*'Really?' another girl says, and she doesn't bother to hide her snickering. 'Does she shower with them too?'*

*'I bet that'd be heaven for the guys,' the first girl says.*

*'Ew, no,' a third girl chimes in. 'She probably doesn't shave and stuff. You know, because she's "a guy".' Blaine doesn't need to turn around to see the air quotes. 'Anyway, I bet she gets to use the private shower or something,' she goes on, talking like she's obviously much cleverer than the rest of them. 'Personally I say this whole thing is political correctness gone mad.'*

*'Hey.' Blaine jumps slightly at the sound of Sara's voice next to him. 'You okay?'*

*'Peachy,' Blaine says stiffly as he slams his locker shut. He never found that book he needed. He leans against the locker and lets out a soft sigh. A little way down the hall he notices three girls staring at him and Sara, and he realizes these must be the girls he overheard just now. Sara follows Blaine's gaze, and her face screws up in annoyance.*

*'The fuck are you staring at?' she shouts at them, glaring at them until they shuffle off, and under normal circumstances (who's he kidding? This is normal now) Blaine would have scolded her for swearing, but right now he's just so glad to have a friend on his side. She and Tyler are the only real allies he has in this entire, stupid school. They are the only ones who treats him like a normal person, and they stand up for him even when Blaine himself doesn't think it's worth it.*

*Blaine suddenly notices that Sara is looking at him and biting her lip. His stomach drops. He knows that look, and it has never been followed by anything good.*

*'What?' Blaine asks. Sara swallows before pointing over her shoulder, and Blaine looks behind her to see her older brother standing there, some fifteen feet away, watching them. 'I don't understand.'*

*'He's there to make sure I say what I'm supposed to say,' Sara explains, and Blaine doesn't like the resignation in her voice. It's not like her.*

*'Which is?'*

*Sara averts her eyes, and mumbles her response to Blaine's shoulder. 'I can't be friends with you anymore.'*

*'What?' Blaine's voice is quiet and he stares, eyes wide and disbelieving. 'What?' he repeats, firmer this time, angrier.*

*Sara meets his eyes again and she almost looks frightened. 'I'm so sorry, my parents won't let me. They think you're a bad influence.'*



*'Oh.' Blaine doesn't know what else to say.*

*'I tried to tell them, there's nothing wrong with you, but they just- They won't have it. As soon as my idiot brother -' Sara raises her voice meaningfully and sends her brother a quick, dirty look over shoulder. '- told them what's going on, they said I wasn't allowed to see you anymore.'*

*'Wow, that's...' Blaine tries to keep his composure as he feels his throat constrict.*

*'I'm really sorry.' Sara's eyes are shining with unshed tears.*

*'So this is why we always hang out at my house lately,' Blaine says evenly, ignoring her apology for fear letting his emotions get the best of him. He can not be crying in the middle of a school hallway. He will not. 'You never told them.'*

*Sara shakes her head sadly. 'You know how my dad flipped his shit when I told them I'm gay. He was only just starting to come around. If I'd told my parents about you... I couldn't bear the thought of the things he might say, maybe even to your face. You don't need to hear that kind of shit.'*

*'So all this time... when you've mentioned me to your parents... you've used...'*

*Sara nods and bites her lip again. 'I'm sorry. Do you hate me?'*

*Blaine sighs. No, he doesn't. He can't make the words come out though, so he just shakes his head. They stand in silence for a moment until Sara's brother clears his throat.*

*'I have to go,' she says, and when Blaine nods, he doesn't look at her. Can't look at her. 'I really hate this.'*

*'I know,' Blaine breathes out and forces himself to look at her. 'Me too.'*

*'This isn't forever, okay?' Sara insists, furious tears in her eyes. 'I will keep trying, I promise. I'll make them listen.'*

*She pulls him into a tight hug then, but Blaine breaks it off quickly.*

*'Please, just go,' he begs her. He doesn't think he can take much more of this. He just wants it to be over now.*

*'Okay, I'll just-' She takes a small step back. 'I'll see you around, I guess.'*

*'Yeah.' Just go.*

*'You're still my best friend.'*

*'I know.' Please.*

*'Bye,' she chokes out before she finally turns to leave, shoving angrily at her brother when she passes him.*

*As Blaine watches the best friend he's ever had walk away from him, maybe forever, his chest aches with hurt and irrational shame, but he refuses to be broken. For the first time he's really properly angry at the world for the way it treats him, for the way it tries to make him believe that he's less than everyone else, when he knows he isn't. He slams his fist furiously against the lockers, taking sick pleasure in the pain that sears through his hand, and when he departs down the hall, the opposite direction from Sara, he wonders bitterly how much more he is going to have to take before the world starts to give a crap about him.*

Of course it had to be a pool number.

Blaine sat in a plastic chair at the far end of the pool, watching as New Directions and the entire swim team rehearsed the proposal number for Miss Pillsbury. Kurt had asked Blaine if he wouldn't prefer to go home early rather than stay and torture himself by watching his teammates do what he couldn't (tank tops or not, it would be obvious and raise questions if Blaine wore a binder to the pool), but in a moment of what Blaine could only describe as temporary insanity, he had insisted that it would be fun to watch, and besides they had carpooled this morning, so he kind of needed Kurt for the ride home.

('That's all I am to you?' Kurt had asked, feigning hurt. 'A chauffeur?' and Blaine had grinned and replied, 'If *chauffeur* means "the person I love more than anything and really really enjoy seeing naked," then yes, that's all you are.' Kurt's cheeks had been slightly pink as he walked off to get changed a moment later.)

So Blaine sat now fully clothed and trying to keep his focus on the homework in front of him, but it was difficult to concentrate with all the noise, and he couldn't help looking up every now and then. Every time

he did so, as much as he tried to detach himself and simply admire the way this elaborate number was coming together, he couldn't stop the sharp pang of bitterness at what he couldn't have just yet.

It was funny how the things Blaine couldn't do frustrated him infinitely more now than they had a mere month ago. He could only suppose that it was the prospect of top surgery that was making the difference. Most of the immediate joy of setting a date had worn off now nearly two weeks later, and while Blaine was still happy that it was happening, he had also eventually had to acknowledge that it wasn't happening *now*. Nothing was changing just yet and he still had over four months of waiting to do, living as he had done for years. He was *so close* – and yet not there at all.

When the rehearsal finished and everyone began to file out and into the changing rooms, Blaine smiled at them and offered complimentary words about the number, but once they had all left and the place was empty and silent, Blaine sat back in his chair, letting out a long sigh of relief. He sat in thought for a while, eyeing the water in the pool as though it had personally offended him, before he finally gathered his things and headed outside to wait for Kurt.

The cool January wind felt sharp on his face, and it was only a few minutes before Blaine was shivering with cold. He could easily step inside, of course, but the hours spent at the pool had left him in a bad mood, and if he was honest, he kind of welcomed the distraction now, uncomfortable as it was.

The first people out were a group of guys, then a group of girls from the swim team, who all passed him like he was air, and then most of the New Directions guys who waved bye to Blaine but didn't stop to chat.

'Oh, hey man,' Mike said as they passed. 'Kurt said to tell you he's *nearly* done.'

Blaine grinned in response, teeth chattering a little. 'Half an hour more it is then.'

A couple of minutes later Blaine heard the front door behind him open again.

'Hey,' Tina's soft voice greeted him.

'Hey,' Blaine called back automatically, looking around to see her and Sugar coming down the stairs. Tina, however, came to a halt when she reached Blaine's step, and she sat down next to him. Sugar stopped and turned a few steps further down, and Blaine thought he saw the two of them exchange a look. He got the sudden, uncomfortable feeling that they had been talking about him minutes before.

'Are you okay?' Tina asked. 'Why are you not in the number with us?'

'No reason,' Blaine said quickly. Too quickly.

'Is this, like, a protest against marriage or something?' Sugar asked, and Blaine looked at her in confusion.

'What?'

'You know, because you can't,' she explained with a small shrug. 'Get married, I mean.'

'What, no. Not at all,' Blaine said feeling slightly appalled at the notion. 'I think it's a lovely idea, and I'm sure Miss Pillsbury's gonna love it.'

'See?' Tina said to Sugar. 'I told you he was far too romantic for that.' Blaine looked around quickly at Tina at the confirmation that, yes, they had in fact been discussing his decision to not participate in the proposal number. He felt himself begin to sweat despite the cold, and he fought to keep his expression reasonably neutral as Tina turned to him. 'So what is it?'

'N-nothing. I just...can't.' Blaine felt his cheeks redden, and hoped that the girls thought it was from the cold. Why hadn't he thought to come up with a proper excuse? Just because Mr. Schue was so stressed about the whole thing that he readily accepted Blaine's notice that he wouldn't be participating with a distracted *Sure, we have enough people anyway*, didn't mean that everyone else wasn't going to realize that something more was going on.

'What?' Tina said lightly, teasing him. 'Can't you swim? Afraid of the water?'

Blaine snorted despite himself. 'No, of course I can swim.' Although come to think of it, when was the last time he *had* gone swimming? Blaine couldn't even remember. 'I just don't.'

'Why?' Sugar blurted, her tone almost demanding. Blaine didn't reply. He didn't even look at them. He just stared straight ahead at the parked cars, focusing on trying to make out what the license plates said, but he felt two pairs of eyes watching him closely, and he wished the girls would just let it go.

'It's because you're embarrassed, isn't it?' Tina said quietly after a while.

Blaine whipped his head around again, and his voice was rather higher than he would have liked when he responded. 'What? What makes you say that?'

Tina just shrugged. 'Nothing really. But guys can feel self conscious too, can't they?' She looked at Sugar who nodded in eager agreement.

'Yeah, maybe you have a funny mole or something. Or weird nipples. Or- or a *third* nipple. Or-'

'Yes, *thank you*, Sugar,' Tina cut her off sharply, rolling her eyes a little. 'We get it.'

'Sorry.' Sugar shuffled her feet and pouted a little. 'Was just trying to help.'

When they both fell quiet and looked at him expectantly, Blaine merely looked back and forth between them, sputtering helplessly with no idea what to say.

'Is it something really private?' Tina asked finally, and Blaine let out a long breath of relief, thankful that Tina knew him well enough (both being juniors, they shared a number of classes, and she always seemed to be around whenever Blaine hung out with Mike, so they had had a few chances to bond) to know not to keep pushing.

'Well, I don't wanna seem rude,' he said a little stiffly. 'But yeah. It kinda is.'

'Okay then. We'll stop pestering you.' Tina stood up and gestured to Sugar. 'Come on, we're leaving.'

'But- *ow*,' Sugar protested when Tina practically hauled her away by the arm. She clearly wasn't happy to leave without a scoop.

'See you tomorrow,' Tina called over her shoulder, winking at Blaine who sent her a thankful smile. He watched them go, his adrenaline still rushing, and it took him a while to calm down properly. After a minute or two he felt a familiar hand on his shoulder.

'Thanks for waiting,' Kurt said as Blaine stood. 'Did I take forever?'

Blaine forced a smile. 'It's fine, Kurt.'

As they walked to Kurt's car, the conversation between them was stilted, Blaine barely hearing what Kurt was saying about the other boys' lack of moisturizing routine.

'You okay?' Kurt asked once they were in the car and headed home. 'Was it horrible having to sit and watch?'

'It was fine,' Blaine said, looking out of the window, but then he caught his own dour tones and looked around at Kurt, faking cheer when he continued. 'You guys were all really good. It looked amazing.'

Kurt took his eyes off the road for half a second to level Blaine with a stern look. 'Blaine.'

Blaine crossed his arms in front of his chest and sighed heavily. 'Tina and Sugar wanted to know why I didn't join in today.'

'Oh,' Kurt said and Blaine thought he seemed oddly relieved. 'Yeah, the guys asked about it too.'

'Great.' Blaine's jaw tightened, and he looked out of the window at the passing houses. 'People talking about me behind my back now. Just fantastic.'

'Don't exaggerate, Blaine.' There was a note of impatience in Kurt's voice. 'They were simply asking if you were okay. Take it as a good thing. It just means they care.'

'Doesn't mean I want to tell them anything,' Blaine muttered.

'Did I say you should?' Kurt snapped tiredly, and Blaine looked around at him in surprise. 'Why are you making such a big deal?'

'*Because-*' Blaine cut himself off and shook his head. 'Doesn't matter.'

Ten seconds of heavy silence followed until Kurt rounded a corner and gave a soft sigh. 'Look, I'm sorry for snapping. I just have kind of a lot on my mind at the moment. I'm still waiting to hear about my NYADA application and I have no idea whether I'm bought or sold and it's driving me a little crazy.'

'I know. You're right, I'm sorry. I shouldn't bother you with my problems.'

'What, no. I *want* you to. That's not what I meant. Just, do you think maybe you're freaking out over nothing?' Kurt asked gently. 'I doubt anyone's mind goes "Oh, he's not getting in the pool with us. I bet he has boobs."' Blaine winced, and Kurt's cheeks pinked a little. 'Sorry.'

'It's fine, Kurt,' Blaine forced out. 'I know what you meant, and let's just change the subject, okay? Tell me about NYADA. When's the letter supposed to come?'

The rest of the drive home went by with Kurt unloading his worries about NYADA, the lack of a letter and the uncertainty about whether that was a bad sign or not. Meanwhile as Blaine listened and offered supportive comments, he mused to himself that however wonderful Kurt had been in all this (and Blaine really did appreciate everything, including how much it must have taken for Kurt to put aside the betrayal of Blaine lying to him for so long, and to choose to stay and support Blaine), there were still things that Kurt just didn't *get*.

Blaine knew that there had been a time when Kurt had not been out and proud, when bullies had terrorized him daily and when he had had few friends. However, most of that stuff had died down now, and the rest of it Kurt just didn't let get to him anymore. Kurt was the kind of person who made his past his past and kept looking forward – to New York and NYADA and Broadway, and to his and Blaine's future together. So if Kurt couldn't easily understand why it agitated Blaine when their friends prodded and asked questions that Blaine couldn't or refused to answer, it was understandable enough. Kurt didn't know what it was to not be proud of who you were.

And Blaine didn't begrudge him that, but neither could he forget. Blaine couldn't simply let his past be his past when it was still so intertwined with who he was now. He couldn't just be proud of everything he was. He couldn't forget what had happened to him the last time he had tried.

If Blaine thought Proposal Week was his least favorite so far in glee club, Michael Week was looking to be the complete opposite. Blaine had thrown himself into it with everything he had, eager to forget all about the previous week. *This* was something he could do, and do well.

As he skipped into the kitchen early Friday morning, he felt unusually refreshed, and he hummed the melody to *Wanna Be Startin' Something* to himself as he made breakfast, thinking of later that day when he would be working on a performance of it with the rest of the group. He had just waved his mother out the door and was enjoying the last quiet minutes of his morning before he had to leave for school, when his phone buzzed with an incoming call. Blaine's mouth fell open in surprise.

'Sebastian?' he greeted his quasi-friend cautiously.

Sebastian's greeting, meanwhile, was nothing if not cheerful. 'Hey, Blaine! So. I had a question for you.'

'Okay... What is it?' Blaine asked, a little wary, but mostly just confused.

'Red wine. Blazer piping. Any tips?'

'Huh?' Had Blaine misheard or had Sebastian really just asked him for tips about red wine stains? After not contacting Blaine at all for three weeks and ignoring Blaine's numerous texts asking if everything was okay?

'I mean how do I get the stain out?' Sebastian elaborated calmly, which did nothing to ease Blaine's confusion. Blaine didn't even attempt to offer an answer to Sebastian's question (club soda?), and how was he supposed to be an expert on that anyway? Sebastian simply chuckled at Blaine's silence. 'What's wrong?'

'Just, it's been a while,' Blaine managed.

'Aw, miss me?' Sebastian said, the smirk evident in his voice, and Blaine deliberately didn't answer this question either, partly because he wasn't sure what the honest answer would be exactly. Had he missed Sebastian's incessant calls and texts and shameless flirting? Not really, but the sudden silence was a little disconcerting when he didn't know what it meant. Much as Blaine didn't particularly like Sebastian, he liked the idea of being hated by him – or anyone really – even less.

'I...' Blaine hesitated before deciding that he may as well not dance around the issue. 'You're not pissed at me?'

'For what, Blaine?' Sebastian asked lightly – curious, as though he couldn't imagine what Blaine was talking about.



Blaine worried his lip for a few seconds. 'New Year's Eve.'

'Oh. I don't even remember that night.'

'I see. So why the radio silence for three weeks?' Blaine asked, deciding to ignore the obvious lie (Sebastian had not been *that* drunk).

'Oh, you know...' Sebastian breathed out, his tone conversational. 'Busy busy. Preparing for Regionals. Five weeks til we crush you.'

'Oh, ha ha, keep dreaming,' Blaine shot back, quietly relieved that this was the turn the conversation had taken. 'We won our Sectionals with Michael and we'll take Regionals too.'

'You're doing Michael for Regionals?' Sebastian asked, sounding politely interested. 'Jackson?'

'Yeah. Or I mean probably. A lot of us want to do it.'

'And you?'

'I think it's a *great* idea,' Blaine responded without hesitation, getting excited. 'I mean, there's such a rich catalogue to choose from, isn't there? And plenty that fits in "inspiration" theme. It's perfect.'

'Wow, Blaine.' Sebastian sounded amused. 'You're really into this, aren't you?'

True, Blaine was gushing a bit, and maybe he was kind of disproportionately excited, but after last week's low, he was milking this week's high for all its worth. Blaine was also honestly relieved that Sebastian was still speaking to him after the things Cooper had said to him, so maybe he was being overly nice today. And actually... was it Blaine's imagination or had Sebastian toned down the flirting? Had he even said one inappropriate thing this entire conversation? Huh. Maybe Blaine should have just put his foot down sooner, and they could have been having normal, friendly conversations this entire time.

'Blaine?'

'Huh?' Blaine was jolted out of his thoughts. 'Yes, I am. It'll be great!'

'So have you come up with any song ideas yet?'

'Oh, yes. Plenty!' Blaine exclaimed excitedly. 'Hang on, I have a whole list here on my phone.'

Maybe there was still a chance they could keep this friendship thing going. Sebastian was a Warbler after all. And that counted for something.

Later that day Blaine led the New Directions through their first big number of the week, and he felt wonderfully like he could fly. For the few minutes the song lasted he could barely even remember what he had been so upset about the week before.

'Looks like someone's at the top of their game,' Tina said, coming up to him in the auditorium, when the number was done. She smiled carefully at him.

'Thanks,' Blaine puffed out, still a little out of breath from the performance. He was pretty sure the grin on his face was big and stupid-looking. 'Yeah, I feel good. Last week was just a... bad moment.'

'So you're fine?' Tina asked with just a hint of skepticism in her voice.

'Yeah. Never been better,' Blaine said truthfully. 'Honest. You shouldn't be worried.'

'So, what, does that mean we're all still going to have to fight you for solos then?'

'I- Yeah?' Blaine's smile faltered for half a second, unsure if Tina was chastising him for singing too much, but then he caught the teasing glint in her eye and grinned. 'You bet.'

'Good. I'll look forward to it,' she said, winking at him, before she turned and skipped off.

'What was that about?'

Blaine turned around at the sound of Kurt's voice approaching him from behind, and he was again taken aback by his boyfriend in that leather outfit that should have been ridiculous but instead was just insanely hot. He stared for a moment, completely forgetting that Kurt had asked a question, until Kurt gestured

towards Tina who was now chatting happily with Mike at the other end of the stage. Blaine shook himself out of it.

'Oh, just Tina making absolutely sure I'm okay,' he replied lightly, prompting Kurt to arch his eyebrows and give Blaine a look that said *Well, you've certainly changed your tune*. Blaine grinned sheepishly. 'You were right. Again. I shouldn't be upset that people show concern. In a way it's exactly what I've wanted since I came here, isn't it?' When Kurt cocked his head and looked questioningly at him, Blaine went on, explaining, 'To be Blaine, their friend, rather just "Blaine, that guy who's Kurt's boyfriend."'

'I see,' Kurt said, taking a step closer and reaching to fix a stray piece of hair. His voice was low and teasing as he continued. 'So what you're saying is... I was right, and you were wrong.'

Blaine rolled his eyes but felt a smile tugging at his lips. 'Yeah yeah, rub it in, why don't you. I thought we already established that. There's no need to keep a tally.'

Kurt's reply was prompt and bright as he made to follow the rest of the New Directions off the stage, tugging Blaine with him. 'I know. Because I'm always right.'

Blaine snorted, jogging a little to catch up with Kurt. 'You're ridiculous. You're worse than Cooper, you know.'

'I'll just take that as a compliment,' Kurt said airily.

Blaine took Kurt's hand in his, taking advantage of the few seconds they had before they left the safety of the auditorium for the crowded hallways and squeezing lightly. 'Mm, you should,' he hummed, and though they were mostly joking around, he meant it too.

After glee club that day a group of them was still so fired up and excited about doing Michael Jackson music that they decided to head to the Lima Bean and share stories and memories. Except Rachel, who apparently just went for the company and the coffee, because she soon confessed to not really "getting" Michael Jackson, prompting all of them to stare at her in disbelief.

'Okay, but just, since you guys are so jazzed about him,' Rachel said once they had finished chastising her. 'I think it's a good idea for Regionals.'

'That might not be the best idea,' a voice said, and they all looked up to see Sebastian approaching them, carrying a cup of coffee and smiling widely. 'Hey, Blaine. Hello, everyone else.'

'Does he *live* here or something?' Kurt exclaimed next to Blaine, not bothering to hide his dislike. 'Seriously, you are *always* here.'

'Why don't you think that's a good idea?' Artie asked, wisely cutting Kurt off.

'Because we're doing MJ for Regionals,' Sebastian said, and Blaine's mouth fell open, because *what*? 'You see, the Warblers drew first positions, so as soon as I heard what your plan was, I changed our setlist accordingly.'

Blaine stared. Had this been Sebastian's plan all along when he called this morning? Figure out what New Directions were up to and then sabotage it? God, Blaine was *sostupid*.

'I'm sorry, h-how did you hear?' Rachel managed to ask through her disbelief.

'Blaine told me this morning,' Sebastian said, gesturing at Blaine who carefully avoided his teammates' eyes when they turned their heads to glare at him. He had the sinking feeling that he may have just lost any and all trust he had gained from the New Directions since joining them. 'I just called for a tip on how to get red wine out of my blazer piping and he would *not* stop going on about it.'

'I may have mentioned it,' Blaine admitted. He had gone on about it a lot. Not like *that* though. Not the way Kurt and the others were looking at him now. He had meant no harm.

As the conversation continued, and Sebastian went on to insult both Kurt and Santana in a most crude and unimaginative way, Blaine felt the last walls of denial crumble; the walls he had built up around Sebastian since the day they met, and Blaine had trusted him implicitly simply because he was a Warbler, and Warblers were Good People. Meanwhile Sebastian had seen right through Blaine and played him for the trusting, excitable fool he was.

When Sebastian left, following his announcement that he was now captain of the Warblers and tired of playing nice, Blaine excused himself and hurried after him before his teammates could round on him. He had to hear what Sebastian had to say for himself.

'Sebastian!' Blaine called, running to catch up with him in the parking lot. 'Sebastian, stop.'

Sebastian turned finally and stood calmly in front of Blaine. 'What?' he asked, clearly not actually interested in the question. It struck Blaine how different Sebastian seemed to the boy Blaine had spoken to that very morning.

'I just- I thought you said you weren't angry with me?'

'I'm not,' Sebastian replied, but his face was impassive and Blaine couldn't tell if he meant it or not.

'Then why?'

'Why what?'

'Why would you do something like that?' Blaine demanded, allowing his hurt to show. Sebastian watched him with that familiar amused smirk.

'It's a competition, Blaine,' he said calmly, rolling his eyes, before turning to leave and calling over his shoulder, 'Stop acting like I killed someone.'

Blaine watched Sebastian go, and all at once he felt a lot more sad and empty than he did angry. He may have transferred to a different school and show choir, but being a Warbler was still a huge part of Blaine. Sebastian hadn't been completely wrong when he had declared "Once a Warbler, always a Warbler" on the day Blaine had first met him. Not as far as allegiance went – Blaine was in New Directions now, and his loyalties were with them – but being a Warbler had *meant* something to Blaine, and that hadn't changed just because he had left Dalton.

There were certain principles every Warbler lived by, because winning wasn't worth it without them. Honor. Discipline. Decency. Fair play. Or at least that was how it used to be. Until Sebastian. Sebastian who didn't play by anyone's rules except his own. Of course Sebastian was just one person, but he was apparently captain now, and Blaine couldn't help feeling like he was changing the fundamentals of what it

meant to be a Warbler, which felt almost worse than the specifics of what he had done to Blaine and the New Directions.

True, Sebastian might not have taken anyone's life, Blaine thought, but that didn't mean that nothing or no one had died today.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *Part three*

#### November

*For the first two weeks of high school Blaine stubbornly uses the boys' bathroom openly and whenever he pleases, ignoring the looks and the sly comments, but by October he has to admit that it isn't worth it just to make a point. Now he avoids the school bathrooms as much as he can, and if he does have to go, he either uses the disabled bathroom (which part of him hates doing because he is not disabled) or excuses himself in the middle of a class and slips into the boys' bathroom when no one else is around to give him grief about it.*

*Today he's in the middle of a History pop quiz, when he has to admit defeat and ask to be excused. He passes Sara on his way out and carefully avoids looking at her – the two of them don't talk at all anymore, both aware that Sara's brother is watching them closely, ready to tell her parents if she steps a toe out of line.*

*In the bathroom Blaine heads for the stalls as usual (he has read a bit about STPs, but they all seem rather expensive and/or not very good, and Blaine doesn't really feel like spending a fortune only to end up peeing on himself in public), but before he reaches one, he hears the door swing open behind him.*

*'Hey, sweetheart!' a voice calls, and Blaine vaguely recognizes it as belonging to one of the older boys who like to make his life miserable. 'Think you got the wrong bathroom here.'*

*Blaine sighs, and doesn't turn around as he responds, 'No, actually I think I'm exactly where I need to be.'*

*Suddenly the boy is right next to Blaine, crowding him and standing far too close to not appear threatening. 'Really?' he says, and Blaine freezes with his hand on the handle. He can feel the other boy's breath on his cheek and out of the corner of his eye, he sees a second boy standing by the urinals. Blaine forces himself to appear unfazed.*

*'Really.'*

*'Prove it,' the boy by the urinals says, and Blaine looks up despite himself.*

*'W-what?'*

*'Prove it,' he repeats, gesturing at the urinals. The boys grin wickedly at each other. 'Prove that you belong here.'*

*'I- I... I don't- I'm just gonna-' Blaine stammers, feeling a blush creep into his cheeks, but then he takes a deep breath, steeling himself. 'No,' he says firmly. He will not let himself be intimidated. 'I don't have to prove anything. Least of all to a couple of Neanderthals like you.'*

*As soon as the words leave his mouth, Blaine knows it's a mistake, but before he can form another thought, the boy next to him has grabbed him by the shirt and is shoving him violently against the wall. The hard impact causes Blaine to let out an involuntary 'oof' sound, but otherwise he stays stubbornly unaffected.*

*'You gonna hit me now and prove me right?' he says, staring calmly into his assailant's eyes, and for a second Blaine thinks the boy might actually hit him, but then the pressure against Blaine's chest is eased a little so that Blaine can breathe properly again.*

*'No. I don't hit girls.' Blaine wants to roll his eyes but decides not to push his luck. 'Troy, get over here,' the boy calls to his friend before turning back to Blaine. 'But I am gonna teach you a lesson, Anderson. Troy, take the other arm.'*

*Blaine yelps in surprise as he is pulled forwards effortlessly by the much stronger boys, their grips around his upper arms far too tight to make resisting a viable option. They stop in front of the sinks, and the first boy lets go of Blaine and moves to stand in front of him. He seems to be appraising him – or contemplating his next move maybe – and for half a second Blaine allows himself to think that nothing more is coming, but the next second the boy's eyes narrow.*

*'Hold her still,' he says, and behind Blaine, Troy reacts quickly, pinning both his arms behind his back, his grip tight enough that Blaine can barely move, let alone get free.*

*'Stop. Whatever you're doing, just stop,' Blaine says in a surprisingly steady voice given his increasing heart-rate. He looks at the boy in front of him, and he doesn't like the smirk on his face one bit.*

*'Are you a boy, Anderson?' he asks, leaning casually against a sink, his arms folded across his chest.*

*'Yes,' Blaine replies, and the boy cocks his head as though Blaine is saying something vaguely interesting.*

*'Are you really, though?'*



*'Yes. Now, let me go,' Blaine demands as he struggles uselessly against Troy's hold on him. The other one steps closer, crowding Blaine again, and suddenly he's kneeling in front of Blaine, a hand coming to rest on Blaine's belt.*

*'Let's check anyway, shall we?' he says, smirking up at Blaine, and all at once Blaine understands where this is headed.*

*'No. Don't. Please,' Blaine begs, his voice shaking for the first time.*

*'Consider it a lesson in biology,' the boy says from the floor as he undoes Blaine's belt, and Blaine tries to kick but finds all strength in his legs gone, the only thing holding him up being Troy's strong grip on his upper arms. He wants to scream, but all that comes out is a pathetic whimper, and it's all happening so fast that Blaine doesn't have time to form a coherent thought beyond no, no, no, this is not happening.*

*'Doug,' Troy says, sounding a little unsure about the situation, but his friend – Doug, apparently – is determined, and a second later Blaine feels fingers hook under the waistband of his underwear. Sucking in a sharp breath, Blaine looks away as Doug in one swift motion pulls down his pants and underwear along with his packer, which flops out onto the floor in a way that might have been comical if Blaine wasn't so horrified and embarrassed.*

*'There.' The boy sounds satisfied. 'Move in front of the mirror,' he orders. Troy maneuvers Blaine a few steps to the left, and with – oh god, is this really happening – his pants being around his ankles, Blaine stumbles a bit, but Troy makes sure he doesn't fall.*

*'Wow,' Troy says stupidly, and Blaine realizes he must be looking at Blaine in the mirror. Exposed. Blaine flinches when a hand forces his head straight.*

*'Look into the mirror, sweetheart. Tell me what you see.'*

*Blaine stares vacantly into the mirror, refusing to look at himself and refusing to say what they want him to. Long, silent moments pass, but the boys just seem to grow more amused by the second.*

*'No? I'll tell you what I don't see: Dick. And, well, I may have flunked biology but I'm pretty sure dudes are supposed to have dicks. Therefore.' He steps in front of Blaine again, crouching to pull his pants up for him. For some reason this gesture feels almost worse than anything else that has happened, and Blaine's bottom lip begins to tremble as Doug's face grows hard again. 'Get the fuck out of my bathroom.'*

*Two minutes later Blaine makes it to the disabled bathroom, and he closes the door behind him, shaking and collapsing against it. He takes a deep breath, fighting to get his breathing under control. It's done, it's over, and he never ever has to think about it again.*

*Except every single time he goes to the bathroom at school from now on.*

*For a long time Blaine just sits there, trying not to think and concentrating on his breathing – In. Out. In. Out. – until he loses track of time. By the time he finally stands up, he isn't sure if it's been five or fifty minutes, and he doesn't really care either. He remembers dully why he went to the bathroom in the first place, and he quickly does his business before taking one last steadying breath and leaving the bathroom.*

*Immediately he is confronted with Sara leaning against the wall opposite the bathroom, and Blaine sees that she's carrying his things in addition to her own.*

*'You never came back,' she says quietly, answering his unasked question and holding out his things. Blaine takes them wordlessly. 'I went to the boys' to look for you. I found your...' She flicks her eyes towards Blaine's crotch. '...on the floor.'*

*'Oh.' He completely forgot about that in his rush to get away his harassers, and he blushes now in mortification, but quietly thankful that Sara of all people found it.*

*'It's- I put it in your bag.'*

*'Thanks,' Blaine says, and he does mean it, but he can't be dealing with Sara now on top of everything else, so he turns to walk away from her. Before he can even take one step, however, he feels her hand on his shoulder.*

*'Are you okay?'*

*'I'm fine.'*

*'I'm not stupid,' Sara says, walking around Blaine to face him again. 'I know something happened.'*

*'Nothing happened,' Blaine says fiercely, and he wonders if maybe he's trying to convince himself as much as her. 'I told you, I'm-'*

*'I know you, Blaine,' Sara cuts him off. 'And you're not fine. So just tell me.'*

*Blaine huffs out a humorless laugh and shakes his head at her. 'You don't get to demand honesty from me anymore. We're not friends, remember? I'm "a bad influence."' His voice is heavy with sarcasm. 'So go find someone else to bug.'*

*Blaine walks past Sara, leaving her looking shocked and hurt. He thought brushing her off might make him feel better, but instead he just feels guilty. It isn't her fault after all. But all this – these people so uncaring and unwilling to understand – is starting to wear on him, and she was conveniently there to take his frustration out on. He vowed patience on his first day of school, because he knows the world isn't used to someone like him, but it's been over two months now. Shouldn't things be getting better instead of worse?*

*It has to get better soon, right? The whispers. The looks. The comments. And now the borderline assaults. He can't keep being that fascinating to them, can he? Aren't people fundamentally good? They will learn to understand, Blaine tells himself, or else not care that they don't. It's just a matter of time.*

*The question is how much longer Blaine is willing to wait.*

Blaine spent the weekend in alternating states of anger and anxiousness. He was angry and disappointed with the Warblers for abandoning their ideals so easily. Even Trent, Blaine's oldest and best Warbler friend, seemed to think that Blaine was overreacting and that a bit of friendly competition between choirs was only healthy. He pointed out when Blaine spoke to him on the phone that it wasn't like Sebastian had gone to great lengths to figure out the New Directions' plans – Blaine had told him himself – and Blaine struggled to explain exactly why this felt so *wrong*.

When Blaine got tired of pacing angrily around his room, he tended to collapse onto his bed with a sigh and from there it was only a few minutes before his stomach twisted uncomfortably at the thought of facing his teammates on Monday. The four at the Lima Bean had been bad enough, but all of them in one

place with only one visible person to take their anger out on? Blaine shuddered to think about it. And he had *just* started to feel like one of them.

When Kurt came over on Sunday, he did his best to soothe Blaine's anxiety and convince him that no one was going to hate him, and if they did they would have Kurt to deal with. Blaine, however, wasn't so easily convinced.

'They're gonna think I did this on purpose,' Blaine whined for the umpteenth time, pacing while Kurt sat on the bed. 'That I'm spying for the Warblers or something.'

'Come on, Blaine,' Kurt said, and Blaine could tell he was getting a bit tired of this argument. 'I'm sure they won't.'

Blaine stopped pacing and stood in front of Kurt, pouting dramatically. 'They will.'

Kurt rolled his eyes. 'Well, then stop feeling sorry for yourself and figure how to make it better.'

'Yes. Of course,' Blaine said as he flopped down on the bed next to Kurt. He sighed and lay back on the bed, pulling Kurt with him after a moment. 'You're so smart. Why are you so smart?'

Kurt smirked and poked Blaine's nose, teasing, 'Because someone's gotta make up for what you lack?'

'Hey!' Blaine said indignantly, suppressing a smile.

'Come on, you set yourself up for that one.'

'True,' Blaine admitted. He gazed absentmindedly up at the ceiling for a moment before he added, 'It's not fair though.'

'What?'

Blaine looked back at Kurt and reached a hand to fix a tiny strand of his hair, smiling softly at him. 'You got the brains *and* the beauty.'

Kurt blushed and buried his face in the mattress. When he looked up again, his expression was tender and he reached to cup Blaine's cheek. 'I think you're selling yourself short.'

Blaine actually rolled his eyes. 'Have you looked at yourself? Trust me, I'm not the hot one here. Hey now,' he said, cutting Kurt off before he could speak. 'Don't argue. Now can we please concentrate on coming up with a plan for tomorrow, so your friends don't skin me alive?'

The plan wasn't really a plan as such. It was more of an attitude. Blaine went to school on Monday morning with his head held high, and every time he spoke to one of his teammates, he drew a deep breath, putting on a mask of optimism and fake cheer, insisting that what had happened wasn't so bad, that they would find something even better than Michael to do for Regionals. When glee club rolled around, he pointed out that much worse things had happened to New Directions before, and they had come out on top. At least this time they had some forewarning.

Both Blaine and Kurt had, however, underestimated just how pissed off everyone was. They were positively fuming and Artie point blank refused to let go of "his Michael". Convincing the New Directions that the loss of Michael was not the end of the world, was clearly not going to work. So Blaine had to change tactics. If they were going to fight to keep Michael, then he was going to fight harder than any of them.

'I know what Michael would do,' Blaine spoke up, responding to Mr. Schue's "lesson" on the board. 'I think he would take it to the streets.'

If Blaine hadn't been so fixated on getting back in his teammates' good graces, he would have thought twice about a suggestion like this, and he might have realized what a bad idea it actually was.

Blaine reacted on pure instinct.

He saw the large, red paper cup in Sebastian's hand, and he saw Sebastian's eyes fixed on Kurt next to Blaine as he raised it.

Hell.

Freaking.

No.

Sebastian was not going to take whatever his issues with Blaine were out on Kurt. Blaine wouldn't allow it. As he dove in front of his boyfriend, he just had time to think that had he not ducked down a little, the slushie would have likely just hit his chest, before the freezing liquid collided with his face.

His first thought as he landed on the parking garage floor was *Okay, this is really, really cold*, and then *Why would anyone throw this in another person's face?* His third thought was that his right arm hurt after landing awkwardly on it. It wasn't until he reached his fourth thought, after the initial shock of the cold had subsided, that he registered the pain in his eyes.

Blaine heard someone scream, and it was a short moment before he realized that it was coming from himself. His eyes were burning, and he couldn't open them properly, only barely aware that a crowd was gathering around him. He felt a pair of hands on him, attempting to soothe him, but it couldn't distract from the searing pain in his eyes.

'Blaine. Blaine, honey,' Kurt said beside him between unsuccessful attempts to pry Blaine's hands from his face. 'Take it easy. I know it's cold. It'll pass in a moment.'

Blaine's screams quieted to a series of loud groans. It wasn't passing though. Shouldn't it be passing? In all his stories about slushies Kurt had never mentioned this amount of pain. Why wasn't it passing? It just kept getting *worse*.

'What's wrong with him?' came Brittany's voice somewhere above him, quiet and concerned.

'Oh, he's just being a baby,' Santana said rather more harshly, continuing, her voice closer to Blaine's ear now, 'Listen, Anderson. Snap out of it. We've all taken a slushie to the face, and it sucks but it's not *that* bad.' She pulled at his hands with such force then that Blaine finally relented. He still couldn't open his eyes properly and only saw his surroundings through the barest sliver. Kurt and Santana on the ground next to him. The rest of them standing and crowding around him. 'Rise and shine, princess.'

'Blaine, can you open your eyes for me?' Kurt asked gently, and Blaine tried a few times, but each attempt only gave him a few seconds worth of blurry vision, before his eyes were forced shut again.

'Kurt, it hurts,' he whimpered. 'It really, really hurts.'

'Something's wrong,' Kurt said, now speaking to the people around him. 'He's not a baby about pain. You don't know what he's been- He's just not.'

'Do you think that Sebastian guy put something in the slushie?' Finn asked, sounding confused. 'Like something toxic or something?'

'I wouldn't put it past him,' Kurt muttered as he tugged on Blaine. 'Come on, Blaine, we're going to get you to the hospital, all right?'

'No, not the hospital,' Blaine protested weakly as he was forced into a sitting position. Even through the intense pain that was making his brain increasingly fuzzy, Blaine didn't like that idea. Hospitals meant hospital gowns and medical records and doctors that tried and failed to treat him like he was normal.

'Don't be silly, Blaine,' Kurt said sternly. 'We need to get you checked out. Come on, stand up for me.'

Blaine gave in and let Kurt help him up, because of course Kurt was right, and a moment later he was led to what he assumed was Kurt's car.

'Finn, can you drive, please?' he heard Kurt say, car keys jingling nearby. 'I don't think I should right now. I'm too...' Kurt's voice was tight, and he seemed to hold Blaine a little closer.

'Sure, dude. Just give me the keys,' Finn replied, and the next moment Blaine was being helped into the backseat of the car. Kurt climbed in next to him while Rachel, declaring that she was coming too, claimed the passenger seat, and then they were on their way. Blaine let out a low groan as he let his head fall back, and he lifted both hands to rub at his eyes.

'Hey, stop that. You'll only make it worse,' Kurt scolded gently, tugging at Blaine's arms, and Blaine whimpered in frustration. 'Come here.'

Kurt maneuvered Blaine into a lying position, letting his head rest in Kurt's lap. A hand caressed Blaine's cheek softly, and Blaine murmured appreciatively at the distraction.

'How're you feeling?' Kurt asked. 'Does it still hurt a lot?'

'Mm,' Blaine hummed, and he automatically lifted his hand again, his instinct telling him to rub at the pain, but Kurt stopped him wordlessly. Blaine groaned again. 'It's like it's spreading. My entire head is throbbing.'

'Hang in there. We're nearly there. I'm sure the doctors will fix you up in no time,' Kurt said, doing his best to sound reassuring, but Blaine could tell by the tightness in his voice that he was worried. Blaine wanted to offer reassurance back, but he was finding it increasingly difficult to form coherent thoughts, let alone words, so he stayed quiet as they drove, only letting out an occasional groan or whimper.

'Kurt?' Blaine said quietly after a few minutes, and he felt Kurt tense around him. 'Do you think they'll know now?'

'Who? Know what?'

'That I really am playing for your team.'

Kurt let out a breath of air that might have been the beginning of a laugh, and he stroked Blaine's hair softly as he responded. 'Yes, honey. I think they'll know now.'

Kurt was angry. Angry at Sebastian for being a sociopathic jerk, and at the Warblers for playing along with him. Dalton was supposed to be free of that kind of stuff. He had gone there last year when he was being bullied, and although he had truthfully never felt like he really fit in with the Warblers, he had always, *always*, felt safe in their midst. It didn't feel that way anymore.

He was scared. Scared because Blaine was in the hospital, and they hadn't heard anything since a doctor came for him nearly two hours ago, and for all Kurt knew, Blaine may be losing his eyesight because of whatever Sebastian had put in that slushie.

He was sad. Sad because his Blaine was in pain, and people that were supposed to be his friends had done this to him. Furthermore Kurt had left a voice-mail for Blaine's mother when they had first reached the ER,



but that was *hours* ago, and she hadn't showed up or even called back yet. What the hell kind of parenting was that?

He was anxious. Anxious because *what was taking so long?* Why hadn't they heard anything yet? And was that a good sign or not?

And he was tired. Tired because it was late on a school night and so much had happened today, and Kurt kind of just wanted to curl up around his boyfriend and sleep and pretend this wasn't happening.

'Kurt?'

'Mm?' Kurt looked up to see Finn standing in front of him, holding out his hand.

'Your phone.'

'Oh, right. Thank you,' Kurt said, taking the phone from Finn. 'What did Dad say?'

'Just, you know, he's worried,' Finn said, taking the seat next to Kurt. 'He offered to come down here, but I said we'd manage and stuff. And Blaine's mom's gotta be here soon, right?'

'Mm.' Kurt chose not to voice his concerns about Mrs. Anderson.

'Anyway, Burt said to keep him and Mom updated, and to not worry about waking them when we come home. He really cares about Blaine, I think.'

'We all do,' Rachel piped up on Kurt's other side. She squeezed Kurt's hand in hers. 'He'll be fine, Kurt. I know he will.'

'You don't know that,' Kurt said, his best friend's words empty to him. 'We don't know what was in that slushie. The damage it could have done.'

'But Sebastian wouldn't do anything really dangerous and illegal, would he?' Finn said, frowning and sounding vaguely optimistic. 'I mean, he can't be that stupid, can he?'

'Look where we are right now, Finn! I think he can,' Kurt snapped, but a moment later he sighed. 'Sorry, I'm just- I'm going crazy not knowing.'

'Oh, this is ridiculous,' Rachel exclaimed suddenly, getting to her feet. 'I'm going up there and demanding they let us see him.' And without a glance back, she strode off towards the front desk, presumably to go harass one of the nurses there, leaving the boys to stare uncertainly after her.

'Should we go save the poor nurse?' Kurt asked after a while. Finn seemed to consider for a moment.

'Give her another minute,' he said. 'I think this is sort of her way of coping. Besides, that nurse looks like she's holding her own well enough.'

Kurt followed Finn's glance towards the front desk where Rachel was having an animated discussion with a nurse, who looked stubbornly unaffected by her pleas.

'True. I'm going to intervene though. I need to stretch my legs, anyway,' Kurt said, standing up and sighing a little.

'For the last time, miss. The patient is underage, and until I hear consent from a parent or guardian, I can't just hand out information all willy nilly,' Kurt heard the nurse reel off as he approached.

'It's not *willy nilly*,' Rachel sputtered. 'We're his friends. His- his *boyfriend*,' she said and gestured at Kurt when she saw him.

'Rachel,' Kurt said, putting a calming hand on her shoulder. 'Come on. Let it go.'

'But she's being mean and unreasonable,' Rachel insisted and threw a filthy look at the nurse who all but rolled her eyes.

'I know,' Kurt said tiredly as he began to lead Rachel away. 'But you're not helping us by...'

Kurt trailed off as a short, dark-haired woman passed them in a hurry, and he looked around to see her approaching the front desk.

'My son,' she managed, a little out of breath, but doing her best to appear composed. 'I need to see him. Where is he?'

'And your son's name?' the nurse asked, looking bored, clearly too experienced to be moved by the woman's urgency.

'Blaine. Blaine Anderson,' Mrs. Anderson said, and the nurse typed something into a computer.

'Right. Your... son.' Kurt didn't like the slight mocking tone to her voice, nor the little quiver of her lips, like she was amused somehow.

'Oh, spare me your judgment,' Mrs. Anderson snapped. 'I have no use for it. Just tell me where he is.'

'Mrs. Anderson?' Kurt said, stepping forward finally, and the woman turned around to face him. She sighed in soft relief, and some of the urgency seemed to leave her.

'Kurt? You're here. I'm sorry, I didn't see you.' She gestured towards the front desk, and Kurt nodded, understanding that she had been in too much of a hurry to notice him. 'How is he? Is he all right?'

'I don't know. They won't let us see him,' Kurt said, his voice breaking for the first time tonight and forgetting his annoyance with the woman for taking so long to show up. 'Because he's underage or something.'

'Right. I see. You can come with me.' Mrs. Anderson squeezed Kurt's shoulder briefly. She glanced behind Kurt, where Finn had come over to join Rachel, watching them from a few feet away, before continuing in a low voice, 'Your friends, I assume Blaine hasn't...'

She trailed off, but Kurt caught her meaning and shook his head. 'Just me.'

'Okay, best leave them here then. Better safe than sorry.'

Kurt nodded his agreement, and while Mrs. Anderson made the nurse explain where Blaine was, Kurt turned to Finn and Rachel, explaining that he was going with Blaine's mother and for them to just go home, that he would text them any news. Rachel hugged him twice before he went, telling him to pass one on to Blaine, and Finn sent him an encouraging smile. Five minutes later and three floors up, Kurt and Mrs. Anderson were greeted by a young doctor outside Blaine's room.

'You're Blaine's mother?' he asked as he shook Mrs. Anderson's hand.

'Yes, Blaine's my son,' she replied, and Kurt suspected she slipped the "son" in there purposely to dispel any lingering doubts about correct pronouns. Although it should be obvious to anyone with a working

brain that Blaine wasn't a girl, Kurt thought savagely, almost missing the moment when Mrs. Anderson turned to him. 'This is Kurt. His boyfriend.'

Kurt met the doctor's gaze, nodding politely, and there was a brief moment in which everyone seemed to be wondering what the doctor's reaction was going to be (they might not be at McKinley, but it was still Lima, Ohio), but then the doctor simply smiled warmly and led the way inside the room.

The room was bland and cold like any hospital room, and Blaine seemed to be the only occupant despite it being a two-person room. He appeared to be asleep, lying in the bed farthest from the entrance, and his right eye was patched up. At the sight Kurt was torn between wanting to cry and wanting to find Sebastian and rip his head off. What was *wrong* with him that he would do this to another person?

'We gave him something for the pain and a mild sedative to help him sleep through the night,' the doctor explained, speaking mostly to Mrs. Anderson whose usually dark skin seemed drained of color.

'But his eye... Is he gonna...' Kurt's voice shook a little. Blaine had taken that slushie for *him*. If Blaine didn't get out of this without permanent damage...

'The left eye will be just fine. It may feel a little tender for a few days, but it should heal up just fine on its own,' the doctor explained in that calm, impersonal doctor voice. 'Now the right one is a bit more tricky. We're having our specialist come take a look at him in the morning, but for now, I wouldn't rule out surgery as a necessity.'

'Surgery?' Mrs. Anderson appeared shaken by this news. 'But he'll be okay? I mean, his eyesight...'

'Any surgery is risky of course, but this one has a pretty high success rate, and if we are successful it should fix the problem and allow the eye to heal. All in all we're hopeful that your son will get to walk away good as new. No permanent damage.'

*Hopeful. Pretty high. Should.* Kurt wasn't sure what to think of the doctor's word choices, and as the doctor finished talking about Blaine and moved on to discuss more practical matters with Mrs. Anderson, he fell into thought. Did those words mean there was still a chance this could turn out horrible, but they were trying to stay positive? Shouldn't a doctor sound more confident than "hopeful"? Or was he maybe not allowed to, just in case?

'Kurt?' Mrs Anderson jolted Kurt out of his thoughts, and he looked around to see that the doctor had left the room. 'You look exhausted.'

'It's fine, I can stay,' Kurt said, catching the hint. He stifled a yawn. 'My parents know where I am. I can stay.'

Mrs. Anderson smiled softly as she looked between Kurt and her son. 'There's nothing you can do for him now, anyway. Go on home and get some sleep. I'll stay with him.'

Kurt bit his lip as he looked over at Blaine's sleeping form. She was right of course, that there was no real point in staying while he slept, and it wasn't like this was anything life threatening, but Kurt's instinct was still to stay as close to Blaine as possible.

'I'll call you in the morning as soon as we get an update,' Mrs. Anderson went on when Kurt didn't respond.

'Okay,' Kurt breathed out, giving in. 'I'll just...say goodbye.' Kurt walked to Blaine's bedside and stood watching his sleeping boyfriend for a moment, before leaning over him and kissing his forehead. 'Don't worry,' he whispered. 'I won't let Sebastian get away with this.'

The next morning Kurt got a call from Blaine, who explained in dull tones that the specialist doctor had just been to examine him, and he now officially needed surgery because of a "deeply scratched cornea". Blaine was to be released from the hospital that morning with a prescription for painkillers and instructions to take it easy until they would be doing his surgery the following Wednesday.

'Are you okay?' Kurt asked carefully.

'Kurt, I just told you I'm having surgery,' Blaine replied evenly.

'No, I know. I just mean, you sound... I don't know.' Kurt couldn't quite find a word for the the vibe he was getting from Blaine, but he seemed different – as if a light had been turned off inside him.

'I'm just tired,' Blaine said. 'And the painkillers they gave me haven't kicked in yet.'

Kurt thought there might be more to it, but he was already late for school and didn't have time to argue, so he left it at that, saying goodbye and promising to come over as soon as he was finished with school.

Around midday Kurt got a text message from Mrs. Anderson, telling him that he was allowed to spend the night if he wanted, and that in fact she hoped he would. Kurt was confused by this offer until that afternoon when he arrived at the house, where he was greeted by a stressed-looking Mrs. Anderson, who told him that she was headed out for work but had left money on the kitchen counter for food. She led Kurt upstairs to Blaine's bedroom, knocking gently on the door before pushing it open. Blaine, sitting pajama-clad in bed, looked up from his laptop at their arrival, and Kurt noted that he was wearing a black eye-patch over his damaged eye.

'Blaine, sweetie,' Mrs. Anderson said, nudging Kurt inside while she stayed in the hall. 'Kurt is here. He's going to stay with you tonight.'

Blaine gave an irritated sigh and looked back at his laptop as he responded. 'I'm fine, Mom. I don't need a babysitter.'

Kurt's eyebrows shot up in surprise at Blaine's tone, and he looked at Mrs. Anderson in silent question.

'Don't worry, it's not you,' she told him. 'He's been like this for a few hours now.'

'Don't talk about me like I'm not here,' Blaine grumbled from the bed, still not looking at either of them. Mrs. Anderson watched her son for a moment, looking like she was about to say something but then she shook her head, seemingly thinking better of it.

'Right, I'll leave you to it then. Bye, sweetie,' she said, shooting Kurt an apologetic look before finally turning and leaving.

Kurt lingered uncertainly by the door for a few moments before he finally dropped his bag into the armchair and joined Blaine on the bed.

'Hey,' he said lightly, trying not to be concerned that Blaine hadn't met his eye since he arrived.

'Hey,' Blaine said, markedly less enthusiastic.

'You're wearing hair gel just to stay in bed all day? That's an interesting fashion statement,' Kurt teased and bumped his shoulder lightly against Blaine's, hoping to get a smile out of him.

Blaine simply shrugged in response.

'Are you mad at me, or something?' Kurt asked then.

'What? No.' He sighed. 'No... I'm sorry, I just...' He looked away again, playing with a loose sticker on his laptop. Kurt stopped Blaine's fidgeting with a hand over Blaine's.

'It's okay, I get it. I'm angry too,' Kurt said, feeling the rage bubble inside him again. 'God, I can't wait until Sebastian's expelled and goes back wherever he came from.'

'He won't be,' Blaine said, speaking to his computer screen, and Kurt stared. He might have expected the words but not that calm even tone Blaine uttered them in. 'I spoke to my mom, and we're not pursuing this.'

'What? No, hold on.' Kurt snapped the computer shut and pulled it from Blaine's hands, putting it aside on the chair and positioning himself on the bed to better be able to see Blaine. '*What? Why?*'

'We're just not,' Blaine said with a shrug, meeting Kurt's eye only briefly.

Kurt made a series of incoherent noises in his throat before he was able to form words. 'But Blaine, this is serious, you do realize that, right? He landed you in the hospital. That's not just expulsion material. That's- that's *police* material, Blaine, especially if he actually did spike that slushie. And you wanna just let him get away with it?'

'Kurt, just let it go,' Blaine said tiredly.

'No, I won't,' Kurt said defiantly, but not quite yelling. 'Don't forget that slushie was meant for me. What if the roles were reversed? Would you be telling me to just roll over and play dead?'

'That's... It doesn't matter. I'm the one he hit, so it's my decision to make,' Blaine said emphatically.

'But-'

'Kurt, please. Stop it. We're done discussing this,' Blaine said, and Kurt had never heard him sound quite so forceful. He opened his mouth to point out that strictly speaking they hadn't actually "discussed" anything, but before he could say anything Blaine had slid off the bed. 'I have to go pee. I'll be right back.'

Kurt watched disbelievingly as Blaine disappeared into the hall, and when he heard the bathroom door snap shut, he let himself fall back onto the bed. He lay staring up at the ceiling minute after minute as Blaine took an uncharacteristically long time in the bathroom, and he wondered what on earth was up with Blaine now. And hadn't they agreed on no more secrets? Sometimes it frustrated Kurt how often he had to drag truths out of his boyfriend; how little Blaine still – even if he *was* getting better at it – talked openly and willingly about things that bothered him. How was Kurt supposed to help then?

When Blaine finally returned, Kurt propped himself up on his elbows and looked seriously at Blaine as the latter approached the bed. 'There's something you're not telling me here,' Kurt said calmly but firmly. 'And I know you don't want to discuss it, but I really think we ought to-'

'Shh.' Blaine held a hand over Kurt's mouth to stop him talking, and when he spoke his voice was low and a little rough. 'Just stop talking.'

Blaine removed his hand and crawled up on the bed, and Kurt watched him confusedly as he positioned himself above Kurt, straddling his hips.

'Blaine, what're you-' Kurt began, but his words were once again cut off, this time by an insistent kiss.

'Shh, please, not now. Just kiss me.' Blaine was practically whining, and his continued kisses seemed desperate almost.

There was a part of Kurt that still thought they ought to talk more about Blaine's lack of talking, but well, kissing Blaine was nice (really nice), and the hands on his body were sure and hot. So, so hot. Kurt felt heat pool between his legs, and a soft whine escaped his throat when a hand brushed over his straining jeans.

'God, Kurt, you're so gorgeous.' Blaine placed a kiss at the edge of Kurt's mouth, one hand tangled in Kurt's hair while the other continued to palm him. 'Beautiful.' A kiss at Kurt's jaw. 'Stunning.' Another kiss further up, and one with each word as he went on. 'Amazing. Breathtaking. Hot.' Blaine's breath was warm against Kurt's neck, and he nibbled lightly at his ear.

'Please,' Kurt moaned, unaware of what he was asking for exactly except *more*, because god, this felt good.



'I really want to fuck you,' Blaine whispered into Kurt's ear, and Kurt shivered involuntarily. Blaine pulled back to look at Kurt properly. 'Can I?'

Kurt considered the situation for a short moment. These weren't exactly the circumstances he had imagined for their first time at this – following a stifled argument and with Blaine wearing an eye-patch and loaded on painkillers – but Kurt couldn't deny being extremely turned on right now. Maybe he ought to let go of some of that romanticism, he tended to cling to, and just let things happen.

'Yes, I want you to,' Kurt managed between shaking breaths. 'Just, do you, uh...have what we need?' Kurt blushed a little. This was new territory for them after all.

Blaine smiled fondly and placed a finger over Kurt's mouth. 'Shh, I have it all under control. Up,' he said, indicating that Kurt should sit up, and before Kurt knew it, they were both shirtless although Blaine kept his binder on as usual (how Kurt wished he would take it off more often), and Blaine was running his hands appreciatively across Kurt's naked torso. 'Gorgeous. Absolutely stunning.'

Blaine pushed Kurt onto his back, and they shared a messy kiss before Blaine moved quickly downwards until he was staring at the growing bulge in Kurt's pants. With a brief look at Kurt, he unbuckled the belt and deftly unzipped and pried off the pants.

'You've gotten better at that,' Kurt remarked with a grin, when he was fully naked a moment later.

'I've had practice,' Blaine responded, winking as he pulled off his own pajama pants. Through his briefs Kurt could see the outline of Blaine's cock (he had taken to calling it that because, well, it was a cock and it was Blaine's, and the technical words seemed too impersonal for the situation), and his head spun for a moment with the thought of where it would be soon.

The next moment Kurt gasped as he felt Blaine's warm mouth around his cock, and Blaine gave it his full attention, working Kurt over almost frantically, and stroking him into full hardness as though his life depended on it. It was incredible what Blaine had learned in a month and a half; how he knew exactly the right way to touch, the perfect amount of pressure, how to suck and where to lick for maximum effect. Although he knew it was Blaine's choice, it made Kurt feel bad about how little he still knew of how Blaine's body worked, when Blaine knew Kurt's so well. And he was about to get even more intimately acquainted with it.

It wasn't long before Kurt was breathing heavily and whimpering with each touch, and he was right near the edge, feeling his orgasm building second by second until-

'What, no. Blaine,' Kurt whined at the loss of Blaine's mouth, drawing out Blaine's name to three times its normal length.

Blaine simply smiled cheekily and swallowed Kurt's complaints with a kiss. 'All in good time, sweet. We're just getting started.' Blaine indicated the bottle of lube now suddenly in his hand, which Kurt hadn't even noticed him getting out with how far gone he was. Blaine moved back between Kurt's spread legs, pushing at them until Kurt caught his drift and bent his knees, his feet flat against the mattress. Blaine frowned for a moment before scrambling for a pillow and turning back to Kurt, touching a hand to his hip.

'Up,' he said, shoving the pillow under Kurt's hips when Kurt obeyed and crawling back to his earlier position. 'Nice view,' he remarked with a smirk and Kurt, even though he was sure his entire body was already flushed, felt his cheeks burn in a blush. They had never even done this first part before. Kurt had never been quite so on display before, and Blaine had never looked quite so full of desperate want. Kurt wondered briefly if they were moving too fast in covering so much new territory in one night, but then Blaine's lubed finger was circling his hole, and Kurt gasped at the sensation, forgetting his wondering for the moment.

'Ooh,' Kurt said in a high voice, when Blaine slid the first finger inside, the sensation so new and different from when he sometimes did it to himself. A second finger was added not long after, stretching him further, and Kurt moaned at the increased pressure. He looked down at Blaine who seemed to almost not be aware of Kurt, which was a strange thing to think of course, since it was *his* ass that Blaine was currently focused on, and Kurt wasn't exactly quiet anymore either. Blaine seemed to be in a world of his own, however, like he was concentrating so hard on something that everything around him disappeared. Kurt wanted to call out, remind Blaine that he had a face too, but then Blaine added a third finger and Kurt lost all chance of coherency for the moment.

'Look at you,' Blaine said as he finally looked up, and Kurt met his gaze through heavy-lidded eyes. 'So flushed and debauched just for me.'

Blaine pulled his fingers out, smirking at Kurt as he whined the loss, before sliding off the bed and slipping off his underwear. As Kurt watched Blaine, back turned as he fumbled with the final preparations, he couldn't help feeling like something was different about Blaine tonight compared to every other time they

had fooled around. Through his current fog of arousal, however, Kurt had a hard time pinpointing what exactly, and neither could he decide whether it scared him or turned him on.

'Ready, darling?' Blaine asked in a low voice when he was ready and positioned at Kurt's entrance.

'Kiss me first,' Kurt said, and Blaine obliged with a fond smile, leaning over Kurt, and Kurt gasped as Blaine's cock brushed against Kurt's own, lying hot and heavy against his stomach. The kiss was brief, and then Blaine was back in position, Kurt nodding his okay for Blaine to go ahead, and Blaine pushed forward.

It slipped.

It slipped again.

The third try was more successful as Blaine wrapped his hand around the base and guided it inside, and Kurt let out a soft moan. For a while, as Blaine pulled out and back in in careful movements, it seemed like it was going to work.

But then the device slipped again, and Blaine groaned in frustration.

'It's fine, honey,' Kurt said, reaching and caressing the skin on Blaine's abdomen. 'Just try again.'

Blaine did so wordlessly, but with the same result, and he let out a violent noise of frustration. He looked mortified, and he made to pull away entirely, but Kurt grabbed his wrist and held him in place.

'Hey hey, honey. Relax, okay? It's just me.' Blaine said nothing, just sat there with a dark look on his face. 'Do you want to try a different position?'

'It's not working, Kurt,' Blaine said, tension in his voice. 'I don't- I don't think it's meant for anal. It's too soft.'

'Oh.' Why hadn't Kurt thought to check that before he bought the thing? 'But maybe if we just try with-'

'It's not *working*, Kurt!' Blaine snapped, yanking his arm free of Kurt's grip.

'Hey, don't yell at me,' Kurt snapped back. 'I'm just trying to help.'

'Yeah, well. You're not,' Blaine muttered, and he groaned again as he slid off the bed.

'Blaine,' Kurt said in a quiet even voice, hoping the sound of his name would calm Blaine, but Blaine was already ripping off the harness that held the device and throwing both angrily across the room. 'Take it easy, honey. It doesn't matter. We can finish without it.'

Blaine, however, didn't seem to be listening and was instead yanking his underwear back on.

'Please,' Kurt begged, a little freaked out at Blaine's behavior. 'Just come back to bed. I don't care about that.'

'Well, I *do*!' Blaine yelled, his one unpatched eye wild and livid. Then he seemed to catch himself and shook his head a little before walking around the bed and picking up his pajama bottoms and putting them on.

'I know. I know, okay?' Kurt said in what he hoped was a calming tone. 'But it's not the end of the world. We'll find something that works.'

Blaine didn't respond for a long moment, but just stood half turned away from Kurt, buttoning up his pajama shirt.

'You should go,' he said finally.

Kurt's mouth fell open. 'Blaine. Seriously?'

'Just go.'

Kurt didn't move from his spot on the bed. 'You don't think you're being a little irrational right now?'

'Don't really care,' Blaine said almost coldly as he moved around the room, picking up the thrown items from the floor and stuffing them into his dresser. Kurt swung his legs over the edge of the bed, but didn't otherwise move to follow Blaine's command.

'I was supposed to stay with you tonight, remember?'

'Do I *look* like I need a babysitter?'

Kurt thought Blaine kind of did, but he resisted the urge to say so, doubting that it would help his cause.

'What is this really about?' he asked instead, watching as Blaine began picking up Kurt's clothes from the floor. Was he really this upset about a strap-on that didn't work? Blaine ignored him, however, and simply held out Kurt's clothes to him.

'Go,' he ordered. Kurt looked disbelievingly up at Blaine, but his boyfriend's face was hard and determined, and in the end Kurt accepted the clothes with a sigh, admitting defeat. Whatever was going on with Blaine, Kurt wasn't getting it out of him tonight.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *Part four*

#### *December*

*The punching bag turns out to be a wonderful relief for Blaine's frustrations. No matter how hard or long he punches at it, it stays in place, heavy and unyielding. At first Blaine is a little scared of the intense anger, that has apparently been building inside him, and the aggressive manner in which he's letting it out. However, Blaine knows in his heart that he would never hit another person, nor does he even want to take up boxing for real and box against a actual opponent. He likes the solitude of what he's doing now. The bag is inanimate. It doesn't sneer or talk back or poke fun.*

*'Hey, sweetheart! Put some effort into it now!'*

*Of course Blaine isn't always alone in the school gym when he's pounding away in the bag, and other students aren't as quiet as the bag, but Blaine pointedly ignores them.*

*'Anyone ever tell you you punch like a girl?' a big guy – from the football team, Blaine thinks – says when he comes over to the lockers and starts gathering his things for the shower. 'Oh, that's right. You are a girl.' He grins, and around him the other boys don't bother to hide their laughter either. 'My mistake.'*

*'What' - Blaine slams his locker shut – 'is your problem? Are you really that insecure about your own masculinity, or sexuality or whatever, that the gay transboy freshman makes you feel threatened?'*

*The boy takes a step closer to Blaine, while the other boys make a collective low 'ooh' sound. 'You talking back now?'*

*Blaine, too angry to feel the least bit intimidated, looks directly into the much taller boy's eyes when he responds. 'Yes. I am. I'm sick of your bullshit.' He turns to the rest of the boys. 'And that goes for you too. You're all pathetic.'*

*And with those words Blaine strides off towards the private shower that he has special permission to use, and he slams the door hard behind him.*

*'You are kidding me,' Blaine says with an incredulous laugh. It's the following day at lunch, his bullies are forgotten for the moment, and Blaine is much more concerned with the admission a sheepish looking Tyler just made. 'How have you not read Harry Potter?'*

*Tyler shrugs. 'I'm not a big reader, I guess?'*

*'No, I know, but... Harry Potter, Ty. You have to read it. Or at least watch the movies.'*

*'I saw the first one,' Tyler says, leading the way past a group of students towards his and Blaine's usual table. 'I was bored.'*

*Blaine makes an indignant face, but before he can utter his teasing threat to end the friendship, he trips over someone's foot and then he's flying forward. For some reason his hands refuse to let go of the food tray, which means that he has no free hands. At the loud clanging and banging as Blaine crashes face first onto the floor, everyone in the cafeteria hushes, and Blaine knows that everyone must be looking at him.*

*'Blaine!' Tyler is by his side immediately. 'Shit, are you okay?'*

*'I'm fine,' Blaine says, waving his friend's helping hands away and scrambling to get up by himself. His food is spilled all over the floor, and he hears scattered giggling all around him.*

*'You're bleeding,' Tyler says quietly, indicating Blaine's lip. Blaine raises his hand to confirm, and as he does so, he catches the eye of one of the guys from yesterday in the gym. A slight smirk is playing on his lips as he arches his eyebrows pointedly.*

*Blaine's jaw tightens and without another word to anyone, he turns on his heel and walks with long sure steps out of the cafeteria, ignoring the mess on the floor and Tyler's calls after him. He doesn't stop until he's standing in front of the door to the principal's office, to which he gives three determined knocks before the secretary can even register that he's there, let alone try to stop him.*

*When Blaine enters, the principal looks up from her desk, looking both surprised and concerned – and maybe a little annoyed – at the sudden interruption. She probably doesn't see this every day, Blaine muses – a student bursting into her office uninvited, wild-eyed and sporting a bleeding lip.*

*'M- Mr. Anderson. What...?'*

*'I'm being bullied,' Blaine says, deciding to cut to the chase. 'Did you know?'*

*'Well, I-' The woman seems unsure what to say, and this confirms to Blaine that yes, she did know. However, it only takes her a moment to compose herself, and then she gestures to the chair across from her. 'Why don't you sit down?'*

*'What did she say?'*

*Tyler is there waiting for Blaine when he leaves the principal's office some time later.*

*'Don't you have class?' Blaine mutters, moving past his friend and starting down the hall.*

*'Screw class,' Tyler says emphatically, catching up with Blaine. 'What happened? Is she gonna do something?'*

*'No,' Blaine says simply. 'Now leave me alone. I have a class to get to.'*

*'Oh, no, you don't,' Tyler says, stopping Blaine in his tracks with a hand around his upper arm. 'You have an appointment with the school nurse, is what you have.'*

*Blaine rolls his eyes, suppressing a slight smile. 'You can't make appointments for the school nurse, Ty.'*

*'Well, I made one for you anyway. Because I'm that awesome. Now, come on.'*

*Blaine snorts, but lets Tyler turn him around and lead him towards the nurse's office. Once there, the nurse tuts and gives him a stern look, but there's fondness behind it, Blaine knows.*

*'Young man, have you been fighting?'*

*Blaine can't help but grin a little sheepishly. In a sea of cold and indifferent faculty members, Nurse Johnson is one of the few who seem to genuinely care about his well-being.*



*'I have, but not like you're thinking,' Blaine says as he follows the nurse's directions to sit.*

*'Oh?' she calls over her shoulder from her station, where she's collecting supplies. She smiles at him when she returns. 'Consider my curiosity piqued.'*

*'He went to the principal,' Tyler says from his spot a few feet away, leaned against the wall. 'You know, to complain.'*

*Nurse Johnson looks expectantly between the two boys. 'And?'*

*'And nothing.' Blaine sighs. 'She basically told me it's my own fault for being different. You know, how she's "sympathetic", but she can't exactly "make people like" me.'*

*'Hm.' Nurse Johnson purses her lips, and Blaine can tell that she has to refrain from insulting the principal – who is after all her boss. "'Like" is one thing. "Basic respect" is another.' She shakes her head and lets the thought hang there as she sets to work on Blaine's bleeding lip, and when she finishes, she advises him to stay and rest for a while, though Blaine knows that she's really just helping him delay the moment when he has to return to class.*

*'Ty?' Blaine says after a few minutes of silence. 'Why are you friends with me? I mean, you do have other friends.'*

*Tyler hops up on the bed to sit beside Blaine. 'Well, someone's gotta sit with you at lunch. Otherwise it's just sad.' He's joking, but they both know it's kind of true too. 'I'm just the unlucky bastard who drew the short straw.'*

*Blaine forces a short laugh. 'No, but really. People wouldn't pick on you half as much if you weren't seen around me all the time.'*

*'Are you kidding me? I'm the gay, black football player,' Tyler deadpans. 'That joke never gets old.'*

*Blaine frowns, replying quietly, 'I missed the punchline.'*

*'You and me both, man.'*

*Tyler shakes his head slightly as he hops back down, and Blaine follows. He can't stay in here forever, no matter how tempting the idea is. As they leave, they wave goodbye to Nurse Johnson, who looks up from her phone call and sends them both an encouraging smile.*

*'I don't know, Blaine,' Tyler says once they're out in the empty hallway. 'Maybe I look up to you a bit.'*

*Blaine stops short, and turns to look at his friend. 'You look up to me?' The idea that the strong, seventeen-year-old, out-and-proud football player looks up to him seems kind of ridiculous.*

*'Yeah.' Tyler shrugs. He looks thoughtful for a moment, evidently searching for words to explain. 'I remember back in February when we met in PFLAG. How scared and awkward you were, and here you stand now. You've come such a long way. I mean, it's obvious how much more comfortable you are. And even with the crap people give you all the time, you're still so...optimistic about life.' Blaine raises an eyebrow, but before he can say anything, Tyler continues. 'Yeah, okay, so today happened. But I think this is genuinely the first time I've seen you look sad or angry for more than, like, a minute at a time. Most of the time you don't let these assholes get to you. I admire that. I know what it's like to be picked on, and it's never been as bad as what you get, but I admit I've had some...dark moments. So yeah. I look up to you.' Tyler considers Blaine for a moment before his expression turns amused. He raises a hand, first to the top of his own head, then to Blaine's. 'Metaphorically of course.'*

*Blaine can't help his smile. Whether Tyler knows it or not, he just gave Blaine the pep talk he needed to bounce back from this latest defeat. He notices suddenly that they have ended up in front of the school notice board, and his eyes fall upon a particular flyer right above to Tyler's head.*

*'Sadie Hawkins,' Blaine says.*

*'Bless you.'*

*Blaine snorts and shoves at Tyler. 'No, you idiot. That,' he says, pointing at the board, and Tyler turns to look, taking a moment to read the notice for the Sadie Hawkins dance in February.*

*'Oh, that. The dance where the girls ask the boys,' he says, sounding bored and unimpressed. 'It's a lovely sentiment, but it kinda leaves us gays out, don't you think?'*

*'We should go anyway,' Blaine says brightly.*

*'Because...?' Tyler sounds simultaneously amused and exasperated.*

*'Because screw the people who say we can't,' Blaine says in what he hopes is a rousing voice. He's not giving up with these people, and he will not roll over and play dead.*

*Tyler chuckles. "'Screw' them? That's, like, hardcore swearing coming from you. You must be serious about this.'*

*Blaine snorts and rolls his eyes. 'Oh, haha. So will you go with me? As friends?' Blaine prods his friend. 'Come on, it'll be fun.'*

*'I doubt it,' Tyler says skeptically. 'But fine. I'll go. To prove you wrong, if nothing else.'*

*'Don't count on it. It'll be great, you'll see.' Blaine grins. 'Just think of all the people we'll get to piss off by going.'*

The first time Blaine's phone rang, it was Kurt calling half an hour after he had left, and Blaine declined the call with only a brief moment's hesitation.

The second time it was his dad calling from the road to check up on him. Blaine answered the questions about his well-being as briefly as he could, and he did his best to sound excited when his dad told him that he had been short-listed for the promotion he wanted, but he made no effort at all to prolong the conversation and was relieved when it ended after only a couple of minutes.

The third and fourth call were both from Kurt and came within a few minutes of each other, the fourth followed by a text message plea for Blaine to pick up his phone. Blaine's stomach twisted guiltily as he continued to ignore his boyfriend.

The fifth call was from Blaine's mother, and the conversation went along a similar vein as the one with his dad, except he and his mother seemed equally eager for the conversation to end. Something about an important dinner she was supposed to attend.

The sixth call came just after Blaine had called for dinner and was – predictably – from Kurt. Blaine stared at the image of Kurt and himself on the screen, biting his lip and wondering if he should pick it up. Or, well, he *should*, he knew that. You weren't supposed to ignore your boyfriend's phone calls, were you? Especially not when you had basically thrown him out of your house hours beforehand. What would Blaine tell him though? He didn't have the words to explain. That was kind of what had gotten him here in the first place.

The seventh call came while Blaine was finishing washing up after dinner. As he heard his phone buzz behind him on the kitchen counter, he assumed that it was Kurt once more, and he was just considering turning off his phone for the night, when he turned around and saw that it wasn't Kurt this time.

'Hey, Squirt.'

'Hey, Coop,' Blaine greeted his brother with a soft sigh as he sank down into a kitchen chair.

'What, no complaint about the nickname?' Cooper asked, sounding half teasing and half like he really wondered.

'What?' Blaine said distractedly. 'Oh, I just... Never mind. What did you want?'

'Dad called. Said you're not okay,' Cooper said casually.

'Yeah, apparently slushies are much more dangerous than anyone thought,' Blaine quipped, keeping his tone light.

'Yes, and about that – this Sebastian kid, where's he staying?'

'Well, he's boarding at Dalton, but I think he's got an uncle in the area. His parents are in Illinois...' Blaine trailed off, frowning. 'Why?'

'Oh, just, you know, so I know which address to type into the GPS when I make the trip to go kill him for-'

'Cooper, no,' Blaine cut his brother off. 'Do not do or say anything to him. We're not making a thing of this.'

'I know, I know. Dad told me. Jeez, Blaine, take it easy. I see what Dad was talking about.'

'What?'

'You're not okay,' Cooper said, sounding serious now. 'And I'm not just talking about your eye.'

'I'm fine, Cooper,' Blaine said tensely. He just wanted to be left alone.

'You don't sound it,' Cooper insisted.

'I know, I just have a bit of a headache,' Blaine said as he stood up, hoping this slight admission would make his brother back off. 'I think I'll go get some painkillers and go to bed early, so if that was all, we should-'

'*Blaine Devon Anderson*, do not lie to me,' Cooper said in a stern voice, and Blaine froze, unsure how to respond. 'Sorry, I just always wanted to try that,' Cooper admitted with a grin, and Blaine snorted despite himself. 'Hey, was that a smile, I just heard?'

'No, Coop,' Blaine said seriously. 'That was a laugh. You can't hear smiles.'

'Mm,' was Cooper's only response, but Blaine leaned against the kitchen table, giving a deep sigh and internally cursing (or blessing?) his brother's ability to know how to make Blaine's walls crumble.

'I just feel...powerless. I just- With everything that's happening, and I can't... Kurt asked and I couldn't explain it. Or wouldn't, I don't know...' Blaine trailed off, unsure if was making sense at all, but if Cooper found the explanation lacking, he didn't say.

'I'm sorry,' was what he did say, much to Blaine's confusion. 'I can't help feeling like this is my fault because of the things I said to Sebastian at New Year's.'

'Coop, you can't think like that.'

'Why not? I clearly upset him. Is it so farfetched to think that this was his response?'

'Yes,' Blaine replied wearily, though who knew? Maybe it was, maybe it wasn't, but Sebastian and his band of Warblers were still the ones at fault here. 'Sebastian's an idiot.'

'Still, if I'm in any way responsible for-'

'Then what?' Blaine said, not quite snapping, but feeling inexplicably annoyed with his brother's sudden display of useless guilt. He just wanted this conversation to be over, so he could go upstairs and swallow another round of painkillers (he hadn't actually been lying about that headache), put on a bad rom-com and forget about everything.

'Just, if there's anything I can do...'

'If you really want to help you can get me a dick that works,' Blaine muttered before he could stop himself.

'Excuse me?'

'Oh god, I so did not mean to say that,' Blaine flustered, feeling his face redden in mortification. 'Look, I'm just gonna go, and we can-'

'No no no, wait,' Cooper said quickly. 'What was that about a-'

'This really isn't appropriate for us to be talking about.'

'Relax, it's not like we're discussing technique.' Blaine winced at the idea. 'So you need a toy?'

Blaine cringed, but replied nonetheless, knowing how persistent Cooper could be. 'I- Well, yeah. The one we've got – turns out it wasn't meant for... guys.'

'I see,' Cooper said, and Blaine was grateful that he wasn't asking for further clarification. 'So how much do you need?'

'Cooper, have you lost your mind? You are not buying me a- a- That's just... weird and inappropriate.'

'Do you have any way of getting it for yourself?' Cooper asked, still not sounding remotely embarrassed.

'Not really,' Blaine admitted. Even if he had had the credit card he needed to shop online, he didn't have the money.

'Well, there you go,' Cooper said as though it was that simple. 'Go find the one you want, send me the link and I'll buy it for you.'

'Coop,' Blaine sputtered. 'I'm not- I can't *send* you-'

'Oh, relax. I wasn't going to inspect and scrutinize your choice. But fine. Then call me when you're ready and I'll give you my credit card info. Deal?'

'I- Yeah, fine. Thanks. Can I go now?' Blaine now felt oddly like adding a shower to his plans for the night. Cooper simply chuckled at him.

'Yes, shoo. Go look at dildos.' Blaine groaned, and Cooper laughed again. 'Oh, and Blaine? Just be glad it wasn't Dad you accidentally spilled your guts to.'

Blaine made a face. 'And if I wake up in cold sweat from a nightmare tonight, I know who to thank.'

'You're welcome,' Cooper said, teasing grin evident even through the phone. 'Just adding some perspective.'

'I hate you,' Blaine said before hanging up, trusting Cooper to know that he meant the opposite.

Half an hour later Blaine's phone rang for the eighth and final time that night, alerting Blaine to a fifth call from one Kurt Hummel.

This time Blaine didn't hesitate before picking up.

Kurt was too busy the next day, but on Friday after school he finally made it over again. Blaine was a little anxious, but Kurt's face lit up in a careful smile when he saw Blaine, and warmth spread in Blaine's chest.

'Hey,' he breathed out.

'Hey, sexy pirate,' Kurt said affectionately as he stepped inside, proceeding to hug Blaine closely while Blaine melted into the touch, feeling calmer than he had for days.

'I'm sorry,' he said when they pulled apart, and Kurt began to shed his shoes and jacket. 'I shouldn't have reacted like that. You did nothing wrong, and it was- it was unfair to you.'

'Yes. It was. I'm glad you realize that,' Kurt said in a gentle but firm voice. As he turned back around, he suddenly looked a lot more serious than he had a moment ago, and Blaine shrank back a little. 'I know it's hard, but Blaine, you can't keep doing this.'

'Do what?' Blaine's voice was almost a whisper.

'Shut me out and then snap at me when I don't get what you're going through.'

Blaine bit his lip. 'I'm sorry.'

'I don't want you to be sorry. I want you to change it.' Kurt stepped closer to Blaine, and Blaine forced himself not to recoil when he took Blaine's hand in his, stroking gently. 'I'm doing my best here, but I can't help you if you don't tell me what's going on.' Kurt let a few seconds of silence pass before he added in a lighter voice, 'For the record that was my not so subtle way of asking what prompted that reaction. In fact that whole day was kind of weird.'

Blaine sighed and pulled away from Kurt to sit down at the bottom of the staircase. 'I know, and I'm sorry. I was just so angry and frustrated with everything. You know...' Blaine gave a tired sigh as he gestured at his eye. 'My head keeps throbbing, and the hospital was kind of awful, and just I feel so... And with no way to let it all out... You know, I can't go to the auditorium and sing, and I can't go to the gym and box... I guess- I guess, I just kind of freaked.'

Blaine looked up at Kurt for confirmation that he understood and accepted this explanation – an explanation that was truthful, yes, but left out some things that Blaine preferred not to get into. When he mostly just wanted to forget and deny and move on, the mere thought of trying to make sense of and put everything into words was exhausting. Besides, did Kurt really need to know *every* little thing that went on in Blaine's head? The important part, Blaine told himself, was that he apologized and that they moved on from this.



'He seems to be in a better mood,' Kurt said to Mrs. Anderson on Monday afternoon, when he met her in the hallway on his way to grab some snacks from the kitchen. He had been in the house for all of ten minutes, and he had already noticed Blaine seeming a lot less tense than he had been since returning from the hospital on Wednesday.

'He seems mildly drunk, you mean,' Mrs. Anderson replied.

'Well, yeah,' Kurt said, unsure if he was supposed to be amused or not.

'His painkillers weren't working as well as they should, so they've given him different ones now.' Mrs. Anderson paused and allowed herself a small smile. 'Apparently these ones come with a bonus.'

Kurt smiled politely and began to walk away but turned back around after a few steps. 'Mrs. Anderson? Can I ask, Blaine says you won't be pressing charges against Sebastian Smythe, or even attempt to get him expelled.' She gave a small nod in confirmation. 'But why? Blaine hasn't said.'

'Then I really don't think it's appropriate for me to say either,' she said, not unkindly, though her face remained impassive. They stood silent for a moment before Mrs. Anderson made to walk away.

'I just don't want to worry,' Kurt said, the words tumbling out.

'Then don't,' she said gently. 'Look, it's hard for him sometimes. And I suppose sometimes it's easier to just not talk about the things you can't change anyway.'

Kurt frowned. 'I don't understand. What does Sebastian have to do with...'

'You should ask Blaine.'

Kurt wanted to protest that he *had* asked Blaine – several times – and that it was rather like talking to a brick wall, but there was a note of finality in her voice, so instead he just nodded and turned to walk downstairs.

In the kitchen Kurt, knowing his way around well by now, quickly gathered what snacks and drinks they needed, but just as he was about to go back upstairs his phone buzzed with a call from Rachel, who informed him that she and Finn were on their way.

'We'll be there in about fif-' she said, but cut herself off. 'Finn! You missed the turning.'

Kurt heard Finn mumble something – probably an apology – somewhere in the background behind Rachel's exasperated sighs. 'Are you doing okay, Rachel?'

'I'm fine. It's not like he crashed the car.'

'No, I just mean' – Kurt lowered his voice as though he was about to say a dirty word – 'with NYADA and everything.'

'Kurt, I'm fine,' Rachel insisted. 'Let's just concentrate on Blaine right now.'

'Okay,' Kurt acquiesced, feeling simultaneously happy and sad as he hung up and made his way upstairs. It had only been hours since Kurt had received his NYADA letter, inviting him to audition in the spring, and he had been so, so happy for about ten minutes until Rachel's breakdown had forced him to subdue his happiness somewhat. He was still *happy* of course, and he didn't blame his friend for being upset, but it felt rather bittersweet. Everything sort of did at the moment, Kurt mused, screwing on a smile as he stepped into Blaine's room.

'Thank youuuu,' Blaine said happily as Kurt set down the snack tray on the bed. It was only then that Kurt noticed the stack of open Get Well cards in Blaine's lap.

'Have you been reading these *again*?' Kurt asked, rolling his eyes fondly as Blaine grinned sheepishly.

'I can't help it! It's so sweet.'

Blaine wore a look of such happy incredulity, very similar to the one he had worn when Kurt had first told him about their friends' reaction to his hospitalization. How angry everyone was. How Artie had even yelled in Mr. Schue's face. How everyone – headed by Santana of all people – wanted to get revenge on Sebastian and the Warblers. It had been rather like watching a herd of animals band together to protect one of their own. Kurt smiled to himself. And Blaine thought he wasn't part of the group.

Kurt just wished that this happiness wasn't marred by everything that was going on. It was hard to really *enjoy* this inclusion, when Blaine was hurt and terrified of his upcoming surgery and just generally in a bit of a bad state, even if he tried to put on a brave face. And said brave face was kind of part of the problem too, Kurt thought.

'How are you feeling, anyway?' Kurt asked when he had settled into the armchair by Blaine's bed.

'Good, good,' Blaine said around a mouthful of cookies. 'I love you.'

Kurt chuckled. 'Well, that's a bit random. But I love you, too.' Blaine looked pleased with this response. 'Enjoying your new painkillers, honey?' Kurt asked, suppressing a smile, and adding when Blaine looked at him in question, 'Your mom told me. We agreed they're making you act slightly drunk.'

'Sorry?' Blaine grinned self-consciously.

'It's fine.' Kurt waved hand. 'As long as you don't try to make out with Rachel when she and Finn come over.'

Blaine groaned and faceplanted into a pillow. 'God, I'm never gonna live that one down, am I?'

'Nope,' Kurt said, his smile wide and teasing, prompting Blaine to throw a pillow at him.

Of course Kurt wasn't seriously worried that his boyfriend would start to make out with Kurt's best friend in front of Kurt and said best friend's boyfriend, but even so, he was grateful to realize that the pills were not making Blaine his usual kind of affectionate drunk. Rather Blaine seemed oddly sentimental.

Blaine was not exactly a cold person on a normal day, but today he kept sending odd, misty-eyed glances towards the Get Well cards on his night table, and he seemed unusually affected by the gossip pieces that Kurt read aloud to him, coming close to bursting into joyful tears at the news of yet another famous person's pregnancy. Kurt found it all rather adorable.

Unfortunately when Rachel and Finn had arrived, Blaine's sentimentality also caused him to want to raise a toast to Kurt's NYADA success, completely oblivious to the fact that it might not be the most sensitive thing to do with Rachel in the room. Thankfully both Rachel and Finn seemed to realize that he meant no harm and let it slide much like they would the outspokenness of a young child.

And then *Ben* happened. Rachel had suggested the serenade the previous week when Kurt had told her how glum Blaine had seemed since the slushie incident, insisting that it might cheer him up. Kurt had been the one to come up with the right song, and together they had convinced Finn to join them. However, the discussion and brief rehearsal had all happened before these new painkillers had miraculously lifted Blaine's spirits, and now as it was happening, Kurt rather feared that it was all too much for Blaine.

All through it, Kurt kept glancing over at Blaine on the bed, noticing how he got more and more affected by it, biting his lip to keep the emotion back and squeezing Kurt's hand multiple times throughout. When it was over Rachel crawled up on the bed and hugged Blaine tightly, but then that seemed to be the end of it. The rest of the afternoon went by with talking and laughing and *Pirates of the Caribbean* playing in the background, Blaine perhaps "aww'ing" more than usual at the romantic bits, but seeming perfectly fine. Rachel and Finn left around six thirty, and after Kurt had seen them out, he poked his head back into Blaine's room.

'What do you want for dinner?' he asked brightly. 'Your mom says you get to- Blaine? What's wrong?'

Kurt stepped fully into the room towards Blaine, who was sitting on his bed, hugging his knees against his chest and staring vacantly into space. He wore an odd look that Kurt didn't quite know how to describe (melancholic? Contemplative? And yet a tiny smile was playing on his lips), and he didn't seem to have heard Kurt at all.

'I lost them,' Blaine said finally, clearly speaking more to himself than Kurt.

'Who?' Kurt asked softly as he sat down on the edge of the bed. 'What are you talking about?'

'The Warblers.' Blaine looked over at Kurt, but he seemed to be looking through him almost, and he still wore that unfathomable expression. 'I've been so focused on Sebastian that it didn't really hit me until now that... I lost them.'

Kurt didn't say anything, recognizing that Blaine didn't need him to right now. Instead he merely rested his hand on Blaine's foot, letting him know that he was here and listening.

'They were my friends, you know? Dalton was the first place where I was liked for me, and I think I held on to that for a long time...' Blaine trailed off, and his face hardened before he continued. 'But last week I was on the ground, literally screaming in pain, and they just...walked away. I mean, who does that? And not one peep from any of them since then. Not even Trent. No phone call, no text, no anything, to check that I was okay.'

Blaine fell into silent thought, and Kurt watched the hurt and disappointment on Blaine's face with an ache in his chest. He took Blaine's hand in his, squeezing it gently. The gesture seemed to re-alert Blaine to Kurt's presence, and his expression softened as he looked at him.

'But then there's New Directions.' He gave a small smile. 'You know, I didn't fit in, not really. Not for a long time. And I really thought I'd blown it forever with Michael, but then here you all are with' – Blaine gestured toward his night table – 'Get Well cards and...and plotting revenge on my behalf. And I mean...' Blaine laughed a little as though he didn't quite believe his own words. 'Chicken soup? And- and serenading?' Blaine shook his head, as if trying to make sense of it. 'I didn't expect that.'

'So basically,' Kurt said lightly. 'You lost the Warblers, but you gained the New Directions.'

'Yeah,' Blaine breathed out as their eyes met, and Kurt smiled softly, sympathizing with the conflicting emotions Blaine must be juggling. Kurt crawled up on the bed, leaning against the headboard and tugging Blaine with him into a cuddle.

'I may be biased, but I don't think that's a bad tradeoff at all,' Kurt said playfully, though knowing that it was a bit more complicated than that. Blaine's body shook slightly in Kurt's arms as he let out a short laugh, which he followed with a quiet noise of assent. Kurt made to steal a kiss, but before he could do so, his phone buzzed, and he reluctantly broke the hug to grab his phone.

'It's from Santana,' he murmured, opening the text message. *Plan worked*, it read. *Rock salt, Kurt. ROCK SALT. -S.*

'What is it?' Blaine asked, looking over at Kurt who was staring at his phone, his expression dark. 'Kurt, what's wrong?'

Kurt handed the phone to Blaine wordlessly, who glanced at the screen for a second before his mouth fell open in surprise. 'Rock salt? In- in the slushie?'

Kurt nodded.

'Wow, that's... I don't know. Just, wow...' Blaine mumbled incoherently. For some reason part of him had held on to the belief that it had been a normal slushie, because he didn't want to believe that Sebastian would sink that low – that the Warblers would.

'You know this changes things,' Kurt said seriously. 'We have to report this.'

Blaine's eyes widened and he drew himself further away from Kurt. 'No.'

'Blaine, come on. This is clearly more than some prank gone wrong. He *planned* this,' Kurt said, getting worked up.

Blaine's only response was to withdraw off the bed entirely, wishing they weren't having this discussion yet again, but they were, and pretty soon Kurt's voice was rising to a yell, ranting at Blaine about his unhealthy relationship with Sebastian and not being honest with Kurt. Blaine tried to tune it out and stand his ground, but he hated when Kurt yelled at him, and to make matters worse, his headache was returning.

'Kurt, please,' Blaine groaned, sitting down in his armchair and massaging his temples. 'Please, just let it go.'

But Kurt refused. 'No! I wanna know why you keep protecting him.'

'I'm not!' Blaine said, looking up at Kurt standing in the middle of the room and his voice rising too now. 'I'm not protecting Sebastian, I'm protecting *me*!'

'And what's that supposed to mean?' Kurt asked skeptically.

'That I can't risk being outed!' Blaine yelled finally. Blaine met Kurt's blank stare for a moment, before he gave a deep sigh and leaned back in the chair, closing his eyes. He heard the bed creak as Kurt sat down close to him.

'What?' Kurt asked quietly. 'I don't understand. How does pressing charges against Sebastian risk you being outed?'

Blaine opened his eyes to find Kurt watching him from the bed, a confused but concerned look on his face. He worried his lip for a moment before giving a sigh of resignation. He stood up and walked over to his desk, where he picked up his wallet, opening it and finding what he was looking for.

'Here,' he said, handing it to Kurt.

'Your driver's license?' Kurt glanced from Blaine to the driver's license in his hand, scanning the text on it several times, before looking back up at Blaine, frowning. 'I'm not following.'

Blaine took a deep breath, steeling himself. 'This is the only thing I have that says I'm male. Every official record still says I'm female.'

'Oh.'

'Yeah, "oh,"' Blaine said irritably. 'So what happens when I get involved with something like this? Even if by some miracle it doesn't come up on its own, or if we stuck to simply trying to get Sebastian expelled, his dad is a *state's attorney*. I can't be sure what kind of information he has access to. And if Sebastian finds out about me, I'm not exactly trusting him to keep it quiet. So yeah,' Blaine finished. 'This is about protecting myself.'

'Well, why didn't you just tell me that?'

'Because it's embarrassing!' Blaine was yelling and he stood up again, feeling far too wound up to be sitting calmly. 'And the fact that I can't do anything, that Sebastian can do *this*' – Blaine gestured angrily at his hurt eye – 'to me, and there's absolutely nothing I can do about it... It's humiliating and it makes me so *angry*, and I just don't want to think about it any more than I have to.'

'You still should have told me,' Kurt said quietly. 'I'm supposed to be that person that you can talk about that stuff to. The stuff that bothers you.'

'And I'm supposed to be your boyfriend. Not your girlfriend,' Blaine said, unable to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

'Hey, do you think I care about that? That's there's some birth certificate somewhere that says you're female? It's not like I don't know you're trans,' Kurt said gently, and Blaine gave a small nod, recognizing the earnestness in Kurt's eyes. 'So what, you haven't got your gender marker changed yet. You're still transitioning. I understand that.'

Blaine's heart sank at these words, and he averted his eyes, responding with a mumble, 'Not "yet" - "ever."'

'What?'

'I can't get my gender marker changed ever.'

'No, but after surgery...' Blaine shook his head, and Kurt just looked confused. 'Wait, no. I read about this. You can get it changed if you've had gender reassignment surgery, so once you've had top surgery-'

'No. I mean, yes, in most states that is more or less how it works, but Ohio happens to be one of three states that don't allow people to ever change their gender marker. And,' Blaine continued, cutting Kurt off before he could get a word out. 'before you say "New York" - no. I was born in Ohio, it's the laws here that matter, and unless they change them, I will never be officially male. Ever.'

Silence filled the room for a few seconds in which Kurt seemed to be digesting Blaine's words. 'Except for your driver's license,' he said finally.

'Yes. Except for that,' Blaine said, oddly relieved to have let everything out, but he still stood a little tensely, arms crossed awkwardly in front of his chest.

'Come here?' Kurt said after a moment. He offered his hand to Blaine who took it reluctantly, sitting down next to Kurt on the bed.

'It's okay if you need time to-' Blaine began, but his words were cut off by a finger on his lips, and Kurt shushed him gently, squeezing Blaine's hand in his.

'I want you to know that I don't care, okay? None of that is important to me.' Kurt smiled suddenly. 'And hey, look on the bright side. This means that we can get married in any state.'

Blaine jerked his hand away from Kurt's, and he was on his feet again in a second.

'This isn't funny, Kurt.'

'I know, I'm sorry, I shouldn't-'

'You think that's what I want? To sign the marriage certificate as the bride? To be your *wife*?'

'I'm sorry, I shouldn't have joked. But Blaine, honey, please calm down.' Kurt's voice was small and almost frightened, and when their eyes met, his were wide and sad, but still tender and *Kurt*. It occurred to Blaine then, that Kurt appeared more freaked out at Blaine's behavior than anything Blaine had told him in the



past five minutes. And really, what was wrong with Blaine that he so took his frustrations out on the one person who had been nothing but amazing? He sat back down on the bed, sighing heavily as he did so. Kurt stayed quiet as he scooted closer to Blaine, taking Blaine's right hand in his left, and Blaine leaned his head on Kurt's shoulder.

'It really doesn't matter to you?' he asked after a while, once he was calm and his heart-rate was back to normal.

'No,' Kurt said, and though he was listening for it, Blaine could trace no doubt or hesitation in Kurt's voice. 'So what if official records say female and the marriage certificate says "Bride and groom"? We know it's not who you are. And it's not who we are. And it wouldn't be the first time the government was wrong about something, would it?' Kurt shifted on the bed, so he could look Blaine in the eye as he finished. 'As long as it's your name next to mine, I don't care.'

'Then...I'll try not to either.'

'Good boy,' Kurt said, smiling affectionately.

Blaine let out a short breathy laugh and shook his head a little. 'I'm sorry, I know it's silly, and they're just titles. And I should've just told you.'

'Yes,' Kurt said gently. 'You should.'

'The point still stands though,' Blaine went on. 'About Sebastian. I'm not risking it.'

'Okay. No expelling and no police,' Kurt said, nodding in agreement, and he looked thoughtful for a moment before adding. 'I might have a different idea though.'

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

*Huggin' and a kissin', dancin' and a lovin' (Now it's much too late for me)*

'Blaine, honey?' Kurt called as he knocked on the door, the interruption making Blaine jump. 'Everything okay in there?'

'Yeah, yeah, I'm fine,' Blaine called back, hoping Kurt couldn't hear the slight waver in his voice. 'I'll just be a minute.'

'Okay then.' As Blaine heard Kurt trudge back down the hall towards the bedroom, he glanced back into the bathroom mirror and gave his nearly naked form one last sigh-accompanied look.

Kurt had come over after school and told Blaine all about the afternoon's events, grinning widely as he described the look on Sebastian's face when Santana had played the tape of him admitting to spiking the slushie with rock salt. Blaine had been so happy and relieved for this mess to all be over (well, except for the surgery on Thursday, which he tried not to think about too much), so he had kissed Kurt in celebration. One thing had led to another until they agreed to try out Blaine's (well, Cooper's technically, but Blaine preferred not to think about it that way) new purchase, and Blaine had tumbled to the bathroom to get ready.

Now that he was here, however, Blaine mostly felt silly.

But unless he wanted to call it off, there was of course nothing else for it, so he left the bathroom and walked down the hall, stopping outside the door to his bedroom and steeling himself before pushing the door open. Kurt was sitting naked on the bed, still half hard from their previous fooling around, and his eyes grew almost comically large when they fell on Blaine.

'I know. I look ridiculous,' Blaine said miserably, feeling himself flush in embarrassment.

'No, you look hot,' Kurt replied instantly, and the way the words seemed to surprise even himself convinced Blaine that it was not a lie to make Blaine feel better, but an honest gut reaction.

Blaine blinked as he stood in the still open doorway, blushing at the idea that Kurt found him attractive like this.

'Come here,' Kurt said, as he beckoned Blaine closer, still staring between his legs. Blaine obliged and moved to the edge of the bed where Kurt was kneeling, trying to decide if he was more turned on or uncomfortable with the way Kurt was now touching the cock almost curiously. 'It's bigger.'

'Yeah,' Blaine breathed out, unsure if Kurt meant it as anything more than a statement of a fact. This one wasn't doubling as a packer, so Blaine had not been concerned with being able to fit it into his pants when he bought it. He didn't think he had chosen one that was unusually big, but he did wonder now if Kurt was intimidated by its size relative to the peacock.

However, Kurt was biting his lips, looking anything but intimidated, before he actually licked his lips and let out a soft moan. The next moment he looked suddenly sheepish, and Blaine guessed that Kurt hadn't realized he was doing it. The thought went straight to Blaine's actual cock, which gave a sudden throb of excitement, and the next moment Blaine was pushing Kurt backwards onto the mattress, grinning when Kurt gave a surprised yelp.

Making out on the bed in these new circumstances was a challenge at first, and they took a while to find angles that weren't uncomfortable for either of them, but once it worked, it was perfect. Blaine had always loved kissing Kurt, and their adventures beyond that had been amazing, but there was something special about being with Kurt this way. The way their cocks would brush against each other and Kurt would moan into a kiss. Or the way occasionally the back of Blaine's cock would press against his own natural one *just right* and send a spark of pleasure through his body.

When Blaine slipped the first lubed finger inside, he kept his eyes on Kurt's face, wanting to see every reaction. In his mind, Blaine knew this was the second time they were doing this, but the first was all a blur. It had been rushed and so, so wrong, and not just because it ended up not working. This felt like the first time. The first time Blaine had seen that exact shade of pleasure on Kurt's face. The first time he had felt Kurt clenching around his fingers. The first time he had heard him moan quite that desperately. The first time Kurt had looked at him that longingly.

All of this, however, was nothing compared to the moment when Blaine first pushed into Kurt. The little gasping noise Kurt made, and the way the the back of the big cock pressed against Blaine's own smaller one, sending a wave of pleasure through him. Blaine watched Kurt for any signs of discomfort, knowing his subtle "stop" and "go" faces well by now, but every inch of Kurt's face screamed "more, more, more", so Blaine pressed slowly forward until he bottomed out, and his hips were flush against Kurt's ass.

Blaine leaned forward and captured Kurt's lips in a tender kiss, the motion of which changed the angle, causing Kurt to moan into it. Blaine began to thrust carefully in and out then, and for one glorious moment Blaine felt so completely *male*. It was silly and stereotypical – it wasn't like Kurt was less male in this position – but for one shining moment he felt it. Complete.

The next moment it all came crashing down.

As Blaine looked down himself, he saw a binder-covered chest and a dildo which, while fairly realistic-looking, was obviously fastened with a harness. It was all fake. The thing that was moving in and out of Kurt wasn't actually Blaine, and Blaine couldn't actually feel Kurt around him. He couldn't do this for real. It was all pretend. He should have been able to do this without help, because dammit, he was male, and *heshould*.

'Are you alright? Blaine?' Blaine stopped moving and looked up at the sound of his own name. 'Are you still with me?'

'I'm sorry, I was just thinking. It feels so weird...' Blaine gestured awkwardly towards his crotch. 'I can't actually, you know, *feel* it.'

Kurt blinked, clearly not quite prepared for this problem.

'Then focus on me,' he said after a moment. 'My voice. My reactions.'

It was such a simple thing to change – to focus on what he was making Kurt feel, rather than what he himself was supposed to feel but couldn't – but it didn't take many seconds of trying it to realize that it worked, and soon Blaine was fucking Kurt in earnest, making him moan and whimper and make the most beautiful pleased faces, and it was *glorious*. Eventually Kurt reached for his own cock, but Blaine brushed his hand away before he could even touch it.

'Please, please, please,' Kurt panted. 'I'm gonna- I need to-'

'I know, baby,' Blaine said, swallowing Kurt's words with a kiss. 'But let me.'

Blaine reached for Kurt's cock and gave it a few firm strokes, grinning when Kurt arched and moaned. This at least was familiar, and he was good at it, though it was a challenge to do it and keep fucking Kurt at the same time. However, Kurt was so near the edge that it didn't take much skill to bring him over, and it was

barely half a dozen thrusts and strokes before Kurt was coming all over Blaine's hand and his own stomach.

Blaine pulled out then, collapsing on the bed next to Kurt, who was breathing heavily, still in a bit of a post-orgasm haze. With Kurt being done, Blaine was suddenly all too aware of how aroused he, himself, still was. In a few seconds he had pulled off the harness, so he would have easier access, and he began to touch himself, letting out a soft moan.

Next to him Kurt took a few moments to realize what was going on, but when he did, he propped himself up on his elbows, and Blaine felt him staring. He tried not to feel self-conscious – he really, really needed to get off – but he had never done this with an audience, and it was hard not to.

'Sorry. I'm sorry. I just need-' he began but Kurt cut him off.

'Don't apologize. It's hot.' Blaine blinked in confusion and looked over at Kurt. 'Can I touch?'

'Yes,' Blaine said, surprising himself by only hesitating for the briefest of seconds.

Kurt scrambled in between Blaine's legs, and Blaine watched him mutely except for his labored breathing.

'I'm gonna...' Kurt trailed off, pointing at his mouth, and Blaine just nodded dumbly for a moment, before remembering his voice.

'Yes, please. Yes,' Blaine panted, and this seemed to encourage Kurt, who grinned nervously and positioned himself flat on his stomach between Blaine's spread legs.

It was tentative and unsure at first, Kurt clearly not familiar with Blaine's unique anatomy. Blaine, for his part, felt weird and ashamed that this was what he had to offer Kurt, but eventually he began to realize that Kurt wasn't not enjoying himself, and the further they got, the more sure of himself Kurt seemed to get, letting Blaine's noises guide him forward and reassure him that he was doing fine. Before long Kurt was humming happily around Blaine's cock, telling him how good he tasted and declaring that he was getting hard again just from this.

Blaine gave into it then, letting himself feel *everything*. The exact slide of Kurt's tongue. The varying pressure of his sucking. The way his humming created wonderful vibrations, that echoed through Blaine's entire body. The hands holding his legs open and the fingers stroking softly at the inside of his thighs.

Blaine felt his orgasm building second by second as he watched Kurt work, feeling dizzy with the thought that this was happening, but in a *good* way, and everything was so *much*. Kurt looked up at him, their eyes meeting for a brief second. It was a look filled with lust and love such as Blaine had never seen, and that was it. Blaine was gone, coming with a long moan as Kurt stroked him through it.

'That was amazing,' Kurt said with a smile as he settled in next to Blaine, who chuckled.

'You'd think I was the one who just sucked you off for the first time.' Blaine scooted closer to Kurt and rested his head on Kurt's chest, sighing happily when an arm wrapped around him. 'But yes, it really was.'

'We should get up,' Kurt remarked after a few quiet moments. 'Get cleaned up. I have homework to finish. And doesn't your dad come home tonight?'

'Mm, no. Not yet,' Blaine murmured into Kurt's chest. 'This is perfect. I just wanna lie here a little longer.'

'Okay, I guess we can do five minutes.'

'Ten.'

Kurt laughed and kissed the top of Blaine's head. 'Fine. Ten minutes.'

'Yay,' Blaine said sleepily, his eyes drifting closed. He felt like he could lie here forever if it was asked of him, but he would take what he could get.

'By the way, before I forget,' Kurt said after a while – it could have been two or ten minutes, Blaine wasn't sure. 'You should call Trent. He says he's been calling you. He thinks you hate him.' Kurt squeezed a little with the arm that was wrapped around Blaine, possibly to check that he wasn't sleeping, and Blaine stirred a little. 'You don't, do you?'

'I- no, but the Warblers kind of screwed me over here. You as well.'

'Then go to him as a friend,' Kurt urged.

'Yeah, because "my friends screwed me over" sounds so much better,' Blaine mumbled.

'That's not what I-'

'Can't we just let this go? It's not my school anymore,' Blaine said, and he meant it. Dalton wasn't his school anymore. It was as if some sort of veil had been removed, and though it could be put back on, Blaine couldn't unsee what it had revealed.

'Look, I'll be the first one to agree that you shouldn't be putting them on a pedestal. Despite what they and Dalton did for you, they're only human. But Blaine, they're not monsters either, and I wouldn't want you to let Sebastian's actions stop you from reaching out to your friends, especially one who means as much to you as Trent. Who, by the way, looked pretty devastated when I spoke to him.'

Blaine sighed. Kurt was probably right. As usual. 'Fine. I'll talk to him. On one condition.'

'What?' Kurt asked warily, but Blaine simply grinned and nuzzled into Kurt's shoulder, breathing in the scent of him.

'Five more minutes?'

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It had been less than a day since that Santana girl had played the tape in front of everyone, and already Sebastian was feeling the repercussions. He didn't yet know the full extent of them – whether he would lose his captaincy and his solos, or even if he would be kicked off the team – but he had seen the looks on his teammates' faces, when they realized what he had done.

No one liked Sebastian anymore. No, that wasn't it. Sebastian didn't care about "like." He had lost their *respect*, possibly forever. As he thought about it, Sebastian shoved angrily at the door he was passing through on his way to the senior commons. It was a heavy oak door, so it didn't really do much, but it felt good to let out some frustration.

It wasn't as if Sebastian cared *personally* what people thought of him, but it was pretty damn hard to work with, let alone lead, a team who didn't respect him. And Sebastian needed to stay on the Warblers, preferably as captain, in order to better his chances at getting in to the right college. His dad would kill him if he failed in this regard. Not to mention the competitions meant seeing his dad, and a chance to make him proud.

As Sebastian entered the hallway that led to the senior commons, he shook his head free of those thoughts, deciding to focus his mind on the task at hand. He was early for practice, which wasn't usually Sebastian's

thing, but today he didn't want to risk his teammates gathering before him and having a chance to formally and collectively turn on him. If he was the first one there, he might get to talk to a couple of them on their own and convince them that it wasn't as bad as it sounded.

As Sebastian approached, however, he noticed that the door stood ajar, and he heard voices drifting into the hall. Apparently he wouldn't be the first one there after all.

'Please know that none of us knew that Sebastian tampered with the slushie. You have to believe that.'

Sebastian frowned at the sound of Trent's voice. It sounded like he was talking to-

'But you still thought a slushie would be a good idea?' Blaine said. 'And who came up with that anyway? I've never told Sebastian about that particular McKinley tradition.'

'Well, it was Jeff's idea,' Trent said, adding quickly, 'But he meant it as a joke! Sebastian was the one who suggested we actually do it.'

'And you all went with it,' Blaine said darkly. '*Knowing* that it's a weapon of bullying over there, and how horrible it feels.'

Out in the hall Sebastian became aware that he was just standing there, and he wondered briefly if he should walk away or simply walk in and announce his presence, but the next moment Trent was speaking again, distracting him.

'Sebastian can be very persuasive.'

Sebastian didn't make a habit of listening at doors. He found it strangely dishonorable. The last time he had done it had been back home in Illinois outside his parents' bedroom. They had been talking about him, trying to decide what to do with him. As if he were some kind of unwanted pet. Sebastian shook his head, washing the memory away. Anyway, Trent and Blaine were talking about him too now. Didn't that almost give him the right to listen in?

Blaine laughed contemptuously in response to Trent's statement, and it was a sound Sebastian had never heard from him before.



'He can!' Trent insisted. 'He kept going on about Warbler spirit and never getting any further than Regionals and didn't we want to win?' Trent sighed. 'I don't know, Blaine. I can't justify it, but somehow he made it all make sense, and he had an answer for everything, and then he was just so *nice*.'

'Sebastian is not nice,' Blaine said evenly. 'He has never been nice.'

'I know, but he...' Trent trailed off, before finishing in a small voice. 'He was.'

'Wait, wait, hold on,' Blaine said, his tone suddenly half serious, half amused. 'Do you like him?'

'What? Who?'

'Don't play dumb. Sebastian. Do you *like* him?'

'Wh-what? No, of course not. That- that's silly,' Trent stammered out, and out in the hall Sebastian grinned quietly, suppressing a snort. 'He's... I mean, okay, maybe I thought I did. He can be really charming, you know. And he was so understanding about my roommate, who is as insufferable as ever, and he helped me with my French – Sebastian, I mean – and, I don't know, he just seemed so nice, and I thought maybe he liked me too, which doesn't really happen a lot. He was just playing me, so I'd be more willing to go along with his insane plan, I realize that now, but...'

As Trent trailed off, Sebastian became aware that he had lost his smile sometime during Trent's speech. It was hard to enjoy his amusement when the guy sounded so miserable about it. Sebastian hadn't really counted on that.

'I'm really sorry, Blaine,' Trent said, and there was a slight pause before he spoke again. 'What are you laughing at? It's not funny!'

'I know, I'm sorry,' Blaine said, and Sebastian could hear him strangling a laugh. 'And I'm sorry he did that to you. I really am. You just reminded me... Remember the day we became friends?'

'Of course I do.'

'I didn't know what to make of you at first,' Blaine began.

'And I was kind of in awe of you,' Trent added.

'And then a couple of days in, you accidentally said something insensitive-'

'I'm sorry for that, by the way.'

'-and you were immediately horrified with yourself and you spent the next ten minutes apologizing over and over again.'

'And you just laughed and told me not to worry,' Trent said, nostalgic fondness in his voice.

'And we've been best friends since then,' Blaine finished. Sebastian found himself strangely moved by the story.

'And are we still?' Trent asked, sounding cautiously hopeful.

'I think we are, yes,' Blaine said to Sebastian's relief, though he couldn't quite explain why he should care.

The next moment Sebastian flinched back from the door when he heard footsteps coming down the hall where he stood. He didn't much fancy being caught eavesdropping, and quickly busied himself with pretending to be looking for something in his bag.

'Afternoon, Mr. Smythe,' the teacher greeted him, when she passed and Sebastian nodded politely in response. He waited until the teacher had rounded the corner, and he glanced around quickly to make sure that no one else was approaching before stepping back to the door.

'...sure you don't want to stay and say hi to the others?' Trent was saying, the meeting evidently drawing to a close. 'It would mean a lot to them, I'm sure.'

'Look, I forgave you because you're my best friend, but the rest of them...' Blaine trailed off, and Sebastian didn't miss the slight bitterness in his voice. 'They know where to find me if they have something to say, and you can tell them I'm not holding a grudge, but I have no interest in being all buddy-buddy with them either. What's done is done.'

'Okay, I guess that's your choice,' Trent said quietly and not without sadness. 'But just know that you always have a home here.'

'My home is at McKinley now,' Blaine said, and without a face to read, Sebastian couldn't quite tell if he was happy or sad about this. 'I have to go now, but take care of yourself, Trent. And be careful with this, alright? Don't give it to someone who doesn't deserve it.'

Sebastian took a moment to figure out what Blaine was talking about, and then another to realize that the "someone" meant him, and why did that suddenly hurt so much? Sebastian wasn't even *interested* in Trent. Or any relationship for that matter. The past five or ten minutes hadn't taught him anything he didn't already know. He had no reason to be upset.

Sebastian was so lost in thought that he almost forgot to move away from the door as Blaine was about to leave. Only at the last few seconds did he manage to shake himself out of his trance and scramble a few steps back, so it looked like he was just approaching when Blaine came into the hallway.

Blaine stopped dead at the sight of Sebastian, his face impassive and unreadable. Sebastian stared dumbly at him, fixating on the eye-patch that covered Blaine's right eye. Did Sebastian really do that to him? He opened his mouth to say something ("Hi"? "I'm sorry"? ) but Blaine stopped him with a sharp motion of his hand.

'Do not talk to me,' he gritted out before starting down the hall, leaving Sebastian to stare after him, wondering what had just happened and why he suddenly felt like crap.

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Sebastian called Blaine that night, and for the first time in the three months Sebastian had known him, Blaine didn't pick up or call back straight away. Sebastian wasn't so easily discouraged, however, telling himself that if Blaine had been willing to talk to Trent, he would do the same for Sebastian and let him explain. He would just have to be persistent.

So he called Blaine again before going to bed, and he kept trying periodically throughout the next day. In the morning before breakfast. Before his first class. Between classes. During lunch. After school. After Warbler practice. But always his calls were either blocked or went to voice-mail. Finally late in the afternoon Sebastian received a text message from Blaine.

*Please stop calling. I'm tired and cranky and I just had surgery. And I have nothing to say to you.*

Sebastian bit his lip as he read these words, before reasoning that he would just have to try a different tactic. He wasn't sure why this should matter so much to him all of a sudden – these things never had before; people could like him or not, what did he care? - except maybe he didn't quite recognize himself in the way Blaine and Trent had spoken about him yesterday, and now he wanted to set the record straight. Or maybe he just no longer *wanted* to recognize himself in it.

The next day was a Friday and lessons ended early as a courtesy to students wanting to go home for the weekend. Sebastian who never went home on the weekends – though he did sometimes go his uncle's – took advantage of his free afternoon to drive up to Lima, where he rang the bell twice at Blaine's house before concluding that no one was home. He was probably still at the hospital, Sebastian realized. Not content to let the trip be a waste, however, he went back to his car and waited, hoping that it wouldn't be long, but determined to stick it out regardless.

A little over an hour later a car pulled into the driveway, and sure enough, there was Blaine and his dad (or so Sebastian assumed) getting out. Sebastian exited his own car, taking a short moment to steel himself before hurrying across the street and down the pathway to the front door.

'Blaine,' he called, reaching them when they were just about to walk up the front steps, Mr. Anderson supporting his son with an arm around his waist as though Blaine wasn't quite steady on his feet. Anesthesia aftermath, Sebastian guessed. Or an over-protective dad.

'Sebastian,' Blaine said as he turned around. He was wearing an expression similar to the one he had worn on Wednesday.

'Sebastian?' Mr. Anderson said before Sebastian could say anything. 'Is this the kid that did this to you?' Blaine's silence seemed to confirm the man's suspicions, and his face hardened as he looked at Sebastian. 'Get out.'

'Please, sir, I'm just here to talk.' Sebastian took a small step back and threw his hands in the air. 'Look, no slushies,' he said, trying for humor, but mentally kicking himself for it a moment later.

Mr. Anderson made a considering noise, but looked unimpressed. 'I'll be right inside,' he said, looking between both boys, his words as much a warning to Sebastian as they were a reassurance to Blaine.

'What do you want?' Blaine demanded the moment his dad had gone inside. He braced himself with one hand on the railing, but otherwise he seemed quite alert.

'Just, I'm sorry, okay? I never meant for this.' Sebastian made a vague gesture at Blaine's face.

'You put rock salt in a slushie, Sebastian,' Blaine said evenly. 'What else were you trying to accomplish?'

'I wasn't aiming for you!' Sebastian protested. 'I was going for Kurt.'

'Right. Because that makes it *so* much better,' Blaine snarled.

'No, I just mean...I wasn't going for anyone's eyes. I was going for his clothes,' Sebastian explained, getting a blank stare in return. 'I read that rock salt is supposed to ruin clothes, and I thought it would be funny since he cares so much about his.'

If Sebastian had thought that this explanation might help he was sorely mistaken. Blaine didn't even dignify his words with a response but the disgusted look Blaine sent him spoke for itself.

'Please just let me make it up to you,' Sebastian tried next.

Blaine gave him a withering look, and Sebastian did his best not to wince under it. 'And how would you do that?'

'My family has money. I- We can cover your medical costs.'

'We have insurance,' Blaine replied in a bored voice before turning and walking up the steps.

'But-'

'Go away, Sebastian,' Blaine said tiredly, slamming the door shut behind him a moment later.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

### *Part two*

'I mean, it's crazy, right?' Kurt said for the millionth time, pacing the floor. 'Getting *married*. At *eighteen*.'

Blaine made a non-committal noise of assent from the bed where he was sprawled on his stomach, a book open in front of him.

'Come on, back me up here, Blaine.'

'I did,' Blaine replied calmly. 'Three hours ago when we went over this for the first time.' Blaine looked up at Kurt and smiled. He couldn't find it in himself to be annoyed with Kurt's ranting – especially as he had subjected Kurt to much worse. 'But it's not our job to tell our friends how to live their lives. And it's kind of romantic, isn't it?'

'I guess,' Kurt flopped down on the bed next to Blaine who scooted to make room for him. Kurt rolled over on his back, staring up at the ceiling for a moment before sighing and continuing, 'But that's not a reason to get married. And Finn's my brother. I'm supposed to look out for him.'

'They love each other. Isn't that a reason?' Kurt moved to lie on his side, propping himself up on his elbow and giving Blaine a skeptical look. 'I mean, I can't say that I don't get it. What it feels like to love someone so much you can't imagine not spending the rest of your life with them.'

Kurt smiled fondly for a moment, before he suddenly looked mildly panicked. 'Wait, that's not you leading up to a proposal of your own, is it?'

'No,' Blaine said with a laugh. 'But thank you for meeting the idea with shock and horror.'

'No, that's not what I meant, silly,' Kurt said with a roll of his eyes and a playful shove at Blaine. 'I want to some day. But it's just, it's too early, isn't it?'

'Yeah, agreed,' Blaine said, abandoning his attempt at studying. He rolled over in his side, mirroring Kurt's position and letting his free hand rest on Kurt's hip for a minute before it (of its own accord, Blaine could have sworn) began tugging at his shirt, craving skin contact. Blaine smiled wickedly. 'Good thing we're not bothered about premarital sex.'

Kurt grinned for half a second until he realized what Blaine was up to. Then he gently pried Blaine's hand away.

'You're supposed to study, remember?'

'Plenty of time for that. I still have, like, a week until I'm allowed to go back to school.'

'Yeah, which is another week of stuff you have to catch up on,' Kurt countered, turning away from Blaine's kiss and causing Blaine to let out a small whine. 'And your dad is home.'

'Forget my dad. My dad is clueless. We'll just be *really* quiet,' Blaine said with a grin, before he leaned in to try the kiss again, smiling when he met Kurt's soft and pliant lips.

'One day,' Kurt murmured into the kiss. 'One day I'll learn to say no to you.'

---

The next day was Monday, and it marked the beginning of the third to last week before Regionals, which meant extra glee practice and mandatory Booty Camp for all. Kurt had already delivered Blaine his part ('I'm rapping?' Blaine had uttered in a horrified voice, but choosing to drop his complaints when Kurt pointed out that at least Blaine had lines – and that was despite having missed two weeks of school.) and he was itching to join the others for rehearsal.

Kurt's busy schedule meant no afternoon visit, but he did at least make it over in time for dinner, which Blaine realized five minutes before Kurt arrived would be the first to feature both of Blaine's parents as well as Kurt. Kurt seemed to be aware of this too as he stepped into the dining room, eyeing the neatly set table for four warily.

'Don't worry. It looks more formal than it is,' Blaine said reassuringly, kissing Kurt on the cheek. 'You'll do fine.'

And, true to Blaine's prediction, Kurt did do fine. Granted, he seemed a little nervous and awkward at first (which Blaine found absolutely adorable) but overcame that as soon as he realized that the questions directed at him were friendly in nature and not part of some interrogation to figure out whether or not he measured up. And, well, he was Kurt, and Blaine's parents were his parents, so of course they liked Kurt, even if they didn't understand everything he was talking about.

Everything went smoothly until the very end of dinner. Blaine's mother disappeared into the kitchen, having received an important phone call, and Blaine took that as his cue to excuse himself and Kurt upstairs.

'Sure,' Blaine's dad said as he stood up and began clearing the table. 'Just leave the door open, alright?'

'Dad?' Blaine asked uncertainly, freezing in his tracks. This was a new request.

'You're supposed to study,' his dad said simply. 'And Kurt is too, I'm sure.'

'Yeah, that's what we were-' Blaine began, feeling like he was missing something.

'I'm not as clueless as you think, son. Nor are you two as quiet as you think.'

Blaine took a few seconds to process what his dad has said, and then – *Oh*. Blaine felt a mortified blush creep into his cheeks, and he chanced a glance left at Kurt who seemed to be trying to pretend that this had nothing to do with him, but failing spectacularly as he stared at the floor, his face growing redder by the second.

Blaine opened and closed his mouth soundlessly a few times, but coherency was difficult when all he could think was *My dad overheard me having sex*. He almost wished that his dad was angry and shouting, because at least then he could be all indignant and defend himself, but his dad simply continued clearing the table, a slight smile betraying his amusement.

'Right,' Blaine finally managed. 'I'm just gonna go...die now.'

---

'Well, Kurt's vowed to not show his face here for at least a decade,' Blaine said the next evening as he and his dad were having dinner. The whole day had been spent avoiding his dad, and Blaine had only just recovered from the embarrassment enough that he could look him in the eye again. 'I hope you're happy with yourself.'

Blaine's dad chuckled. 'Poor boy. I'm afraid I've scarred him for life.'



'I'm pretty sure that when the time comes, he's gonna insist we not invite you to the wedding for fear that you tell some really embarrassing story,' Blaine said seriously.

His dad froze in the middle of cutting up his chicken and looked up at Blaine. 'Really?'

'No, Dad. Not really.' Blaine rolled his eyes. 'But did you really have to say that in front of him?'

'I'm sorry!' his dad exclaimed somewhat sheepishly. 'There didn't seem to be a better moment.'

'I think *any* moment would have been better,' Blaine countered, allowing himself a small laugh despite how embarrassed he still felt.

'Would a you rather I'd burst in on you on Sunday?'

'Ew, Dad.' Blaine held up a hand as though to block out the image his dad was putting in his head.

His dad smirked. 'Just saying. It could've been worse.'

Blaine made a small noise of assent (preferring not to think too much about the different ways in which his dad could have embarrassed him) and returned his attention to his dinner.

'So uhm...' he said a little while later as they were clearing the table, finding one thought still nagging at him. 'You don't seem upset. I mean, that we're...' He cleared his throat awkwardly, but his dad seemed to understand. Blaine had expected a lecture. Maybe something about being "inappropriate".

'I'm not gonna lie,' his dad began, his voice having lost its humorous edge. 'That was my first instinct, but your mom convinced me that there's nothing to worry about as long as you're both safe and comfortable. We trust you. And Kurt's a good kid as far as we can tell.'

'Wow,' Blaine said, pausing in the middle of packing away the leftovers. 'That's very...modern of you.' Blaine wasn't so sure that most parents thought this way. He was almost certain that Kurt's dad didn't.

'*But*,' his dad went on, pointing at Blaine with the dishwashing brush, and Blaine could tell that he was getting to the point of his comments the day before. 'don't forget the doctor's orders, and don't jeopardize you health just because you're in love. You're supposed to be taking it easy while you heal up.'

Blaine was tempted to point out that it wasn't as though he had broken a leg, and all this "taking it easy" was probably just a precaution – and even then it wasn't like lying on his back and letting Kurt blow him really required a lot of physical exertion. Of course there was no point in arguing with the doctor's orders, so Blaine just nodded his head.

'And don't forget you have other responsibilities besides Kurt.'

'I'm *taking* care of my studies, I swear,' Blaine said somewhat indignantly. He might have let things slide a little lately, but he wasn't hopelessly behind. 'I just did a whole bunch today.'

'Okay, good.' His dad nodded approvingly. 'But what about your family? Not counting your surgery, I've barely seen you since I've been home.' He gave a slight, crooked smile. 'Or is this the part where you tell me that you're nearly eighteen and too cool to hang out with your dad, hm?'

'No,' Blaine said, rolling his eyes and smiling fondly at his dad. At the same moment his phone buzzed in his pocket, and he pulled it out as he responded, 'Fine, I'll make sure to pop outside my room every now and then.'

'Good. I was thinking maybe we could-' He cut himself off, looking questioningly at Blaine who had just read the text message. 'Something wrong? You look like you need to pee.'

'It's just, Kurt and I sort of have a Skype date, like, now.' Blaine couldn't help a guilty wince, given what they had literally just talked about, but his dad simply laughed exasperatedly.

'I should have known. Fine.' He waved the dishwashing brush, spraying water in Blaine's direction, and Blaine fled the kitchen with a grin. 'Go. Shoo. I'll take care of the dishes.' Blaine was already climbing the stairs in the hall, when he heard his dad call after him. 'Hey, leave the door open, alright?'

'Dad!' Blaine groaned, and he could hear a short laugh coming from the kitchen.

'Kidding.'

---

As it turned out the following week saw Kurt making good on his promise to not show his face at the Anderson house, though he claimed it was because of glee practice and homework. Blaine suspected that

if he really wanted to, Kurt could at least make it over for dinner for a night or two (he still had to eat, right?), but he didn't push the issue, knowing that if the roles had been reversed, and it had been Burt who overheard them, Blaine probably would have wanted to move to Australia for a week or two. Or twenty.

It wasn't like Blaine didn't have things to do either. Now that he was feeling better both mentally and physically, he did have a lot of homework to catch up on, and he did actually want to spend time with his dad too. They had a lot of catching up to do.

One afternoon Blaine walked downstairs to find his dad watching football in the living room, and on a whim he decided to join him.

'We can watch something else if you like,' his dad said after a moment.

'It's fine,' Blaine replied, not taking his eyes off the screen. 'I wanna watch it.'

Out of the corner of his eye, Blaine caught his dad frowning a little, but he didn't comment on it all throughout the game, though he did keep sending bemused looks at Blaine as he reacted to it. When the game ended, Blaine's dad muted the TV, and they sat in silence for a while until suddenly Blaine had an idea.

He crouched in front of the TV, taking a few moments to find what he was looking for, and when he turned back around, he was holding up one of Cooper's old video games.

'You up for it?' Blaine asked, grinning widely, adding when his dad hesitated, 'Or are you afraid to lose to the one-eyed guy?'

'I- No, sure,' his dad said, adding a moment later as Blaine was slotting the game in. 'I'm confused though.'

'About what?'

'Just, the football, the video games... Isn't this the kind of thing you yelled at me about? You know, "boy" stuff. I thought you hated it.'

'Oh,' Blaine said as he straightened up, the video game loading behind him on the muted TV. He hadn't even really thought about that. 'Yeah, I guess. Maybe I do like some stuff? I can't really explain it, but it feels different now.' Blaine sat down on the couch next to his dad, handing him the extra controller and

falling into thought. 'I think before, when I was younger, I kind of hated everything you made me do, just on principle, because I felt like I had to like it? But, like, having talked about it, and knowing that's not how you meant it, I feel more free to like it. Does that make sense at all?'

Blaine turned his head to look at his dad, who wore a bemused smile. He made a motion as though to ruffle Blaine's hair, but then he seemed to realize that the gel prevented that, and he ended up sort of patting affectionately at the nape of Blaine's neck.

'You are one confusing kid, you know that?'

Blaine grinned. 'Thank you. I do try.'

---

On the morning of the fourteenth Blaine had what was hopefully going to be his last appointment at the hospital. He didn't much like coming here. He didn't like that on the night when he had been brought in, he had been made to remove his binder, making him feel raw and naked. He didn't like that nurses and doctors had seen him like that. He didn't like the curious, searching looks he had received when they realized that he wasn't biologically male.

The surgeon who Blaine was coming to see today had been seemed nice enough during the brief interaction Blaine had had with him, but Blaine thought that might have been because of his mother's no-nonsense attitude. His dad was accompanying today, and while Blaine loved him, he was not nearly as intimidating or good at putting his foot down. So Blaine couldn't help feeling a tiny bit uncomfortable, when he was called into the examining room, leaving his dad outside.

'Mr. Anderson, we meet again,' the doctor, who was a forty-something-year-old sharp-looking man, greeted Blaine warmly. Blaine decided this was a good start and smiled shyly in response.

There was another doctor in the room, however – a young intern – and Blaine became increasingly uncomfortable with the way she kept staring intently at him. Especially because he was well aware what she was doing. She was looking for a "tell" - searching for the girl behind the mask.

'Yes, thank you, Pearson,' Blaine's doctor said when this had gone on for a full minute, interrupting his speech about the healing process of Blaine's eye. 'I won't be needing your services after all.'

'But you-'

'Thank you,' he repeated sharply, cutting her off. 'You're dismissed.'

The woman opened her mouth to protest, but seemed to think better of it, choosing instead to follow the order, and a moment later, the door slammed shut behind her.

'So let's get this thing off you,' the doctor went on, continuing as though nothing had happened, and *that* more than anything made Blaine want to hug him.

A short while later Blaine's eye had passed every test, and Blaine hopped down from the examining table, finally able to see in 3D again.

'There we go. Good as new,' the doctor announced, winking at Blaine. 'And just in time for Valentine's too.'

Blaine smiled. Yep, just in time.

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It had not been easy convincing Kurt that Blaine would have to skip Sugar's Valentine's party. Blaine had plenty of practice with concealing himself both pre- and post-transition, but when it came to things other than that, he didn't consider himself a particularly good liar. Kurt's badly hidden disappointment at the news had not made things easier, and in fact Blaine had nearly cracked and ruined the whole thing, because his heart hurt to hear Kurt that way.

However, he managed it somehow, and come Tuesday night, as Sugar announced his entrance and Blaine launched into his performance, he had to admit that the look on Kurt's face was so, so worth it. It wasn't ecstatic joy or anything like that, but a small smile spread on Kurt's face and a look of utter peace came over him. As though he finally felt at home again. Perhaps Blaine was over-reading it or really just projecting his own feelings onto Kurt, but that was how he chose to interpret it,

The moment the last notes of *Love Shack* had faded, Kurt flung his arms around Blaine's neck.

'God, I missed you,' he murmured into Blaine's ear as he hugged him tightly. After a second though, he pulled back and punched Blaine hard in the shoulder. 'You stupid, evil liar, Blaine Anderson. Do you realize how miserable I've been?'

However, Kurt was pouting far too dramatically for Blaine to be worried that he was truly upset, and Blaine replied in a mock-serious tone, 'I'm sorry, I can go again?'

'Oh, come here, you,' Kurt said as he let go of his angry facade and pulled Blaine forward by his jacket so forcefully that Blaine's hat fell off, capturing Blaine's lips in a hungry kiss. Blaine grinned into it at first, but the kiss soon grew more passionate as it seemed to dawn on both of them just how much they had missed this part of their relationship in the past week.

'Hey, hey, get a room, you two!' someone – Puck maybe – yelled, while a few people catcalled, making Blaine and Kurt realize that there was a world around them and prompting them to break the kiss.

Blaine felt his cheeks grow hot as he realized – and Kurt seemed to, too – that they were still standing in the middle of the crowded floor, surrounded by their friends and classmates. And that they had just shared a not-so-innocent kiss in front of them.

'Oops,' Kurt said sheepishly, and they both grinned self-consciously as they trailed off to the side of the restaurant, where they tucked themselves into an abandoned booth.

'I missed you too, by the way,' Blaine said as he drew an arm Kurt, inviting him to sit closer. 'I've been counting down the days since Wednesday.'

'Mm, tell me about it,' Kurt murmured, leaning into Blaine and resting his head on his shoulder. 'I'm just glad you're back and well. I feel like I've lived the last three weeks on the edge of my seat, so worried that the surgery would go wrong or it wouldn't do anything.'

'I'm fine. I'm always fine.' Blaine kissed the top of Kurt's head, finding his need to be close to Kurt taking precedence over their rules about PDA. And Kurt didn't seem to mind. 'And if I weren't... It's just an eye, right?'

Kurt hummed in agreement, but before either of them could say anything else, Rachel was suddenly by their table, an excited gleam in her eyes, and they both jumped a little at the interruption.

'Kurt! Kurt, you- Hi Blaine! Kurt, you gotta come sing with me.'

'I don't know, Rachel...' Kurt glanced at Blaine. 'We're kind of...'

'Come on,' Rachel urged. 'We'll dedicate it to our boyfriends. I have the perfect song.' Rachel stuck out her bottom lip in a pout. 'Please?'

For a moment Kurt looked seriously tempted, but then he glanced back at Blaine and shook his head. 'Blaine and I haven't seen each other in a week. I think we'd rather just-'

'Kurt, it's fine,' Blaine assured him. 'Go. I'll be here after.'

'Perfect!' Rachel beamed. Before anyone could get another word out, she had hauled Kurt out of the booth, and Blaine watched with an amused smile, as she dragged him towards the stage.

A minute later they started singing, and yes, Rachel was a great singer and she took up more than fifty percent of the song, but Blaine couldn't keep his eyes off Kurt. His mouth and the way it moved when he was singing. The way his eyes were alight with excitement because he was doing something he loved. The way his body swayed gracefully in time to the music. How was it possible that this was the guy, who Blaine got to call his boyfriend? Who he got to love and who loved him back?

As he watched, Blaine was overcome with a desire such as he wasn't sure he had felt before. Neither was he sure if he wished the song would go on forever so he could keep watching, or if he wanted to interrupt it right then and throw himself into Kurt's arms, and when the song eventually ended of its own accord and Kurt returned to the table, Blaine told him as much.

'I want you so bad,' Blaine whispered into Kurt's ear, as he held him in a tight embrace. When Kurt drew back, he watched Blaine's mouth hungrily, his pupils blown wide, and Blaine knew that the feeling was mutual.

'Ugh, why are all our parents home tonight,' Kurt said miserably. 'It's not fair.'

'Well, there's the car,' Blaine said, smirking and quirked an eyebrow.

'That better be a joke, Blaine Anderson, because' – Kurt wrinkled his nose in distaste – 'ew, I'm not doing it in a car.'

Blaine grinned. 'Fine. What do you suggest then?'

After a bit of deliberation and a number of interruptions by their friends who came to say hi to Blaine, they ended up deciding that Blaine's house would be the better choice on the basis that it tended to be the most quiet there, which meant that they might be afforded some modicum of privacy there, even if they wouldn't dare to actually have sex with Blaine's parents around (once was enough, thank you very much).

As luck would have it, Blaine locked them in to find the house dark and empty. Apparently his parents weren't yet back from their own Valentine's dinner.

'I'm sure they'll be back soon though,' Blaine said as they stood undecided in the hall.

'Yeah, we shouldn't start anything we won't be able finish,' Kurt concurred although it seemed to cause him great pain to.

'TV?' Blaine suggested, swallowing and trying to ignore how much he needed to feel, taste, touch.

'Yeah,' Kurt breathed, and soon they found themselves in the living room, cuddled close together on the couch as Blaine flicked through the channels until he came across one that was airing *When Harry Met Sally*, and they both smiled at the memory of the previous year's Valentine's Day, although Blaine also groaned a bit as he thought of the spectacular fiasco that was the "Gap Attack." Thankfully, though, everything had worked out in the end, and now he was here, happier than ever and with Kurt wrapped in his arms.

Watching a romantic movie, Blaine soon realized, was perhaps not the most effective way of assuring that he and Kurt kept their hands off each other, especially not with their track record of making out during movies. They kept inexplicably finding their lips locked together and their hands roaming, and they had to constantly pause and cool off lest things got out of control.

One such time Kurt had ended up on top of Blaine, hand roaming and tongues exploring. Blaine's shirt had been untucked, and Kurt's warm hand was running aimlessly across his stomach, but then further south, growing determined and searching. As the hand reached below the hem of Blaine's pants, Blaine whimpered softly, needing Kurt's touch. Needing Kurt.

'Wait, stop,' Blaine managed finally, and for the first time calling things off had nothing to do with Blaine being uncomfortable. 'We can't.'



Kurt pouted as he sat back up, and the look almost made Blaine jump Kurt again, to hell with being caught. Luckily he didn't, however, because not thirty seconds later they heard the front door open and close, which also sealed their fate for the night. No more touching or groping, and definitely no sex.

'Hey, can I ask you a question?' Kurt asked a short while later, when Blaine's parents had said goodnight and disappeared upstairs. Blaine hummed in response. 'It might seem a bit random, but your upcoming top surgery had me wondering, because you've never really talked about it... What about bottom surgery?'

'What about it?' Blaine asked a little more sharply than he meant to.

'Is it something you want?'

Blaine hesitated. 'I'm...undecided, I guess.'

'Why? Just, you seem so uncomfortable with what you've got. Wouldn't surgery make it better?'

'Maybe. But it's a bit more complicated than that,' Blaine said, biting his lip and trying to decide if he really wanted to get into the details of this.

'In what way?' Kurt asked quietly, and Blaine did recognize that he wasn't being pushy or awkward at all, but talking about his genitals – or lack thereof – still kind of made Blaine want to crawl into a hole.

'Because...' Blaine thought for a minute, wondering how best to approach it. 'Okay, so there's two types of surgery, right? There's the phalloplasty, which is where they take skin from somewhere on your body and sort of use that. It's the most realistic-looking...penis' – Blaine flushed involuntarily at the word – 'you'll get, but sensation isn't guaranteed, it won't be able to get hard on its own, and it's hugely complicated and risky.'

Blaine looked up at Kurt – having been talking partially to the floor before – to make sure he was following Blaine's words. Kurt gave a small nod, but his expression was unreadable.

'The other one is called a metoidioplasty, and it's where they use whatever growth the T has given you. You know, how the, uh... clitoris gets bigger. It's a simpler procedure, and it functions pretty normally, with sensation and such, but well...it's tiny.'

Kurt took a moment to digest the information. 'Wow,' he breathed out. 'I'm sorry, that sucks. I guess I just kind of assumed that there would be a perfect surgery. That it might be expensive, but that it was possible.'

'There isn't,' Blaine said, trying not to sound too bitter. 'So basically whether or not a transguy chooses to have bottom surgery is about weighing up the pros and cons and deciding if it's worth the risks and the money and all that. For me...' Blaine went on, feeling strangely relieved to be sharing his thoughts on the matter with someone who wasn't on the other end of a DSL line. 'A phalloplasty is pretty much out of the question. I mean, just the thought of squeezing some pump in my balls to make it hard freaks me out. Sometimes I think I'll want a metoidioplasty for sure, but other times I think, what's the point of spending fifteen thousand dollars on something I might not even be happy with?'

Blaine let out a heavy sigh as he sank back into the couch, annoyed with himself for getting worked up. It wasn't like this was the first time he had had this discussion with himself. He wished he could just come to a decision and find peace in that, but he kept changing his mind back and forth.

'It really bothers you, doesn't it?' Kurt said, and Blaine felt his warm hand on his knee. 'What you don't have down there.'

Blaine smiled sadly. 'Yeah.' He looked quickly at Kurt. 'I mean, it's gotten better since we've started doing stuff. But yeah, it does.'

'I'm sorry. Just so you know, though,' Kurt said, lips curling in a flirty smile. 'I love your cock just the way it is.'

Blaine let out a small self-conscious giggle. 'I like yours too.'

'No, but...' Kurt turned to sit sideways on the couch, taking Blaine's hand in his. 'You get what I'm saying, right?'

He was telling Blaine not to be uncomfortable on Kurt's behalf. That he accepted and loved Blaine's body because it was *his*, and that was the important part. It was what Kurt had told him that first time Blaine had freaked out, but it was not until this moment now – perhaps because Blaine realized that he had nothing else left to surprise or push Kurt away with – that Blaine truly believed it.

Little by little and step by step, things were starting to come together in a way that made sense, like the pieces of a puzzle. *Teenage Dream*, which was the song that Blaine had flirtingly sung at Kurt on the day they met – back when Kurt had just been a new, cute boy – contained the lyric *My missing puzzle piece*. Blaine had always thought that was a sweet sentiment, but he realized now that it wasn't quite how he felt. It was more like Blaine *had* all the pieces already, but they were jumbled and messy, and Kurt was helping him figure out how they all fit together into one cohesive whole.

Blaine looked down at their joined hands, and he smiled as he squeezed Kurt's gently.

'Yeah. I do.'

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### *Part three*

'Hey, man. Good to have you back,' Mike said, clapping Blaine on the shoulder as they passed each other in the hall the next morning, calling over his shoulder, 'Don't forget! Glee practice extended till five today. Regionals, here we come!'

Blaine grinned and gave the thumbs up in response. He was happy to be back in school. He had missed his classes, his teachers and even his insane classmates. Particularly Blaine was glad to once again be in a space where he could see Kurt throughout his day – In the morning by the lockers. In the hallway between classes. At lunch. During glee – but the problem was that this wasn't enough today. That feeling from the night before hadn't gone away, and smiles and looks just weren't cutting it, when Blaine needed so desperately to kiss and moan and just be closer, closer, closer.

There was no privacy in the halls of McKinley of course, so he couldn't say as much to Kurt, but Blaine did manage to send him a few (barely) subtle looks across the table when they were having lunch with their friends, and the way Kurt blushed and tripped a little during his rant about Finn and Rachel's newly announced May wedding let Blaine know that he wasn't alone with his feelings.

'Dude, are you coming? Blaine?'

'What?' As Blaine was jolted out of his not-so-innocent thoughts about Kurt, he looked around to find Sam at his side, giving him an impatient look.

'Gym,' he said, and when Blaine still looked quizzical, he added in a "duh" voice, 'We have gym.'

'Oh! Right,' Blaine exclaimed, standing up quickly. Lunch period wasn't over, but their P.E. teacher usually gave them about thirty seconds to get changed, so most people got there five or ten minutes early. 'Coming. I'll just...'

Acting on a spontaneous idea, Blaine pulled out his phone and typed a quick text message. He proceeded to grab his lunch tray and when he passed Kurt on his way out, he leaned down to whisper in his ear, 'You should check your phone,' suppressing a smirk as he finally followed Sam out.

In the locker room, which was already half full of half naked guys, Blaine headed for the private shower and changing room as usual, spending a moment digging around his bag for the key.

'Are you ever gonna tell us what's with the privacy?' Sam called from a few feet away where he was kicking off his shoes.

'Nope,' Blaine replied cheerfully as he successfully retrieved the key. It was far from the first time anyone had asked Blaine what was up with that, and sometimes the question made him nervous and flustered, but today he just couldn't find it in himself to care.

'I bet it's not even for his benefit,' a voice called from the other end of the room. 'They're worried the fag will make everyone uncomfortable by staring at them in the shower.'

'Shut up, JT,' Sam yelled back. 'You're not that attractive, anyway.'

Blaine merely rolled his eyes as he shut the door behind him. He checked his phone before getting changed, and sure enough, there was a response from Kurt.

*Blaine Anderson, your MOUTH omg. I nearly choked on my food.*

Blaine grinned at Kurt's words and typed a quick reply, his continued horniness and the text communication making him bolder than he usually was. *Then I guess I should be made to nearly choke too. On your cock preferably.*

*I wouldn't be opposed to that at all. You do have such a talent with your mouth. Be a shame to waste it,* came the reply a few minutes later when Blaine was changed and ready. Blaine smirked as he sent off another reply.

This back and forth continued throughout the rest of their afternoon lessons (History had never been so interesting), their texts getting increasingly dirty and graphic. By the time they were in glee rehearsal, and Rachel was rehearsing her solo in the auditorium while the rest of them watched, "Kurt" was on his back, stretched and ready for "Blaine" to fuck him. Blaine was about to respond but hesitated suddenly.

There was something wrong with that image. Well, not *wrong* – Blaine loved that image – but what he wanted even more was...

*Could we switch?* he texted then, adding after a moment, *Positions, I mean.*

In the row in front of him, though Blaine couldn't see his face, Kurt seemed to hesitate as he read Blaine's text. Blaine waited, biting his lip nervously and trying to pay attention to Rachel. The response came a full minute later.

*You want me to ride you? Cause I'm down with that. ;)*

*No. I mean, that would be hot. But...*

Blaine sent these words off, before he could finish the thought, because at that moment Rachel finished her performance, and then Mr. Schue's attention was on the group again, prompting both Blaine and Kurt to tug away their phone, because they didn't much fancy getting caught sending dirty texts to one another. Blaine did, however, catch Kurt sending him a confused look during the commotion of the Trouble Tones taking to the stage and Rachel taking Mercedes' empty seat beside Blaine.

*I'm ready,* Blaine typed once the attention was once again on the people on stage. *I want it. I want everything. I want you.*

Blaine stared at the back of Kurt's head, willing him to turn around, so Blaine could see his face. Despite the two of them having discussed this before – that some day Blaine would want this – Blaine felt inexplicably nervous about Kurt's reaction. It still felt odd and a little bit wrong for him to express any desire at all. Responding to Kurt's and making them his own was one thing – even Kurt blowing Blaine for the first time had been Kurt making a move and Blaine accepting – but this was changing the status quo and saying *This is what I want now. Please want this too.*

Blaine swallowed as Kurt finally, after what seemed like minutes, turned around in his seat. His expression was soft yet carefully even (they were in the middle of glee rehearsal after all), and he mouthed at Blaine, *Are you sure?* to which Blaine could only nod. It was scary and huge, but he was sure. So sure.

Kurt turned again to type something, and Blaine waited anxiously, struggling to pay attention to the Trouble Tones' rendition of *What Doesn't Kill You*, but still jumping in surprise when his phone buzzed in his hand.

*Come over after seven.*

Glee rehearsal ended at five, which gave Blaine two hours to burn until he could show up at Kurt's house; hours which would probably have been best spent doing some of the homework he no doubt wouldn't be doing tonight, but instead he went to the gym.

After a quick change of clothes he poised himself in front of the punching bag, feeling the familiar dispelling of energy after only a few punches, and he had a lot to work out so he kept going, punching the bag over and over and eventually working up a sweat.

It wasn't that he was regretting his decision. He was certain that this was the right time to be making this decision. His body had wanted it for a long time, and his mind had finally stopped giving him reasons why he couldn't go through with it. However, Blaine was still nervous about it – though it was a good nervous; excited nervous – and the boxing helped him to expel all that, to focus and center himself, so when the time came he wouldn't be a shaking mess and give Kurt the impression that he didn't really want this.

Because Blaine *did* want this. So much. He had spent some time when he was first exploring his sexuality being horrified to realize that he was probably more of a bottom than a top, because what did that mean for his identity as transman? Wasn't it girly to want that? Of course he had been a naïve, fifteen-year-old ball of insecurity then. Time and plenty of internet research had eventually taught him that wanting that did not somehow invalidate his identity, because his identity was his and his alone, and no one could take it from him, no matter how much he opposed so-called masculine stereotypes.

That it had taken Blaine this long to get here had more to do with insecurity about his body than insecurity about his identity. Because despite how much he *physically* craved this, he knew it would leave him more exposed and vulnerable than anything he had done with Kurt so far (control was good while giving in was scary – but also potentially amazing) so before putting himself in that position he needed to trust both Kurt and himself not to freak out.

Blaine grinned to himself. Or maybe he just needed to be sufficiently horny.

Blaine suddenly became aware that it was already a quarter to seven and cursed himself for letting time run away from him. He stalked to the shower room, where he tore off his clothes quickly, not even stopping for his usual *ugh* reaction at seeing himself naked, before jumping in the shower. When he was done he got dressed and did his hair faster than he ever had, and when he left the shower room he almost walked straight into one of the football players (JT? TJ?).

'Oops, sorry. Didn't see you there,' Blaine said and clapped the other boy on the shoulder as he passed, grinning widely and not caring about the weird look he got in return.

By the time Blaine made it to Kurt's house, it was almost a quarter past seven.

'I'm sorry I'm late,' he all but gasped when Kurt opened the door to let him in. 'I was in the gym, and I was boxing and I don't know what happened to time-'

'Blaine, relax,' Kurt said, pulling Blaine inside and clearly trying to tame an amused smile. 'I just said "after seven." You're fine.'

Blaine grinned sheepishly. Okay, so maybe he was still a little nervous.

'So no one's home?' Blaine asked once he had hung his jacket and kicked off his shoes.

'Nope. We'll be alone for the next three hours or so.' Kurt pointed over his shoulder towards the kitchen. 'Carole left dinner in the fridge if you want any.'

Blaine moved to stand right in front of Kurt, looking him intently in the eye as he replied in a low voice, 'I'm really not hungry.'

'Me either,' Kurt whispered, returning Blaine's gaze. 'I don't know what I was thinking.'

They leaned forward at the same time, lips meeting in a soft yet passionate kiss.

'You're still sure about this?' Kurt asked when they parted.

'Positive,' Blaine said, but a moment later he flustered, 'You- I mean, you want this too, right? You're not just indulging me?'

Kurt just smiled sweetly and held out his hand to Blaine. 'Let's go upstairs.'

When they entered Kurt's bedroom, Blaine's mouth fell open slightly. The room was lit solely by about fifteen candles placed all around the room, and soft music was playing on the stereo. Dumbfounded, Blaine looked around at Kurt who shrugged.



'I may have been planning this moment for a while,' he said as Blaine shook his head fondly. 'Do you not like it? I didn't know what- I almost added flower petals, but I thought it might be a bit much. I just- I wanted it to be special, you know, because I know what this means to you. To both of us, and-'

'It's perfect,' Blaine said, and he felt his throat constrict as he reached to touch Kurt's cheek, the light stubble scratching his palm. 'I love you so much.'

'I love you too, honey,' Kurt said as Blaine pulled him forwards, their mouths crashing together a moment later, and Blaine found himself stumbling backwards towards the bed, the kiss only breaking when the back of Blaine's knees hit the bed and he sat down with a thump while Kurt remained standing. He ran his fingers along the neck of Blaine's shirt, only barely grazing the skin underneath and making Blaine shiver. 'Ready to lose some clothes?'

'Yeah,' Blaine breathed, unable to take his eyes off Kurt's mouth as he tugged off Blaine's shirt, revealing a plain tank top underneath.

'Mm, layers,' Kurt mumbled as he breathed in the scent of Blaine's shirt before tossing it towards the chair in the corner. He made quick work of removing own pieces of clothing until he was shirtless, his naked torso glowing beautifully in the candlelight, before he placed a knee on either side of Blaine's thighs, straddling him. 'Rubbed off on you, did I?'

As Blaine's eyes locked with Kurt's, he could feel Kurt's fingers toying with the hem of his tank top and he was almost certain that he could feel Kurt's excitement throbbing through four layers of clothing. Or maybe it was his own he was feeling. 'All I hear is "rubbing", and yes please.'

Kurt laughed. 'All in good time, sweet. First: Tank top. Lift.'

Blaine lifted his arms obediently, allowing Kurt to pull the tank top off. Kurt cupped Blaine's face with both his hands, gazing at him for a moment before planting a sweet kiss on his mouth, but Blaine squirmed a little, making Kurt break the kiss and frown in question.

'Would it...?' Blaine shifted a little again and rolled his shoulders. God, his back was aching. He cleared his throat and indicated the binder he was still wearing. 'Would it be weird if I wanted to take this off?'

'No, I love it when you do,' Kurt said, stroking softly where his hand was resting at the inside of Blaine's right wrist. Blaine's confusion must have shown on his face, because after a couple of seconds Kurt went on, 'Because it means you're comfortable, doesn't it? Mentally, I mean.'

'Oh.' Blaine hadn't even really thought about it like that, the urge to leave his binder on or off usually feeling more instinctual than anything. 'Yeah, I guess it does.'

'Come on then,' Kurt said with a fond smile before placing a soft kiss on Blaine's nose and tugging on the binder. Blaine remained calm and his body complied, though he couldn't help the sharp intake of breath as the fabric was removed. 'Better?'

Blaine gave a sigh of relief as the pain in his back lessened. '*Much*.'

'Good,' Kurt said as he ran a hand down the middle of Blaine's chest, tickling the soft hair there and just barely grazing the soft part of his chest. Blaine startled a little. 'I'm sorry, is that alright?'

'Yeah, yeah,' Blaine said breathlessly, finding himself lost in Kurt's eyes and overwhelmed with how familiar and foreign this all felt. 'It's just new. Just don't, like, fondle.'

'I won't,' Kurt said as he slid off Blaine's lap and moved to lie down, tugging Blaine with him until they lay on their sides, facing each other. Kurt trailed a finger down the length of Blaine's arm, coming to rest on his waist. 'You're gorgeous. I'm so lucky.'

'We are,' Blaine corrected before leaning in and capturing Kurt's lips in a kiss, which was happily reciprocated, and it soon deepened, tongues meeting and exploring as they kissed slow and languid. Kurt pushed Blaine onto his back then, climbing on top of him and pushing his hardening, but still clothed, cock into Blaine's crotch.

'There's your rubbing,' Kurt said though his voice was almost drowned out by Blaine's moan, because *wow*, that felt good.

'Yes, thank you,' Blaine breathed out, hardly aware of what he was saying. All he knew was that he was incredibly turned on, and now Kurt was trailing soft kisses down his torso, one hand finding and intertwining itself with Blaine's where it rested next to his head.

'You're so hairy,' Kurt commented after a short while.

'Mm,' was all Blaine could think to say in response, too distracted by the way Kurt's mouth was making his skin tingle.

'My hairy little monkey.'

Blaine snorted. 'Was any part of that a compliment?'

'Yes, definitely yes,' Kurt murmured against Blaine's stomach. 'Some monkeys are adorable, I'll have you know.'

'So I'm a cute monkey?' Blaine asked, amused.

'Mm, yes,' Kurt said, planting a circle of kisses around Blaine's bellybutton before adding, 'My cute, little monkey boyfriend.'

Blaine giggled. 'Fine.'

He watched enthralled as Kurt inched further and further south, moving maddeningly slow until finally – five more seconds and Blaine would have screamed at him to rip his pants off already – deft fingers popped open the button on his jeans. Kurt moved to kneel on the mattress next to Blaine as he peeled off Blaine's pants, and Blaine almost protested the loss of Kurt's weight pressing him down, but then his pants were off, and they were one step closer to tonight's goal, so he couldn't really complain. Kurt brought his hands to the hem of Blaine's underwear, before he lifted his gaze, looking to Blaine for permission.

Blaine gave a small nod, and in one quick motion – almost as if he were removing a bandaid – Kurt pulled off Blaine's briefs, leaving Blaine completely nude. It wasn't the first time, and Blaine *was* still okay with everything that was happening, but he still found his breath hitching and his pulse quickening at the realization that he was lying there, completely exposed under Kurt. Even though he was far too hairy and muscular to truly look like a girl, so many things were still not *right* with his body, and he couldn't help but feel self-conscious.

Especially since the first thing Kurt did was to stare confusedly between Blaine's crotch and his clothes on the floor, and for one horrible, confused moment Blaine had the thought that his genitals surprised Kurt, before he remembered that this didn't make any sense at all.

'Where's your packer?'

'I- What?' Blaine frowned and looked around the room. 'It's-'

'You weren't wearing it.'

Blaine thought for a minute. 'Oh god.' He propped himself up on his elbows. 'I must have forgotten it in the shower room. I was so distracted by the thought of coming here that I must have forgotten to put it back on.'

'Oh.' Kurt withdrew himself a little, and he looked...disappointed? 'Do you need to go find it?'

'Hey, no. It's fine.' Blaine reached out for Kurt's wrist, tugging him back toward him. 'I'll just go get it in the morning. That shower room is locked anyway. Pretty sure I'm the only student with a key.'

Kurt raised an eyebrow. 'That's very zen of you. A month ago you would have been freaking out about someone finding it.' He ran a light finger up the length of Blaine's leg, and Blaine saw the playfulness that the momentary confusion had erased return to his eyes. 'You sure?'

'Yeah.' Blaine felt his lips quirk in a suggestive smile. 'Besides, we were rather in the middle of something, weren't we?'

'True,' Kurt conceded, his eyes growing hungry as they settled on Blaine's lips.

'And you're wearing far too much clothes for my liking.'

Kurt looked down at himself as though he was only just realizing that he was still wearing pants, before he scrambled off the bed and shimmied them off quickly, his already semi-hard cock springing free. Blaine stared hungrily at it, scrambling to his knees to meet Kurt at the edge of the mattress.

'God, I've missed you.'

'Are you really talking to my cock right now?' Kurt asked and Blaine didn't have to look to know that he had one eyebrow raised in exasperation.

'Yes. We have a very special bond, me and it,' Blaine deadpanned.

'I see. Do you two wanna- *Ooh*.'

Kurt didn't get to finish his sentence because at that moment Blaine took him in his mouth, rendering him temporarily speechless.

And Blaine loved this. Before he and Kurt had ever gotten naked together – before he had even met Kurt actually – he had thought that he might feel uncomfortable interacting (for want of a better word) with another man's cock given that he would have what Blaine so desperately wanted. And there had been elements of that – brief twinges of *It's not fair* and *Why can't I have this? Why can't I know what it's like to be blown? To be jerked off? To fuck someone?* – but he usually managed to let go of that pretty quickly, because when it came down to it, Blaine just really, really loved Kurt's cock.

He loved touching and sucking and licking it, and he loved the noises Kurt made when he did. The whimpers, the moans, the gasps and the "Blaine"s and the "Oh, god"s. And Blaine especially loved that by now he knew how to get which reactions; exactly how and where to touch to best bring Kurt to the edge, and then, when he was *right*there, hold back, sending Kurt a teasing smirk when he whimpered that he needed to come.

Today, however, Kurt was the one to call Blaine to a halt.

'Blaine. You need to, *uh*, stop.' Blaine pulled back, finding a strange pleasure in the lewd *pop* Kurt's cock made when it slid out of Blaine's mouth. He blinked innocently up at Kurt. 'Or this'll all end too soon.'

Kurt crawled up on the bed, and Blaine moved back a little to give him room. Kurt reached out a hand at Blaine's face.

'God, Blaine. Your mouth,' Kurt said quietly, almost as if he were speaking to himself, his thumb grazing Blaine's bottom lip. Blaine's stomach fluttered at the touch. 'Lie down for me?'

Blaine did so, but the new position seemed to flip a switch inside him, and suddenly as he lay there, he felt incredibly naked and not in a sexy way. Kurt was looking at him, and Blaine didn't understand how Kurt could look at him like that. Like Blaine was attractive. Like he was everything Kurt had ever wanted. Blaine brought his arms up, crossing them in front of his chest.

'Hey, I don't care,' Kurt said softly, repeating as a mantra, 'I don't care. I don't care. I don't care.' He tugged gently at Blaine's arms, but Blaine just shook his head. Kurt bit his lip, looking uncertain. 'Do you need to put it back on?'

'No,' Blaine said. He didn't want that. He didn't want the ache it would bring, and he didn't want what that would remind him, nor would it help him relax and not freak out once Kurt shifted his focus further south. 'I just need...' Blaine closed his eyes, willing himself to stay calm and think clearly. He felt Kurt's warm hand on his stomach, anchoring him, and he breathed in deeply. *I'm fine, I'm fine. Kurt's obviously fine. I'm freaking out over nothing.* Blaine opened his eyes, meeting Kurt's steady gaze. 'Give me your t-shirt.'

Kurt looked confused but nodded and crawled off the bed. He picked up his t-shirt from the chair in the corner and threw it to Blaine, who caught it. Instead of putting it on, however, Blaine placed it across his chest so it covered the parts he struggled with, but so most of his torso was still visible.

'Clever,' Kurt commented as he rejoined Blaine on the bed. 'Why mine though?'

'It smells nice,' Blaine said, giving a slightly bashful shrug. He reached to cup the side of Kurt's face, bringing him down for a kiss. 'You taste nice too.'

As the kiss continued and deepened, Blaine was vaguely aware of a hand travelling across his stomach, but it was still a surprise when he felt fingers brush over his cock, which gave a sudden throb of excitement, and Blaine was unable to stop a moan from escaping his mouth.

'Warn a guy, will you?' he panted.

'Because you did so well in that department earlier, did you?' Kurt said teasingly as he continued to touch and stroke Blaine.

'Alright, point t-taken,' Blaine managed, groaning when Kurt hit a particularly sensitive spot. He watched through heavy-lidded eyes as Kurt began to move further and further until his mouth was level with Blaine's crotch.

'Hey, Blaine?' he said, the teasing glint still in his eyes. 'I'm gonna suck your cock now, okay?'

'Okay,' Blaine breathed out, too distracted by the prospect of Kurt's mouth to think of anything clever or sexy to say.

And *wow*, Kurt's mouth. Blaine thought he still seemed a little unsure and hesitating, but it was only his third time at this, so Blaine figured that was understandable, and Kurt was nothing if not enthusiastic, so Blaine never doubted that he *wanted* to be doing this.

'Ready for the next step, honey?' Kurt asked softly, looking up at Blaine, his lips all red and swollen, which Blaine decided was a really good look for him. Blaine felt his heart-rate pick up at the suggestion, but he nodded dumbly. Ready. Kurt placed a light kiss at the inside of his thigh, before he stretched, scrambling for the lube on the nightstand. 'Pull up your legs a little? Like- yeah.'

Kurt blew out a nervous breath of air as Blaine bent his knees, shifting slightly to give Kurt better access. As much as he had wanted Kurt to be in control tonight and carry him through this, Blaine also felt relieved that he wasn't alone in being nervous. It made the whole thing seem a little less daunting; a little more normal. Like they were just two regular teenagers messing around for the first time. He tried for an encouraging smile

'I'm not about to fall apart, you know,' Blaine said when he suspected the smile came across as less encouraging and more uncertain.

'Yeah?' Kurt said, regaining some of his confidence from earlier. He capped the lube bottle and squirted a generous amount on his fingers, winking at Blaine as he did so. 'I wouldn't be so certain.'

As Kurt pressed the first finger gently against his entrance, Blaine let out a breath he hadn't realized he had been holding. It was surprisingly cold. He kept his eyes on Kurt, watching Kurt's almost awed expression as he slipped the first finger inside easily. There wasn't much resistance, but the sensation was new, and Blaine was suddenly hyper-aware of his heart pounding in his chest. Kurt began to move in and out, and Blaine's cock gave a throb when he brushed past a particular spot.

'Have you done this before?' Kurt asked just as he slid a second finger in beside the first and Blaine groaned. 'To yourself?'

'Yeah. Not often though.' Blaine struggled to keep his voice level. 'And this feels different. It's...more.'

From his kneeling position between Blaine's legs, Kurt leaned down and pressed soft kiss to Blaine's stomach, just below his navel. 'Good "more", I hope?'

'Yeah,' Blaine panted, his breath hitching when a third finger pressed against his hole. 'Definitely good.'

'Good. Then let's try for a little...' - Kurt had inched further south again, and Blaine felt his warm breath ghost against his cock – '*more.*'

'*Holy-*' Blaine had to stop himself from swearing as Kurt took his cock into his mouth while continuing to move his fingers in and out of Blaine's ass, stretching him. Preparing him for the final act. Kurt pulled off him right at the last moment, and Blaine whined, wanting desperately to come but also knowing that now was not the time.

'I think we're there,' Kurt announced, pulling his fingers out and wiping them quickly on a piece of tissue. Blaine nodded and swallowed, watching as Kurt guided them both into position.

Blaine's eyes locked with Kurt's as slowly – and yet very fast somehow – he felt the head of Kurt's cock push past his opening. Blaine breathed in sharply, his eyes fluttering shut, and for a moment everything seemed to stop. It lasted ten seconds at most, but somehow it was enough time for a million thoughts to pass through Blaine's mind.

He thought about Kurt and his relationship – about everything that had happened, every up and down, since they had met. He thought about the night he realized he was trans. He thought about the night Kurt realized it. He thought about every small step taken since then. He thought about today and the events leading up to now. He thought about the times when he had imagined this moment and his conviction that – no matter how ready he might feel – being in this position would make him feel weird and uncomfortable. He thought about the mental preparation he had done before tonight, expecting to have to overcome or suppress a moment of extreme dysphoria.

And then he didn't think any more.

Blaine let out the breath he had been holding and opened his eyes to find Kurt still watching him, an expression of mild wonder on his face as though he couldn't quite believe where his cock was at the moment.

'Everything okay?' he asked, the words coming out a little strangled, possibly from the effort of holding himself still and not just pressing forward. 'Blaine, talk to me.'

Blaine opened his mouth to speak but found himself unable to express with words quite how he felt. Before tonight he had expected his mind to put up a fight, but the surprising truth was that now as it was



happening, Blaine felt completely at peace. There was no binder to make him feel trapped and no fake penis that he only barely managed to pretend was real. There was just himself and Kurt, connected in the most primal way with nothing in between them.

He was a gay, pre-op transboy who was being anally penetrated for the first time in his life, and yet strangely, at this moment, Blaine didn't think he had ever felt more normal, or less like a freak.

'I'm good,' he said, a serene smile spreading on his face as he held Kurt's gaze. 'I'm perfect.'

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They were in a world of their own the next day.

When Blaine pulled up outside Kurt's house five minutes early, Kurt was already there waiting for him, and he greeted Blaine with a deep, passionate kiss the moment he was inside the car.

'Because I know we won't be able to all day,' he said quietly when they pulled apart again, running his fingers across Blaine's lips as though he was trying to memorize them.

At school they almost decided to throw caution to the wind and walk hand in hand down the hall, but they decided against it at the last moment. Even so, as they walked to their lockers, it occurred to Blaine that more people than usual were staring in their direction, and he wondered vaguely if something showed on their faces – if their peers were somehow able to tell that he and Kurt had had the most mind-blowing sex the night before.

But of course they couldn't, so he shrugged it off.

They spent their lunch period, not at their usual table with all their glee club friends, but at their own private one, where they found it easier to get away with making heart-eyes at each other and "accidentally" brushing their hands together.

'Our friends keep staring at us,' Kurt commented idly, seeming more concerned with staring at Blaine's mouth as he chewed.

'Mm,' Blaine said, not really listening, because he had just realized that the way the light fell in Kurt's eyes made them look the most beautiful shade of green.

Suddenly there was a girl at their table, and they both snapped out of their lovesick reverie. The girl looked to be a freshman, and she stared first at Kurt then at Blaine. Kurt raised an eyebrow at Blaine, and Blaine eyed the girl with what he hoped came across as polite puzzlement.

'Yes?'

The girl blushed and opened her mouth to speak, but she seemed ultimately incapable of words, turning on her heel finally and running back to a group of people who were evidently her friends. A few seconds later there was a lot of giggling and glancing over shoulders at their table.

'Got yourself an admirer, I think, Blaine,' Kurt said with a grin, rolling his eyes a little. 'Freshmen. Honestly.'

It wasn't just freshmen though. Throughout the rest of the day, Blaine kept catching people staring at him, but quickly looking away when they caught his eye. Girls. Boys. Even a group of jocks one time.

'I think the general McKinley population just caught up with my being gay,' he announced to Kurt as they met at the latter's locker after their final afternoon lesson. To a lot of people Blaine just didn't read as gay, which apparently made him less interesting to make fun of, so of the two of them, Kurt had always been the one to receive the most looks and comments about his sexuality. Until today that was, when Blaine had been "caught" (because neither of them had really cared) making obvious heart-eyes at another boy. 'I think some people genuinely just thought we were really good friends or something.'

Kurt rolled his eyes. 'The stupidity of these people never ceases to amaze me.'

Blaine shrugged. 'People see what they wanna see.'

Kurt slammed his locker shut and eyed Blaine, a half-smirk playing on his lips. 'Well, if that were true I would be seeing you with a lot less clothes on right now.'

'Shh,' Blaine reprimanded, though barely suppressing a smile. 'But okay then.' He held out his hand to Kurt. 'Come on. Let's give 'em gay.'

With one raised eyebrow Kurt took Blaine's hand, and together they proceeded down the hall towards the choir room and their last activity of the day. They were still smiling and stealing glances at each other when they stepped inside the room, so they didn't immediately notice every head turning in their

direction. However, they did notice when all the chatter died out, a strange hush falling over the room, and they stopped abruptly only a few steps inside.

'Is it true?' Sugar asked, breaking the silence. Twelve eager pairs of eyes were trained on them. Twelve people were obviously waiting for some kind of answer, but Blaine hadn't even really understood the question. 'Is it true what they're saying?'

'What are they saying?' Kurt asked, clearly not following either. 'Guys, you're being really weird.'

Sugar looked suddenly uncomfortable with whatever was on her mind, and the group exchanged looks until finally Rachel spoke up, softly but clearly.

'About Blaine.'

Blaine stiffened.

'They're saying he's-'

Blaine's eyes widened as Rachel's cheeks grew pink.

'Well, that he's not-'

*No.*

'Oh, for Pete's sake,' Puck broke in finally, speaking with the air of someone who thought this whole thing was idiotic. 'They're saying he's a freaking *girl*.'

Blaine ripped his hand free of Kurt's and took a frightened step back. *No, no, no, no, no.* He had completely forgotten... Blaine spun around, almost colliding with Mr. Schue as he ran back out into the hall, ignoring Kurt's cry of, 'Blaine!'

When he reached the boys' locker room he ripped open the door so violently that it slammed hard against the wall, the sound echoing throughout the room. Blaine ignored it and ran straight for the shower room he had used the previous day, finding the door unlocked and ajar.

'Looking for this?' a voice came from behind him before he could even begin his search. Blaine spun around quickly, heart pounding furiously in his chest. Standing by the nearest row of lockers was that same JT kid from the day before – the one Blaine had almost bumped into – wearing a most unpleasant smile.

And there in his hand, held up beside his head as if it were some kind of victory trophy, was Blaine's forgotten packer.

## CHAPTER NINE

### *Losing my mind, losing control*

For a long moment, Blaine just stared.

'That's- that's not- I- I can explain,' he stuttered, mind working furiously, because maybe there was still a chance he could talk himself out of this. No one had actually seen anything.

JT, however, didn't seem to be listening to Blaine but was watching him thoughtfully, a subtle smirk playing on his lips. He began walking idly around the room, but never straying far from Blaine and always keeping him within his line of sight. Blaine stood frozen still by the shower room door, following JT's every movement with his eyes.

Finally JT launched into speech, his tone calm and quietly musing, 'You know, I knew the moment I saw you that there was something *off* about you. I knew I recognized you from somewhere, but I just couldn't place you.' JT took a small step closer, studying Blaine's face as though amazed with what he was seeing. 'Not that anyone would blame me, of course. I mean, we were just kids when we saw each other last. What's it been? Eight, nine years?'

JT looked expectantly at Blaine at that, clearly waiting for the penny to drop, but Blaine's mind was swimming, unable to think straight. 'I don't- I don't understand.'

'Come on, Anderson! You know this one,' JT urged, as if this were some kind of perverted game show. *Here's your life, Blaine Anderson. Now watch it fall apart.*

Blaine's mind was reeling. When they were kids? What was he talking about? Was Blaine supposed to know this guy? He searched his mind for early childhood memories. JT... JT... He didn't know any JTs, did he?

'No? I've gotta say, I'm kinda hurt you don't recognize me. I mean, it's not like I've gone and changed genders on you.' JT's eyes were positively dancing with glee at watching Blaine's struggle. 'Come on, we used to be best friends.'

Blaine's eyes widened and he took an involuntary step back, bumping into the door frame. Best friends... Blaine's only male best friend before Trent and Tyler... His best friend until the age of six... The one who

had decided that girls just weren't friend material... Blaine hadn't seen or even thought about him since he had moved out of Columbus at age...eight?

'Jamie?'

'It's JT now,' he said, face scrunching up in distaste at the diminutive. James Thompson. Jamie. JT. 'And I see I'm not the only one who goes by a different name now... Amber.'

Blaine breathed out shakily, struggling not to panic, because here was the final nail in the coffin – the confirmation that this was not a situation that he would be able to talk himself out of. Even if he could come up with some sort of explanation for the packer, JT – Jamie – *knew* him, and the packer wasn't the issue anymore.

'Please, Jamie. We used to be friends,' Blaine pleaded, hating how small and terrified he sounded. 'Why would you do this? Tell everyone?'

'Because,' JT said, holding up his hand and shaking it so the packer still in his hand wriggled comically. 'It's amusing, isn't it?'

Amusing? Blaine swallowed painfully, and he fought to hold back the tears that were forming behind his eyes. He couldn't be here for this. He had heard enough anyway. He charged forwards, eyes on the door, but JT stepped in front of him, blocking his path. For a moment Blaine thought JT was about to get violent, but then he simply smiled and held out the packer.

'Don't forget this.'

Blaine practically ripped it from JT's hand, and then he was running – out the door and down the hall, away, away, away – JT's last shouted words following him all the way home.

'You can't run from your past, Anderson!'

---

*Blaine's face is scrunched up in concentration, falling into frustration a moment later as he yet again fails to complete his bow tie knot. He glances in the mirror and catches Tyler, who has been finished with his tie for a while, behind him barely containing an amused smile.*

*'Hey, it's not funny!' Blaine says indignantly, but Tyler simply stops fighting his amusement in response, and Blaine sticks out his tongue at him.*

*'Oh, give it here,' Tyler says finally when Blaine fumbles his umpteenth attempt. 'Why didn't you practice before tonight?'*

*'I didn't think it'd be this difficult,' Blaine mumbles, watching Tyler work and trying to figure out where his own attempts went wrong.*

*'Well, isn't that just Blaine Anderson in a nutshell?' Tyler says fondly, but with a certain tension in his voice as well. 'Eternal optimist.'*

*'What are you trying to say?' Blaine asks, sensing that bow ties are not really the issue. Tyler, having finished his work, drops his hands and moves to lean against his dresser.*

*'I just don't want you to have any false hope for tonight.'*

*'I don't. I'm not stupid, Ty,' Blaine replies evenly. 'But being all doom and gloom about it isn't going to help, is it?'*

*'Yeah, guess you're right,' Tyler says as he draws himself up again and turns around to face the mirror, considering the two of them in their fancy dress for a moment. His eyes fall on Blaine's hair. 'Sure you don't want to do something about that?'*

*Blaine grins as he runs a hand through his short curls. 'Nah. I like it this way.'*

*'Dork,' Tyler teases as he checks his own for the occasion styled hair, before giving Blaine the once-over. 'But in that case I think you're ready.'*

*'You think?' Blaine asks uncertainly, turning sideways and watching his reflection skeptically as he runs his hands down across his chest.*

*'You're fine,' Tyler says, answering the unasked question. Neither of them mention that on some level it doesn't matter how flat Blaine's chest is. Everyone will know anyway.*

*A knock on the door startles them both, and before Tyler can respond, his father is standing in the doorway.*

*'Did you want a ride or not?' he asks sourly.*

*'Yes, we'll be right there,' Tyler replies quickly.*

*'Well, hurry it up. I ain't got all night,' his father grunts before closing the door with a snap. Blaine tries not to look alarmed.*

*'Don't worry, his bark's worse than his bite,' Tyler says cheerfully, as he throws Blaine his shoes and sits on the bed to put on his own. 'He knows he can't change who I am, but every now and then he likes to make it known that he doesn't like it. He probably sees me taking another boy to a dance as a good opportunity.'*

*'I'm sorry,' Blaine says, though he can't help the swelling in his chest at the idea that Tyler's parents – who do know about him, at least in vague terms – views him as "another boy."*

*'Could be worse,' Tyler says with a shrug, focusing his attention on tying his shoes, adding casually, 'What about you? I guess your parents were cool with the gay thing considering...'*

*'Considering the trans thing?' Blaine finishes for him, smiling carefully as he picks up his shoes and sits on the desk chair to put them on. 'Yeah, it wasn't too bad. I mean, there was no yelling or anything. I think they were mostly just a bit confused when I told them. Although my dad...' Blaine shakes his head, washing the thought away. 'Never mind. Tonight's about having fun, right?'*

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Blaine slammed the front door shut behind him and threw his bag on the floor along with the bow tie he had found himself frantically tearing off while he drove home.

'Dad!' he called as he shrugged off his jacket and kicked off his shoes. His dad would make it all better. He would know the right thing to say to make it feel a little less like Blaine's life was coming apart at the seams. When Blaine got no response, he stepped into the living room, repeating, voice uncertain, 'Dad?'

*Of course*, he remembered then. His dad had left again that morning. He would be in a different state by now. At the realization that he was alone, Blaine felt the tears he had otherwise managed to force back threaten again, stinging his eyes. He looked around the room, so vast in its emptiness suddenly, looking for some source of comfort, but what good were TV or books or even a soft couch when what he needed was to disappear into a strong pair of arms?



Blaine became vaguely aware that something in his pocket was buzzing. His phone. Right. He pulled it out to find a missed call from Kurt and four unread texts.

*Blaine, where are you?*

*Where did you go? People are looking for you.*

*Please tell me where you are.*

*Just let me know if you're okay.*

Kurt. He had been outed too in a way. Blaine felt a momentary surge of guilt at having left him there to face their friends alone, but then his heart sped up again as the word sank in. Outed. He had been outed. Everyone knew now, or they would soon enough. And Kurt was strong in the face of judgment. He would be okay. Blaine wondered what he had told them, but quickly abandoned the thought, because the thought of all of New Directions knowing and asking questions was too much, too much, too much.

Blaine stared blankly at his phone for several long moments before it occurred to him that he should probably give Kurt some sort of response lest he think that Blaine had gone and done something drastic. Another moment passed as he considered what to even say, and in the end all he could come up with was a simple *I went home*.

Kurt had strong arms. His embraces made Blaine feel safe and warm and loved. Kurt would come if Blaine asked. He might even be on his way right now.

But Kurt couldn't fix this. He was right next to Blaine in all this, and Blaine didn't think he could face the guilt of having brought him into it on top of everything else. Kurt had been bullied enough in his life. The last thing he needed was to be associated with someone like Blaine.

Blaine felt almost ashamed to admit it, because he wasn't a child anymore, but he really, really needed his daddy right now. He watched the phone in his hand. At least a phone conversation would be better than nothing.

'Please pick up, Dad. Please pick up,' Blaine whispered as the phone rang in his ear, each ring bringing him closer and and closer to panic, the lump in his throat growing more and more painful.

'Hi, this is John Anderson...' Blaine's heart leapt, only to sink that much deeper a moment later, when he realized this was simply the intro to his dad's voice-mail. He must be traveling still, or already in a meeting.

'Dad,' he choked out a moment later when the beep had sounded. 'I need to- Something happened at school. I- They-' Blaine swallowed thickly. He couldn't make himself say the words out loud. 'Please, I just really need to speak to you.'

Blaine's eyes were wet when he hung up, and he felt his lip trembling, but he bit his lip, concentrating on keeping the tears at bay. He proceeded into the kitchen a moment later, unsure why exactly except he needed to get away from the screaming emptiness that was the living room. Another part of him felt like he needed to not be standing still or he would fall apart completely.

There was a note from his mother on the kitchen table attached to a fifty-dollar bill.

*Blaine,*

*Late meeting and dinner tonight. Here's money for food. Don't forget your homework.*

*-Mom.*

Homework. Blaine couldn't even think about that now. He sighed as he sank to the floor, resting his head against the kitchen cabinet where his parents kept some of their fine china and wondering vaguely if he might feel better if he were to smash a couple of plates. Had it just been that morning that he had felt the happiest he could remember being for a long time? Like nothing could touch him and everything would work out.

It seemed so far away now.

---

*'Pick you up at midnight,' Tyler's father calls after them as they exit the car, and a minute later Blaine and Tyler are following the crowd towards the front entrance of the school.*

*Blaine, however, finds his steps slowing down and eventually coming to a complete halt. It takes Tyler a few seconds to notice Blaine's absence at his side, but when he does, he turns to walk back through the thinning crowd, his brow creased in concern.*

*'You okay?' he asks.*

*'Yeah, yeah,' Blaine breathes, as he glances vaguely around at the few stragglers that still remain outside. 'It's just- first high school dance. Wow.'*

*Blaine looks back at his friend to find him smiling at him in that slightly indulgent way he sometimes does, which reminds Blaine that much as Tyler is handsome and his date for tonight, he really is more of a big brother.*

*'Scared?'*

*'Yeah. No.' Blaine shakes his head. 'A bit. Or just...nervous, I guess.'*

*Tyler considers Blaine for a moment, before taking a step forward and offering his hand. Blaine takes it gratefully. As they walk the final way to the entrance, Tyler's warm hand squeezes Blaine's reassuringly, and Blaine's muscles relax a little. He can do this.*

*When they step inside the immaculately decorated gym together, Blaine's eyes grow big as he takes it all in. Tables line the edges of the room, bearing drinks and snacks, and in the middle people are dancing and laughing along to the music playing from the speakers at one end of the room. Blaine kind of thinks the entire room radiates joy.*

*And this is what he is really here for. Part of him wants to make a statement, yes. That transgender or homosexual he and Tyler are just as entitled to be here as anyone. That no matter how much they call Blaine a girl or disgusting or sick or worthless, he knows he isn't. And he isn't going to let a few bullies take that knowledge from him.*

*Mostly, however, Blaine is just really excited to be at his first high school dance. To be here as a boy, dressed up in a tuxedo his mother bought him for the occasion. To have his date be the handsome gay junior from the football team – who may just be a friend, but he and Blaine still look good together. A few years ago Blaine never would have dared to imagine this.*

*'Pretty cool, huh?' Tyler says, still holding on to Blaine's hand and leading them further into the room.*

*'Yeah,' Blaine says, pushing down the lump that has formed in his throat, a smile spreading on his face instead as he thinks of the night ahead of them. 'Pretty cool.'*

---

Blaine was pacing back and forth in his room, trying not to think but *needing* to; having to, because it was happening and he couldn't hide from it, but being too scared to.

The doorbell rang in the distance, and he made his way downstairs slowly, as if through a fog. He wasn't entirely aware of how long he was taking, but apparently it was long enough for the person outside to grow impatient and ring the bell twice more. The final one was insistent and came just as Blaine reached the door.

'Blaine!' a voice yelled, and oh god, it was Kurt, and was that good or bad? 'I saw your text. I know you're in there.' Kurt was trying to sound firm and demanding, but his voice wavered slightly. 'Please open the door.'

Finally Blaine opened the door, finding Kurt on the other side, anxious features melting into relief at the sight of Blaine who, for his part, remained impassive. He didn't have the energy for facial expressions.

'There you are. You're okay,' Kurt breathed before going in for a hug, which Blaine was ready to reciprocate, because yes, Kurt was strong and warm and wise. He would know. He would be reassuring. And then he might say something to make Blaine smile, just so that for a tiny moment the weight on Blaine's shoulders might seem a little less.

But then as Blaine caught sight of a figure hovering some twenty feet behind Kurt, he jerked back in surprise, and Kurt did the same in response to Blaine.

Finn.

Finn was standing there with his hands in his pockets, his expression caught somewhere between confusion and worry. When Blaine caught his eye half a second later, something in Finn's expression shifted into something... Blaine didn't study it to figure out what it was. All he registered was that it was

different – Finn had never looked at Blaine like that – and the next moment he was slamming the door shut, because no, no, no. He could not face that.

'Finn!' Kurt shrieked on the other side of the door. 'I told you to *wait in the car!*'

Blaine closed his eyes as he steadied himself against the door. The room was spinning around him, making nausea rise in his stomach. His mind was spinning, circling the thoughts he was so afraid of. Memories he wanted nothing to do with. Terrifying realizations of what was to come. Blaine's whole world was spinning out of control, and he wasn't sure if he wanted to hang on or let go. He heard Kurt's voice calling him through the door, but his mind was hazy and he could make no sense of the words, let alone think of a response.

He couldn't do it. Couldn't face going to school tomorrow and have everyone look at him differently. Have everyone look at him and *know* what he hid beneath layers of clothing. Not when he had done it before. Not when the world had already shown him what he was worth, and it wasn't much. People like Mike or Tina or Rachel. His friends. He couldn't bear the thought of how they would treat him from now on. God, the *jokes* Santana would make.

Somehow Blaine had ended up on the floor, leaned against the door. He breathed out heavily, trying to get his breathing under control, but it came out shaky and staggered. His heart was beating so hard and fast it hurt. His palms were sweaty, but at the same time he felt cold, his whole body trembling, though somewhere he was aware that it wasn't from cold. He did know what was happening to him, because he had gone through it before – though somehow that thought was not comforting in the slightest, and a new wave of panic surged through him – but it had been years since the last time.

Blaine tried to remember the coping mechanisms his therapist had taught him back then, but all he could come up with was "relax" and how was he supposed to do that? How was he supposed to relax when everything was falling apart? When he was being forced out of the closet, not to one person but to an entire school and whoever they felt like sharing it with. When he might once more be losing all his friends.

Blaine stared at his trembling hand, willing it to stop and making a fist of it when it wouldn't. As he felt the memories he had considered dead and buried press ever closer, he squeezed both fists tight around nothing as though he might physically be able to hold them back.

Losing his friends was the least of his worries.

*It doesn't take long before Tyler lets go of Blaine's hand. He is trying to be casual about it, but Blaine senses his unease with the way people around them are starting to look at them.*

*'I love this song,' Blaine says without stopping to think, seeking mainly to break the sudden tension between the two of them. 'Wanna go dance?'*

*'Nah, let's go get drinks first. Over here.'*

*A little disappointed with his friend's hesitation, Blaine follows him across the room towards the drinks table.*

*'What are you two doing here?' a voice calls over the loud music as they approach the table, making them stop in their tracks. They spin around and find themselves faced with an angry-looking Shawn Woods, quarterback and Tyler's teammate.*

*'What's it look like, genius?' Blaine says, matching Shawn's anger.*

*Shawn's eyes travel across Blaine first and then Tyler standing a few steps behind Blaine. His lips curl into an unpleasant smile. 'Looks like a fag and his beard of a girlfriend.'*

*'Do you even know what a beard is?' Blaine asks, rolling his eyes and smiling in satisfaction when the other looks uncertain for a moment. Shawn's eyes narrow.*

*'I know that you should both know better than to show up here.'*

*Blaine simply shakes his head at the older boy before turning away and pulling Tyler with him as he starts towards the drinks table again.*

*'So you're here together, right?' Shawn calls after them, apparently not through being nuisance.*

*Blaine turns back, exasperated. 'What? What do you mean?'*

*'I mean one of you asked the other out tonight.'*

*'What's your point?'*

*Shawn feigns a casual shrug. 'It's Sadie Hawkins. Just wondering who asked who here.'*

*Blaine stares. Sadie Hawkins is the dance where the girls ask the boys. Blaine asked Tyler. No matter how casual and more of a suggestion than an I'm-formally-asking-you-out the agreement to go together was, Blaine was the one who did the asking. He has no desire to admit this out loud, however, knowing very well how it will be interpreted.*

*'It was you, wasn't it, Anderson?' Shawn says gleefully, and Blaine knows the sensible thing to do – which would end the conversation here – would be to deny or shrug it off, but he has frozen, unable to think of a response. Shawn laughs.*

*'Hey, I asked him, okay?' Tyler says, stepping up beside Blaine and looking straight at Shawn, all traces of his previous unease gone. 'So there. If you wanna call anyone a girl, it's me. But that's probably not nearly as much fun for you, is it?' Tyler regards Shawn, grimacing in distaste. 'Ignorant prick. Now why don't you leave us alone and go annoy your own date. Or let me guess, did no one ask you?'*

*'You are on very thin ice here, Simmons,' Shawn says, his voice low and dangerous. 'You know the team tolerates you because you happen to be good, but one word from me and the guys will-'*

*'What?' Tyler interrupts, his face the picture of mock interest. 'Pick on me some more? Come up with even more colorful names to call me? I can hardly wait.' He turns to Blaine and, in what Blaine suspects is a very deliberate gesture, he grabs Blaine's hand and begins to pull him back in the direction they came from. 'Come on, Blaine. Let's go dance.'*

---

When Blaine's breathing and heart rate returned to normal, he found himself sitting on the floor by the front door, playing idly with the bow tie he had dropped there earlier. He didn't have much memory of getting there. Kurt had been at the house, hadn't he? It seemed so far away now, as if it had happened in a dream. Blaine stood up, his legs aching a bit from sitting in the same position for so long, and he peeked outside. Kurt seemed to have gone now. How long had it been? Blaine couldn't be sure, but he vaguely noted that darkness had fallen outside, so it must have been a while.

Yawning and mind heavy with exhaustion – too heavy to feel much more than a dull sense of dread – Blaine made his way up to his bedroom, thinking that a nap might do him good. Perhaps he would wake

up in an hour or two with a new sense of hope. However, before he could even reach the bed, let alone lie down on it, the phone that had been left on the desk went off.

'Finally. There you are,' came Kurt's relieved voice the moment Blaine answered the call.

Meanwhile Blaine, far from mirroring Kurt's relief, felt tension creep into his muscles again, because talking to Kurt meant talking about *that*, and couldn't he just be allowed to forget for a little while? He sat down on the bed, his posture stiff and tense. Right now all he wanted was to sleep and dream of simpler times. To put off facing reality until he absolutely couldn't deny it anymore.

'I've been calling,' Kurt said, and Blaine realized that he had forgotten to respond to Kurt's greeting.

'Sorry. Didn't have my phone with me,' he mumbled, eyeing his soft pillow longingly.

'Blaine, are you okay?'

'I don't know what you want me to say to that, Kurt.'

'Yeah, okay. Dumb question.' Kurt sighed. 'This is such a mess.'

'I'm sorry for taking off earlier and leaving you with it,' Blaine said quietly, picking at a loose thread in his bed cover. 'That wasn't fair.'

'It's okay. I think you get off due to extreme circumstances. And for what it's worth, I didn't tell them anything.'

'Right.' Blaine almost commented that it wasn't like it mattered much, since the cat was well out of the bag now, but he did appreciate that Kurt hadn't simply spilled everything at the drop of a hat.

'I didn't think it was my place. And I didn't know what had even happened. What did happen? Do you know?'

Blaine smiled ruefully. 'Remember how I forgot my packer at school yesterday?'

'Oh my god, someone found it?' Kurt asked, horror apparent in his voice. 'But I thought you said the room was locked?'



'It usually is,' Blaine said, thinking back to the previous day and wishing he could go back and make himself pay better attention to his actions. 'But I was in such a hurry, I didn't stop to check, and he saw me as I was leaving. He must have caught the door before it shut.'

'Who? Who did this?'

'A guy off the football team. JT. Except I knew him as Jamie.'

'Wait, you knew him? Someone you know did this to you?'

'Yeah. We used to be best friends.' Blaine gave a short humorless laugh. Some friendship. 'I haven't seen him since his family moved away when I was eight. I didn't know they'd come here. I didn't even recognize him until he told me who he was. Can't say the same for him. I got the feeling he's been watching me for months, trying figure out why I seemed familiar to him.'

'That's really creepy.'

'Yeah, he's a charmer,' Blaine said, going for sarcasm but only managing a tired sort of sigh.

'Have you told your parents what happened?'

'They're not home. I tried calling Dad, but he's traveling or in a meeting or something, and Mom won't be home 'till late. For a change,' he added bitterly.

'What about Cooper?'

'No,' Blaine said blankly. 'He'd go nuts and jump on the first plane here.'

'Isn't that the point?' Kurt countered gently.

Blaine made a non-committal noise of assent. He didn't mention that part of him didn't want to make the call, because he was afraid that would make him fall apart completely, the way a small child's tears over a scraped knee only came when an adult paid attention to it.

Silence fell between them as neither seemed to know how to continue the conversation, but the simple sound of Kurt's breathing on the other end of the line somehow proved comforting to Blaine.

'I have to go,' Kurt said finally, regret in his voice. 'Carole's calling everyone to dinner.'

'Okay,' Blaine said, wishing he could make Kurt stay on the line. Then, before he could stop himself, he blurted, 'I'm really scared, Kurt.'

'I know, honey,' Kurt said, his voice tender and sad. It felt almost like a hug. 'I'm scared too, to be honest. But we'll get through this together, alright?'

Blaine murmured a vague agreement, before he bid Kurt goodbye and then finally sank into the bed, stifling a sob against his favorite pillow. Kurt might be scared, and Blaine thought he had every right to be – it was naive to think that only Blaine would suffer consequences from this – but he couldn't be scared the way Blaine was. He probably couldn't even *understand* Blaine's fear, because Blaine had never told him the details of his first out experience and the night that had so shaped him.

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*At midnight Blaine and Tyler tumble outside in the cold, both feeling happy and high after a successful night of fun, during which their run-in with Shawn was the worst thing that happened. Maybe the school really is starting to get over its issues.*

*Tyler's father hasn't arrived to pick them up yet, so they stand at the entrance, chatting happily and watching the crowd thin around them as they wait. After a few minutes they go back inside the school grounds to check the parking lot and make sure that Tyler's father isn't parked and waiting there, but it only contains a handful of cars, none of which belong to him, and within a few minutes, as the last few students claim their cars and speed off home, the place is completely devoid of cars. They hear distant giggling for a while, but then that too disappears. They are, it seems, entirely alone now.*

*'For fuck's sake, Dad.' Tyler gives an irritated sigh as he gets out his phone and brings it to his ear, calling his father. Ten seconds later he swears again. No answer.*

*Blaine looks around the dark school grounds, telling himself that the shiver that passes through him is entirely to do with the cold February wind. He follows Tyler around to the front of the school again, and they stand in silence for a few moments as they both stare up and down the street, but it appears deserted. Tyler tries his father's cell phone again, but there is still no answer.*

*'He's probably on his way,' Blaine suggests hopefully.*

*'Yeah, or he fell asleep in front of the TV again,' Tyler mutters.*

*They both look around at the sound of an approaching car, but one glance tells them that it isn't the one they are waiting for. The color is wrong and loud, youthful music is blaring out the rolled-down windows. The car slows down when it's level with Blaine and Tyler, and the two share a nervous look. A boy – too old to be in high school, but young; maybe college-aged – pokes his head out at the passenger seat.*

*'Hello boys, past your bedtime, isn't it?' he calls, slurring his words a little. Great. Drunk college students.*

*'Yeah, well. Sadie H-Hawkins dance,' Tyler says, pointing to the school behind them, apparently deciding that politely engaging the older boy is better than ignoring him.*

*'I see.' On the surface the guy sounds friendly enough, but Blaine thinks he picks up on a sinister undertone, and he instinctively takes a step closer to Tyler. The boy notices this. 'And you went...together?'*

*It isn't a question meant to be answered, and the next moment the boy turns away from them to address the car's other occupants. Blaine inches slowly away from the car at the curb, pulling at Tyler's sleeve as he does.*

*'Ty, let's just go,' he whispers, pretty sure that whatever they are talking about in the car, it's not about offering Blaine and Tyler a ride home. Blaine wonders if they should just run for it now, but then that almost seems like inviting trouble. Better to just stay and play nice until the guys get bored and continue on to the party they were probably headed for.*

*The next moment three guys, all physically imposing, exit the car and approach Blaine and Tyler who find themselves backing up a little.*

*'Had fun, boys?' one of the other guys asks – Blaine thinks he was the one at the steering wheel – and Blaine is pretty certain those words have never been spoken with so much menace.*

*'His dad is picking us up any minute,' Blaine blurts, because maybe that will make these guys think twice about causing trouble (and where is Tyler's father?) but then all three guys suddenly focus their attention on him, expressions changing from threatening to something like amused curiosity, and Blaine nearly clasps his hand in front of his mouth at the mistake.*

*'Oh, but wait, this one isn't a boy, is she?' the same guy continues, stepping closer to Blaine who swallows down the sudden fear that has risen inside him. Further back the two other guys are whispering to each other, and though Blaine can't make out the words, he can guess well enough.*

*'Yeah, I heard about this one,' the guy that first spoke to them says, stepping around his friend to get a better look at Blaine. 'My sister goes to school here. She's told me all about you.'*

*'Fucking freak,' the third one says.*

*The guy in front of Blaine is drawing closer still, and Blaine finds himself backing away until he collides with the wall that surrounds the school. Nowhere else to go.*

*'Hey guys, stop this,' Tyler speaks up, moving to stand between Blaine and his aggressor. 'You don't wanna-'*

*'Shut up, fag,' one of the others – Blaine can't remember who is who anymore – snarls, keeping Tyler back with a hand on his chest.*

*Blaine's pulse is racing, but he does his best to stand his ground and appear unfazed. His jaw tightens in determination as he looks up into the older boy's eyes.*

*'I'm not gonna apologize for who I am.'*

## CHAPTER NINE

### *Part 2*

It was still early in the evening, and Blaine's mother had not yet returned from work, when he fell into a fitful sleep, tossing and turning over and over. In his dreams, nightmare visions of the coming time mixed with unpleasant memories, and when Blaine awoke with a start in the middle of the night, cold sweat clung to his body and unshed tears were stinging his eyes. Glancing at the alarm clock on his night stand, he saw that it was only two in the morning. Far too early to get up. Blaine rolled over on his other side and attempted to fall asleep again, but every time he closed his eyes images from his recent nightmare stood sharply in his mind, so for a while he simply lay there, eyes open and trying to think of nothing, praying that sleep would eventually overtake him.

At a quarter to three Blaine gave up and decided to take a bath in the hope that it might calm him. The only calming parts of it, however, were the moments he spent with his entire body submerged underwater. There was a strange quiet down there that made him feel apart from the rest of the world – as if nothing that happened outside that tiny bathtub could possibly matter. Blaine was down there longer than he probably should have been.

Afterward he drew on sweat pants and a t-shirt and went back to bed, but his entire body was still thrumming with so much fear and nervous energy that sleep was impossible, so he resigned himself to not getting any more before school. Blaine's stomach surged. *School*. How was he supposed to go back there? Face everyone? He could barely even face himself.

Biting his lip in an effort to keep back the tears that still hadn't spilled – he was afraid he wouldn't be able to stop once he got started – he rose and picked up his laptop from the desk before sitting back on the bed, crossing his legs and placing the laptop in front of him. Maybe he would be able to find advice online. Blaine couldn't be the first person to go through something like this.

And he wasn't, he quickly realized. Unfortunately the accounts he found were all from people very much in the same boat as him. Lost and scared and bullied. It didn't say what to do next or how to handle the situation.

At one point he began writing his own forum post asking for advice, but even writing the words *I was outed yesterday* made panic rise in his chest, so he quickly clicked away and went back to reading. As he browsed page after page and forum after forum, every piece of advice he found sounded stale and useless,

but he read on because what else was there to do? He kept reading until it started to get light outside, and somewhere along the way he decided not to go to school, not today. Monday. He could deal with it on Monday. Or never. Never sounded good.

A knock on the door startled Blaine out of his thoughts.

'Blaine, are you up? It's past seven,' his mother called. Blaine simply sat quiet and motionless, having suddenly forgotten how to move or form words. 'Blaine?'

Blaine purposely didn't look up when he heard the door open, but he could sense his mother standing there, watching him for a moment as though deciding what to do. Finally she let out an audible breath of air and took two steps further into the room.

'Everything okay?'

'Yeah, I'm fine, Mom,' Blaine said, trying to brush her off.

'You don't look fine,' she said as she sat down on the edge of the bed. Blaine immediately slid off the bed and went to the desk, back turned and pretending to look for something.

'Yeah, well. Looks can be deceiving.'

Blaine shivered a little at his own words, because didn't that just describe him to a tee? All the things he worked so hard to hide from people. Blaine the performer. Except now it was all about to come crashing down, threatening to bury him.

---

*'I'm not gonna apologize for who I am.'*

*'No?' The older boy's face is inches from Blaine's. 'We'll just have to make you.'*

*A punch to the stomach takes Blaine by surprise, and he doubles over, gasping for air.*

*'Blaine!' Tyler cries, and Blaine hears scuffling next to him.*

*'Restrain the fag,' the guy in front of Blaine says in a bored voice and more scuffling and a few strangled yells follow. Meanwhile Blaine has caught his breath, and he manages to straighten up again. He's alright. He's more shocked than in pain, to be honest.*

*Calm eyes are watching him, and Blaine is meant to be scared, he knows that. To cower or plead, but he refuses. He won't let himself be pushed around, so he returns his assailant's gaze as steadily as he can. More than anything he tries not be reminded of the incident in the school bathroom a few months ago, and when he can't he tries to forget about the fear and humiliation and focus on the anger instead. Because how dare they?*

*Blaine is better prepared for the second blow, but it still knocks the wind out of him and sends him flying into the wall behind him. He manages to remain mostly standing but has to steady himself against the wall. His eyes dart around the area, deserted except for the five of them. The two other guys are working together to restrain a struggling Tyler whose panicked eyes are visible even in the dark.*

*As the third blow hits Blaine hard just below the ribs, he falls to his knees, groaning in pain and struggling to breathe.*

*'For God's sake, stop it!' Tyler yells. 'Please, you've made your p-'*

*'I thought we told you to shut up,' one of the boys growls, and a moment later Tyler groans as he takes a punch of his own, and all Blaine can think is no, no, no. Tyler, stay out of this. It's not your battle.*

*Someone – Blaine can guess who – is crouching on the ground next to him. He instinctively begins to crawl away, but a hand tightens around his jacket, keeping him in place.*

*'We can do this all night,' the hand's owner says, and Blaine, still gasping for air, meets his eyes. He can't show weakness. Can't give them that satisfaction. The other boy looks vaguely amused.*

*'What do you want from me?' Blaine asks.*

---

*'Yeah, well. Looks can be deceiving.'*

'Not this time, I think,' his mother said from right behind Blaine, almost making him jump. She put a gentle hand on his shoulder, but Blaine squirmed away.

'I told you I'm fine, Mom. Just go to work.'

'Excuse me?'

'Fine, do whatever. Just leave me alone.' Blaine made to cross the room again, wanting to put some distance between himself and his mother, but she caught his arm. He jerked away violently, stumbling backwards several steps, and his tone was harsh when he repeated, 'Leave me alone, Mom.'

'What's wrong?'

'What do you care?' Blaine blurted before he could stop himself.

She blinked. 'You're my son.'

Blaine huffed out a laugh. 'That hasn't meant much before.'

By the look on his mother's face, Blaine might as well have slapped her, and for a tiny moment Blaine felt better, but the next moment he felt bad. He knew he wasn't being fair.

'I just...I need Dad,' Blaine said carefully. He didn't mean to offend his mother, who was very good at the practical things – at having researched his surgery options or at stomping out the ignorance and rudeness they sometimes faced – but Blaine had never felt particularly close to her, and ever since he had been little, his dad had been the one he went to for comfort.

'Well, tough,' his mother said, unfazed. 'You've got me.'

Blaine let out a long breath, feeling himself surrender. She would find out anyway. He wasn't really planning on keeping the situation a secret. He looked up at his mother, her brow creased in worry as she waited for a response, and he bit his lip. He didn't want to say it. Maybe if he didn't say it, it wouldn't be real.

'What happened?' his mother pressed. 'Did you and Kurt have a fight? Was he being inappropriate?'



Blaine shook his head. If only.

'They know,' he said finally. 'Everyone. Someone found out and he told everyone, and now the whole school knows.'

Blaine swayed on the spot, impacted by his own words. It was really real. Everyone knew his secret now, and he was back to being Blaine The Freak.

'Oh, Blaine,' his mother said, and in his devastation, Blaine had almost forgotten that she was in the room, but now she rushed forward, crossing the room in half a second. She pulled Blaine into one of her rare tight hugs, murmuring wordless comfort into his ear as he finally fell apart.

---

*'What do we want? How about an admittance that you're a disgusting freak of nature, and you're sorry for making the rest of us look at you?'*

*The wise thing to do is probably to just say what the guy wants to hear. Maybe that will put an end to this night. But Blaine isn't thinking much beyond the fact that he's angry, and he will be damned if he lets the bigots win.*

*'How about "screw you"?''*

*The guy reacts quickly. Before Blaine can fully realize what he just said, hands reach out and rip Blaine's shirt open, sending buttons flying everywhere.*

*A few feet away Tyler is screaming, first in anger but then in pain, and Blaine tries not to imagine what the other two are doing to him as he keeps his eyes on his own tormentor.*

*'Let's see what little Miss Freak is hiding here, shall we?' he says as he reaches out towards Blaine's binder-covered chest, but Blaine kicks at him. His aim at the groin ends up landing nearer to the other boy's upper thigh, but it does the trick anyway, and Blaine takes advantage of the moment, scrambling to get up and away. Before he gets more than half a step, however, a hand closes around his ankle and he falls forward, only barely managing not to hit his head on the ground.*

*He doesn't stop fighting, but his attacker is too strong, manhandling him onto his back easily, and then he's on top of Blaine, using his weight to pin Blaine's lower body to the ground.*

*'Don't touch me!' Blaine yells, arms flailing and using every bit of strength in his body to fight the attack, but it's useless against the older, stronger boy who catches Blaine's wrists in one hand and uses the other to shove his upper body hard against the ground. When the back of Blaine's head crashes into the pavement, Blaine briefly thinks he hears something crack, but the next moment he sees stars, and he doesn't think much more after that.*

---

'Okay, sweetheart,' Blaine's mother said, breaking the hug after an indeterminable amount of time had passed and Blaine had calmed somewhat. 'Come, let's get you sitting down.'

Blaine, drained and numb, let himself be led around to his bed, where he had to be prompted by his mother before he sat down on the edge of it. She crouched down in front of him, seemingly trying to get eye contact, but Blaine stared emptily ahead of him instead.

'I'm gonna go call your school, okay?'

That got Blaine looking at her. 'And say what?'

'Nothing, not yet,' she said. 'I'll just tell them you're ill and not coming today. We'll take the weekend to sort things out.'

'Oh.' He nodded, appreciating her words, but he also knew that this wasn't really something they could fix if only they thought about it hard enough.

Blaine sat quietly on the bed, half-listening to his mother make the phone call, while he himself texted Kurt to let him know that he wasn't coming to school today. He was startled out of his numbness when after finishing the conversation with the school, his mother proceeded to call her own work, claiming to be sick. She never called in sick. Not even when she was sick.

---

*Blows are coming steadily from all directions now and from more than one person. Blaine's first thought is that maybe this means Tyler got away – Please let him have got away – but then he hears the unmistakable sound of Tyler's pained groans over his own and knows that someone is still pounding away at his friend. Because of him.*

*A kick to his chest distracts Blaine from the thought. He wonders how many ribs have been broken by now. A kick to his face. He hears his nose break, and he tastes blood in his mouth. A kick to his back. He tries to imagine the different shades of purple and yellow it will be after tonight.*

*If there is an after.*

---

While Blaine's mother discussed the matter with her superior ('No, I definitely don't feel well enough to get anything done at home. '), Blaine's phone buzzed on the bed next to him.

'Hi Dad,' Blaine said heavily. He had almost forgotten that he had called his dad the day before, looking for comfort. Now that he had told his mother, however, he didn't know that he had it in him to say the words again.

'Hey sport,' his dad said lightly though his voice betrayed his worry. 'Everything okay? You sounded upset yesterday.'

'It's not. It's- I-' Blaine swallowed thickly. He had *just* stopped crying.

'Blaine, buddy,' his dad said, voice deep and calming. 'You've got your old man worried here.'

Blaine took a deep breath. 'I was outed. At school. Everyone knows now.'

There was silence on the other end for a few seconds, then, 'Oh god, Blaine. I'm so sorry. What happened? No wait, doesn't matter right now. Are you okay? Is your mom there with you?'

'Yeah, she's staying home from work.'

'Okay, good. Don't go to school today. Regroup. You'll get through this, I promise.'

'I don't wanna have to get through it,' Blaine said, voice breaking.

'I know, buddy. It's not fair. But you're strong, and there's nothing wrong with who you are. Remember that and *know* that. Then your friends will too.'

Blaine didn't feel strong at all. He had never felt less right. And as far as owning who he was, wasn't that what he had done the first time around, back in Columbus? And what had that got him? A hospital stay so long he had known the names of his nurse's grandchildren by the end of it. Blaine was too tired to argue, however, so a quiet 'Thanks, Dad,' was all he said in response.

---

*Every punch or kick is accompanied by a single word.*

*Disgusting.*

*Freak.*

*Bitch.*

*Whore.*

*Worthless.*

*Disgrace.*

*Cunt.*

*Freak.*

*Worthless.*

*Freak.*

*Freak.*

*Freak.*

*Blaine isn't sure anymore if he's imagining it or not.*

---

'Is that your dad?' his mother, who had finished her own conversation, asked, and Blaine nodded. 'Can I speak to him?'

Blaine shrugged. 'Mom wants you,' he said before handing the phone off to his mother who took it with her into the hall outside Blaine's room.

'Hi, John...' was all Blaine heard before his mother's voice faded to a distant murmur, and Blaine was alone in his room again.

He let himself fall back onto his bed with a thud. He was exhausted and his body was aching, not from the binder for once, which he had foregone putting on after the shower, but with a desperate need for sleep. He longed to rest his body and mind, to escape into quiet and nothingness.

But sleep wouldn't bring that, Blaine reminded himself. Sleep would only bring screaming and terror and memories best forgotten. Resisting the temptation to close his eyes, he forced himself to sit up instead. Better to stay awake where he might be able to control where his mind went.

Wondering vaguely when next he would be able to get a good night's sleep, he stood and wandered to his door. His mother was still on the phone, speaking quietly but clear enough that Blaine could make out some words through the gap in the door that had been left ajar.

'I know you just left yesterday, but is there any way that you could come home early?' she said. Her voice was tense and Blaine imagined she might be pacing. 'You could say it was an emergency? ... I know, but John, I'm not- You're better at this kind of thing. ... I'm not what he needs right now. ... He actually said...'

His mother's voice faded again, and Blaine guessed that she had walked into another room. He was thoughtful as he drifted around his bedroom, waiting for his mother the finish, and eventually he ended up back on his bed again. When she came back a few minutes later, looking stressed and worried, he squeezed her hand gently as he accepted the phone back from her.

*After a while he almost doesn't feel it anymore. Or he feels it, perhaps, but he has resigned himself to it, like this is the way it will be forever. The way it has always been. He can't imagine anything else.*

*Hasn't his chest always felt like it's on fire?*

*Hasn't his mouth always tasted of blood?*

---

'It's okay, Mom. I know you're trying and that this isn't your thing.'

His mother smiled carefully at Blaine's words, but sat down next to Blaine with a soft sigh.

'I know I can be absent-minded and forget things I shouldn't, and I'm not...your dad.' She put a hand on Blaine's shoulder, prompting him to look at her as she finished. 'But I love you just as much.'

Blaine nodded. He did know that, but it was still nice to hear. 'I love you too, Mom.'

She smiled, and they fell into silence – comfortable at first, but growing awkward when they both realized that neither of them knew what came next. There wasn't a manual for this kind of situation.

'Are you hungry?' Blaine's mother asked finally, and as though on cue, Blaine's stomach started rumbling. He hadn't eaten since lunch the day before. When he and Kurt had been happy and high on love and sex. Kidding themselves that things would always be so bright and sparkly.

'Yeah, starving actually.'

His mother, appearing relieved to be given something practical to do, guided Blaine downstairs to the kitchen.

'What do you want?' she asked from the fridge as Blaine slid into his usual seat at the kitchen table. 'Eggs? Toast? Pancakes?'

'Cereal's fine. I know you don't like cooking.'

'I could try. If you want.'

'It's fine, Mom.' Blaine's smiled wearily. 'I wouldn't say no to a cup of coffee though. Or five.'

'Let's start with one, huh?' his mother said in a forced light tone as she went about grabbing Blaine a bowl and spoon and handing him the cereal. 'We wouldn't want you overdosing now.'

'Is that actually a thing?' Blaine said, playing along with the game of "Wrong? What could possibly be wrong?" It felt nice to pretend for a little while. 'Like, have people actually gone to the ER for a stomach pump because of too much coffee? Milk,' he added, gesturing at his dry bowl of cereal.

'Right, of course.' His mother handed him the milk. 'I doubt it,' she said returning to their frivolous caffeine talk. 'But I'd rather not see you be the first one.'

'Fine,' Blaine said, prolonging the vowel. He swallowed down three spoonfuls of cereal in quick succession. God he was hungry. How had he not realized before? 'It'd probably take more than five cups though.'

'Probably.' She joined him at the table while the coffee brewed behind them, and in a gesture that seemed out of context with the current conversation, she reached out for Blaine's free hand, caressing softly, her expression tender suddenly. Blaine stilled for a moment, but then continued to eat as though nothing had happened.

---

*Blaine thinks he hears a voice yelling in the distance. But it can't be. This is his world – him, Tyler and three angry men. There is no one else in it, and no one is going to save him from it.*

*'Hey!'*

*He hears the voice again. Great, he's finally going crazy.*

*'Shit.'*

*That voice is a lot closer and definitely real.*

*'Fuck, let's go.'*

*Blaine feels one last kick at his legs, before he hears running feet fading into the distance, and for a moment all is quiet. Then he hears feet again, coming closer this time. He pulls his legs to his chest, curling in on himself.*

*'No, please. No more.'*

---

When Blaine had finished breakfast, they went to the living room to finish their coffee (Blaine his second one).

'So what do you want to do?' his mother asked after another long and awkward silence.

'Move to Australia?' Blaine gave a small, breathy laugh.

'Do you want to not go back there? To start over again?'

'Yes. No.' Blaine shook his head. He wondered where he would even go. Dalton? Dalton had semi-regular interaction with the McKinley kids. It would only be a matter of time. On the other hand Dalton had a zero-tolerance bullying policy, which meant Blaine might be safer there – mentally as well as physically – but could he really go back there after everything that had happened?

---

*'Oh god, Tyler,' a voice 's different from the ones before. Blaine releases a small sigh of relief. They haven't come back after all. 'Oh, my boy. Ty, look at me.' The man is growing steadily more panicked, almost yelling, 'Tyler! Oh god.'*

*'Dad...' Tyler's voice is small and pained.*

*'You're alright, you're alright, you'll be alright.'*

*'Blaine. Help Blaine.'*



'Blaine?' His mother put down the coffee cup she had been holding as though to say *I'm listening*.

'I mean, it's not like the last time. I actually have friends here, and a place where I fit in. And Kurt's here. I don't want to lose all that.' Blaine put down his own coffee and sank back into the couch, blowing out a breath of air. 'But on the other hand, I may have lost most of it already.'

'Maybe it won't be so bad,' his mother said reasonably, and Blaine stared at her. She shrugged. 'Maybe the world has evolved in three years. And maybe it'll be different now that you're so far into your transition. You look a lot less androgynous than back then. People will just look stupid if they call you a girl now.'

'But they'll still know.' Blaine's voice came out more broken than he meant it to. He pulled his legs up, hugging his knees tightly as though this would help contain the emotion bubbling to the surface again now. 'I can't go back to being the freaky kid everyone stares at.'

The first tear spilled just as his mother's arm wrapped around his shoulder, and after that it was like a dam broke. He had thought he let go earlier that morning when his mother had hugged him, but this – this must be what breaking felt like. Tears spilled hot and heavy, rolling down his cheeks and staining his t-shirt.

'I can't, Mom,' Blaine said between sobs, leaning further into his mother's shoulder, and somehow his head ended up resting in her lap.

---

*'Hey kid,' a voice – Tyler's father? – says at his ear. 'You with me?'*

*Blaine doesn't reply, but he winces when a hand touches his shoulder.*

*'It's okay, I'm not gonna hurt you.' A shaking hand touches his face, which is still tucked into his chest, gently turning his head up. Blaine complies, rolls onto his back, and tries to open his eyes but finds that he can't. The man lets out an audible gasp, and he murmurs to himself, 'But someone sure did, Jesus Christ.'*

---

'I know, sweetheart. I know,' his mother said as Blaine cried harder and harder, burrowing closer and closer. His mother seemed a little unsure what to do, but Blaine really just needed her to be there.

And then a wonderful thing happened, and she *was* there, wrapping one arm around him and stroking his hair gently with the other hand, and Blaine felt a small part of him relax, one cog falling into place even while the rest of him was falling apart.

---

*There isn't an inch of Blaine's body that doesn't ache. He's vaguely aware that Tyler's father is in the process of calling an ambulance, but his head is swimming, and he can't focus on any of the words. He thinks he might throw up. God, everything hurts.*

*He shivers a little when a gust of cool wind blows over him. He becomes aware that his shirt is still open and that his binder has been pulled up above his chest, leaving him exposed. Oh god. A wave of humiliation rolls over him. No, that isn't it.*

*For the first time, he feels gross.*

*Blaine rolls over on his side despite the excruciating pain that shoots through his body as he does. His hands are shaking and a single tear trickles down from the corner of his eye as he pulls his shirt closed in front of him.*

---

After a while Blaine's sobs quieted to a soft weeping, and eventually they too died out as Blaine felt himself drifting off to sleep. He was so, so exhausted. Sleep would help. Sleep would be good. Yes, sleep.

---

*I'm sorry,' he whispers into the night just before he feels the sweet, welcoming oblivion of unconsciousness washing over him.*

## **CHAPTER TEN**

*All that you are and everything that you do (A word they say)*

'Blaine!' Kurt yelled after his boyfriend as the latter ran out. Finn watched from the back row as Kurt made to follow but was kept back by Rachel when she put a hand on his arm.

'Kurt, what's going on?' she asked.

'Yeah, is it true?' Artie chimed in.

Kurt turned to face the room again. His mouth moved wordlessly and a hush fell over the room as they waited for his response. A moment passed before he folded his arms across his chest and straightened his back. Going into defensive mode.

'It's not my place,' he said.

The moment the words left Kurt's mouth, chatter broke out again, everyone talking at once so that making out more than a few words here and there was impossible. Finn got the general gist of it, however, and – more importantly – so did Kurt who looked more and more uncomfortable by the second, making Finn confused as to whether he wanted to join his friends in asking questions (so many questions) or if he would rather tell everyone to shut up and leave Kurt alone.

'Guys, what's going on here?' Mr. Schue said next, making the decision for Finn (he couldn't very well tell his teacher to shut up). Kurt, who had been inching towards the door, sighed in frustration as he let himself be turned away from it once more. He looked like he wanted to be anywhere but here. 'I feel like I've missed something.'

'Didn't you hear about Blaine?' Puck said. 'Apparently he's a girl.'

'What?'

'*Stop saying that,*' Kurt said in a dangerous voice that made Finn appreciate that Kurt wasn't speaking to him. 'He's not a girl.'

Puck's face scrunched up in confusion. 'So he's not a tranny then?'

Finn frowned. Weren't those men who dressed up in women's clothes? Like drag queens? That didn't seem to have anything to do with what they were saying about Blaine though. Drag queens weren't girls. And Finn didn't understand how Blaine could be a girl to begin with. The dude had facial hair and he boxed and stuff. None of this made any damned sense.

'Hey!' Rachel said sharply, startling Finn from his thoughts. She glared at Puck. 'That's a really rude word.'

'Well, I'm sorry,' Puck said, throwing his hands up. 'I'm just wondering what the hell is going on here.'

'I think we all kind of are,' Mr. Schue said, and murmurs of agreement sounded throughout the room. 'Kurt?'

'We're your friends, you can tell us,' Mercedes said.

'No one's gonna judge,' Quinn said.

'We're all just really confused,' Sam said.

Everyone looked expectantly at Kurt, but he just shook his head. Finn was reminded of that time back in December when Blaine had been freaked out about something, but neither he nor Kurt had wanted to say what. Was this it? He (or she?) was a girl? But how-

'You guys,' Brittany said, and Finn looked over at her, train of thought interrupted once more. 'You're acting really strange. Blaine's clearly not a girl.'

'Brit, this is a bit more complicated than that,' Santana whispered, although Finn heard her clearly through the hush that had fallen over the room.

'Why?' Brittany said, frowning at Santana's words. She looked at Kurt. 'Does he *want* to be a girl?'

'No,' Kurt replied.

Brittany looked around at the rest of them. 'Seems pretty simple to me.'

'Thank you, Brittany,' Kurt said. 'Now if you'll all excuse me, I have to go find my *boy*friend.'

As Finn watched Kurt go, he had the urge to follow, but the second Kurt was out the door, the debate started up again, making leaving kind of awkward. And okay, Finn was maybe hoping that someone had an answer to what was going on, because this was really very confusing.

'I'm still confused,' Puck said, echoing Finn's thoughts

'Maybe someone just made up that rumor to mess with him,' Mercedes offered.

'Or us,' Artie added.

'But clearly something's going on, or Blaine wouldn't have run off like that,' Quinn said.

'What do you say, Mike?' Sam said, turning to him. 'You guys hang out a lot, don't you?'

'Um, I don't know.' Mike shifted in his seat, looking uncomfortable with the way everyone was looking at him now. 'Except for everything with the Warblers recently, he's seemed fine, I guess?'

Everyone looked disappointed when Mike couldn't offer anymore than this, but Finn didn't know what they had expected. Whatever was going on, it obviously wasn't something Blaine made a habit of sharing with other people.

'But what do they even mean "he's a girl?" Sugar asked the room after a few seconds of silence.

'Yeah,' Mercedes agreed. 'Boy doesn't really look like one.'

'Or sound like one,' Tina said.

Santana rolled her eyes, looking very unimpressed with them all. 'Haven't you people ever heard changing genders?'

'No way,' Puck all but gasped. 'They make 'em like that? But you can't even tell.'

'That's the point, dumbass,' Santana snapped.

'I just don't understand why anyone would wanna do that,' Quinn said. She looked kind of queasy. 'Change what God gave them.'

'Well, maybe he wasn't happy as a girl,' Rachel said softly, still lingering in the middle of the floor where she had addressed Kurt a few moments ago.

'It's still a bit weird though, isn't it?' Artie said, throwing up his hands in defense when everyone stared. 'Hey, I'm just saying what everyone's thinking.'

'Speak for yourself,' Rachel shot at him before taking an empty near Finn. Meanwhile Finn found himself wondering if he really did think it was weird. True, he might not really understand it, but did that necessarily make it weird? There were after all a lot of things Finn didn't understand. And who said "weird" was bad anyway? People said the glee club was weird.

'It is a little weird,' Puck insisted.

'And Kurt's gay. Like really gay,' Sam said. 'How do they work that one out?'

'I wonder what his name was before,' Sugar said.

'And, like, does he still have-'

'Hey!' Finn yelled as he stood up suddenly, startling everyone. 'Blaine's our friend. We shouldn't talk about him like this. And he actually looked pretty upset before. Why aren't we worrying about that?' Around him, a few people were looking ashamed, while others seemed more puzzled at Finn's outburst. Finn shook his head and rose from his seat, mumbling as he started towards the door, 'I'm gonna go help Kurt.'

Kurt had already gone from the hallway, so Finn spent a while looking for him as well as Blaine. Finally he found Kurt exiting the auditorium. Kurt immediately tensed at the sight of Finn. Defenses up again.

'Please, Finn,' he said, walking past. 'I can't do any more questions right now.'

'I wasn't going to ask,' Finn said truthfully. Kurt stopped and turned to regard him skeptically. Finn shrugged. 'I figure making sure he's okay is more important at the moment.'

'Oh. Thanks.' Kurt still looked wary, but seeming to recognize that Finn was serious, he breathed out, looking suddenly very tired. 'Actually it'd be great if you could drive me to his house. I don't think he's in the school anymore, and my car's at home.'

'Sure thing,' Finn said and, pushing away all the questions and concerns that were still nagging him, he put a hand on his brother's shoulder and led him towards the parking lot.

---

Kurt cursed out loud as yet another call went to voice-mail. He had lost count of how many times he had tried calling Blaine now.

'Still no luck?' Finn asked, stepping through Kurt's open bedroom door.

Kurt shook his head and flopped down on his bed where his History textbook was still open on the same page it had been an hour ago.

'I'm really sorry,' Finn said.

'You've said that.'

'I didn't mean to freak him out like that.'

Kurt sighed. 'Finn, it's fine. It's not like you're the one who outed him.'

Kurt looked back at his textbook, trying to find his place but realized he had forgotten everything he had read so far, so he ended up skipping back to the beginning of the chapter. Before he could start reading again though, he became aware that Finn was still hovering in the doorway, and he looked up.

'Yes?'

'I know I said I wouldn't ask questions-'

'Then don't.'

'Look, I'm not trying to pry, but it's kind of out there now, and-'

'Please, Finn,' Kurt said, getting up from his bed and waving Finn out of the room. 'I'm not ready to talk about this.'

'But-' Finn protested though he was backing away.

'Leave.' Kurt closed the door. 'Call me when dinner's ready.'

Kurt picked up the phone from the bed and called Blaine's number for what felt like the twentieth time, mouthing a quiet mantra of *Pick up your phone, pick up your phone, pick up your phone.*

When Blaine finally did pick up (an hour or so later), the conversation that followed was good for very little other than confirming for Kurt that Blaine really had been outed and there was no way back now. Kurt did his best to reassure Blaine, but his words sounded empty even to himself.

When Kurt had been called to dinner and they hung up, Kurt felt sudden tears gathering in the corners of his eyes. He wiped them away quickly and angrily. He had no business getting upset, when Blaine was hurting so much more. When he *needed* Kurt.

Kurt was quiet throughout dinner, listening to his dad talk about Washington – normally such an interesting topic – with only half an ear. A million thoughts were whirling around his head, all centered around Blaine. The right thing to say. The right thing to do. How to handle school and friends and family. He felt like he was being faced with a surprise exam in a subject he was not remotely prepared for, and now he had no idea what he was supposed to be doing.

'...and well, we're not moving mountains or anything,' Kurt's dad was saying about some project or other he was working on. 'but a lot of rocks can go a long way too, right?'

'That's great, dear,' Carole said, patting her husband's arm. 'Though I must say we miss you during the week. It's great to have you back early this week. Right, boys?'

Neither Kurt nor Finn responded. Kurt glanced at Finn who was playing with the food on his plate. He didn't seem to have eaten a lot of it.

'Boys?'

Kurt forced a smile. 'Yeah, it's great.'

Kurt's dad and Carole exchanged a look.



'Something happen at school today?' his dad asked.

Kurt forced casual shrug. 'No, everything's fine.'

'Actually...' Finn began, and Kurt's eyes snapped to Finn, knowing just by his tone, the slight hesitancy, where Finn was going. 'Something did happen.'

'Finn. Don't,' Kurt said, warning in his voice.

When Finn caught Kurt's eye, he looked torn for a moment, but then he looked back at the adults and pressed on, 'It's about Blaine.'

'Finn, shut *up*.'

'I'm sorry, Kurt, but you won't talk about it.'

'Because this isn't my issue to talk about,' Kurt said through gritted teeth.

'You're dating him,' Finn argued. 'They deserve to know.'

'*Excuse* me?' Kurt put down his fork and knife with a loud clatter, making everyone at the table jump. 'It's none of anyone's business. Just because some idiot decided to blab to the whole school doesn't make it anymore so.'

'Kurt, calm down,' his dad said gently. 'Whatever it is, it sounds like we run a risk of finding out anyway if the whole school knows.'

He and Blaine had discussed telling Kurt's family at some point, but this was not how either of them had wanted it to happen. Kurt had not discussed it with Blaine, nor was he at all prepared for it, so he simply shook his head at his dad's words.

'What is it, Finn?' his dad prompted Finn, when it became clear that Kurt wasn't going to spill.

'Well...' Finn eyed Kurt nervously. 'It somehow got out that Blaine's actually a girl.'

'No, he's not,' Kurt said before anyone had the chance to react. He turned to his dad. 'He's transgender.'

Kurt's dad frowned. 'What, so he wants to be a girl?'

Kurt sighed, closing his eyes for a moment. 'No, Dad. Other way around.'

His dad looked at him for a few long seconds, seemingly trying to work out what Kurt was telling him. Then his eyes grew huge, and his mouth fell open. 'No. Really? Are you sure?'

Kurt almost smiled. 'Yeah, Dad. I'm sure.'

'But he looks so...normal.'

'Dad!' Kurt exclaimed, scandalized. 'He is normal.'

Kurt's dad looked to Carole, but her mouth open and closed wordlessly, seemingly too stunned for words. After a moment or two of silent communication, Kurt's dad looked back across the table.

'And you're okay with this?'

'Yes,' Kurt said simply.

'Are you sure you've thought this through properly though?' His dad seemed to be struggling with a thought. 'I mean, you're supposed to be gay and the last time you tried not to be, with that cheerleader from your glee club-'

'Oh my god, Dad, this is not even remotely the same thing,' Kurt said, trying hard not to get angry. He had to remind himself that his dad meant well and that he was simply uninformed. 'I am gay. Blaine is a boy.'

The room was silent for a few long moments as Kurt's dad seemed to digest Kurt's words. Kurt's heart was hammering painfully in his chest, and he had completely lost his appetite. As much as Kurt was not going to take anyone's crap and *did not care* what they thought, he also kind of... did. He really needed his dad to be okay with this.

'What about what this means for you?' Kurt stared blankly at his dad, because what about it? This wasn't about him. 'Okay, look. I've nothing against the kid. I'm sure Blaine is a lovely person, I'm just-'

'He is. You've met him, remember? You make him call you Burt.' Kurt glared around at his family. Finn looking guilty. Carole looking bewildered. His dad looking concerned. Kurt huffed out a noise of exasperation before standing up. 'You know what, I can't listen to this. I'm dating him and that's that. You don't get any say in it.'

'I wasn't-' his dad began, but Kurt had lost his patience somewhere around "cheerleader" and wasn't hearing it.

'I'll be in my room.'

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The next day Kurt awoke to a message from Blaine, telling him that he wouldn't be coming to school that day, that his mother was staying home with him. Kurt was relieved that for once Blaine's mother was putting her son before her job, but on the other hand it worried Kurt that Blaine wasn't just coming to school like usual. He was afraid that the bigger a deal Blaine made out of the whole thing, the more the general population of McKinley would see that as a sign of weakness and pounce on it. If Blaine held his head high, people were less likely to pick on him.

When Kurt entered the kitchen half an hour later, showered and dressed, he found his dad there, suspiciously alone. Usually Finn or Carole, if not both of them, would be there by this time. Kurt rather felt like he had walked into an ambush.

'We need to talk,' his dad said.

'No. We don't, Dad,' Kurt said, before striding past his dad to the fridge.

'Yes, I really think we do.'

Kurt was checking the contents of fridge, trying to decide on breakfast, and he didn't look up when he responded. 'I already said everything I was gonna say.'

'Well, I didn't 'cause you didn't let me finish.'

Kurt slammed the fridge shut and rounded on his dad. 'Please, can we not do the intervention thing right now?' Kurt was tired and anxious about the day ahead, and he still hadn't spoken properly to Blaine about all this.

'Will you stop being so damned defensive? I'm not trying to tell you what to do here.'

Kurt reached into the cupboard for the cereal box, finding that he didn't really have the energy for anything more complicated. He glanced skeptically at his dad. 'Then what?'

'I'm just trying to understand. I don't really know what this all means.'

Kurt raised an eyebrow. 'It doesn't "mean" anything. He's just a boy who happens to be transgender.'

'You can't really think it's that simple,' his dad said, watching from the same spot as Kurt went about grabbing milk, a bowl and a spoon.

'It is that simple.'

'Really?' his dad said doubtfully, sitting down across from Kurt. 'So there's been no issues to sort out whatsoever? You're just like any other couple?'

Kurt thought of Blaine's issues with sex, with trust and being open about things. He thought of Blaine's occasional bad days when he would be moodier than usual. He thought of the back aches Blaine's binder gave him, and how Blaine had confessed to regularly wearing two of them when his mood or a particular outfit called for it. He thought of Blaine telling him back in November that he would rather have their friends think he cheated than have them know he was transgender. Then he shook his head a little as if it rid his mind of the thoughts. 'What's your point?'

'My point is that I know you care about Blaine, and I do to – we all do – but he's not your responsibility, and you're not obligated to date him.'

'What?'

'I just mean that it's okay to think about what's best for you.'

Kurt stared at his dad. 'Blaine is what's best for me.'

'I know you think that, but you're young and...' Kurt pushed away the bowl in front of him, suddenly nauseous. 'Listen, I don't know a whole lot about this. In fact I only know what I was able to gather from an hour online last night, but the things I read were... If you just think about this rationally-'

'I don't need to.'

Kurt's dad smiled indulgently. 'Because your heart tells you all you need to know?'

Kurt swallowed down a spiteful response to what he thought was a rather patronizing remark and instead muttered a stiff, 'Something like that.'

'Look, Kurt. I'm really not going to tell you what to do. I'm not. I figure you'll be nineteen in a few months and well, you gotta do what you gotta do.' His dad stood and walked around the table to stand next to Kurt who eyed him warily. 'But I can still offer advice, and I just want you to make sure that you've thought this through, because being with someone like Blaine is not without consequences, you have to realize that. Especially as you get older.'

Kurt was on his feet in seconds, cheeks burning in anger. "'Someone like Blaine'"?

'Kurt-'

'Wow, make him sound a bit more like a freak, why don't you, cause that sentence didn't quite cut it.'

'Kurt, please. Work with me here,' his dad said with the air of someone who knew he had made a mistake and was trying to regain control of the situation. 'I'm on your side.'

'Really?' Kurt folded his arms across his chest. 'Cause it sounds to me like you're uncomfortable with the whole thing, so you're looking for reasons I should dump him without having to say so.'

'Hey now, when have I ever played that game with you?' Kurt avoided his dad's eye as the latter stepped forward and put a calming hand on Kurt's shoulder, waiting until Kurt relented and lifted his gaze. 'You and me, we've always been honest with each other, right?'

'I know, I'm sorry.' Kurt sighed and unfolded his arms. 'I'm just...protective. And I get that you guys have questions, and that's fine I guess, but I just can't answer them all right now. Not until I've talked things through with Blaine.'

'Okay,' his dad said, nodding his acceptance.

Kurt gave a nod of his own before moving towards the hall. 'I have to get ready for school. But' – He turned in the doorway – 'for what it's worth, I'm fine. You don't need to worry about "consequences" or anything. Blaine's all that matters.'

For a moment Kurt's dad looked like he had more to say, but then he simply threw his hands up in surrender. 'Whatever you say.'

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If there had been a question about whether or not the general population of McKinley cared about the revelation that Blaine Anderson was "really a girl", it was answered the moment Kurt stepped through the doors that morning. Curious heads turned to look his way, and some idiot shouted across the hall, 'Hey, Hummel! Where's your girlfriend?' to the amusement of the people around him.

Kurt ignored them and held his head high as he made his way to his locker. He had just finished gathering his things and was slamming the locker shut, when he caught sight of Mike heading towards him. The two of them didn't usually socialize in the halls, so Kurt had no trouble guessing what Mike wanted, even when Mike didn't seem to know how to start the conversation.

'Blaine's not coming to school today,' Kurt said, answering the unasked question.

Mike nodded, digesting this information for a few seconds before blurting out, 'Is he okay? Cause, like, I wanted to call him last night, but then I didn't know what to say, and I didn't want to make things worse. But the way he ran out yesterday, he just seemed so...'

'Not okay?' Kurt finished for him.

'Yeah.'

'I honestly don't know.' Kurt leaned against his locker. 'I mean, I know he's freaked out, but I hoped he'd come to school today and just get it over with, but...'

'Should I call him?' Mike asked, worry in his eyes. 'Tell him- I don't know...' He trailed off, uncertain.

'I don't know, I think... I think he just needs space right now, you know?' Mike nodded. 'But I'll tell him you asked about him.'

'Okay, thanks.' Mike made to leave, but only turned half away before turning back again, and Kurt could see him trying to put a thought into words. 'I don't really know much, or anything really, about being...being trans. But he's my friend, and the least I can do is to try and understand, right?'

'You're a good friend, Mike,' Kurt said, smiling as some of the – unrecognized but still there – "Are our friends going to be okay with this?" worry was lifted off his shoulders. The bell rang and they were about to part for different classes, when Kurt turned back. 'Actually can you do me a favor?'

'Sure.'

'I'm skipping glee today and going to Blaine's, but can you pass on the message to the others that he needs space, and to not bother him until he wants to be bothered?' Kurt dared a small smile, trying to lighten the mood, although for whose benefit he wasn't sure. 'And we definitely don't need a "We support you" serenade. You can look straight at Rachel for that one.'

Kurt and Blaine hadn't discussed any of this directly, but judging by the incident with Finn the day before, Kurt rather felt he was right to insist that Blaine should see his friends again on his own terms only. Kurt just hoped that Blaine would at least want to see him.

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When Kurt rang the doorbell at Blaine's house that afternoon, he waited anxiously for a few moments before the door was opened by Mrs. Anderson, whose quick smile as she invited Kurt in did little to mask the worry in her eyes.

'How is he?' Kurt asked when he had hung his coat and pulled off his shoes.

'Sleeping right now, I think.' Mrs. Anderson hugged her arms around herself, looking so different from the put-together state Kurt usually saw her in. 'He's been drifting in and out all day, and every now and then he jerks awake suddenly. He doesn't say, but I think he has nightmares.' Mrs. Anderson quieted, biting her lip lightly as though afraid that she had said too much. She gestured towards the living room. 'He's in here.'

Kurt followed Mrs. Anderson into the living room, where Blaine was lying on the couch, sleeping underneath a thick blanket. His hair was curly and ungelled and, from what Kurt could see, he was wearing the kind of clothes he might have worn to bed.

'He looks so young,' Kurt said as he sat in the armchair indicated for him.

'It's the hair, isn't it?' Mrs. Anderson, taking the chair next to Kurt's, her eyes on Blaine as she spoke. 'I can't even remember the last time I saw it like this. It's how I knew something was wrong this morning before he told me.'

Kurt glanced at Mrs. Anderson. She was usually so business-like in her demeanor, and despite the fact that Kurt only really knew her as Blaine's mother, he sometimes forgot that "Head of department" was not her only job title. But the way she was looking at Blaine now truly brought home the fact that she was in fact a mom. That Blaine was her son.

And as Kurt looked from her to Blaine again he saw what she was so concerned about, because while Blaine might be sleeping, he did not actually look relaxed at all. His legs were pulled up a little, and his hands were clutching the blanket as though to keep someone from taking it. His eyes were shut almost too tight, his features too tense, and his breathing was shallow.

'Has he said anything about what he wants to do on Monday when he goes back?' Kurt asked, glancing briefly at Mrs. Anderson.

She shook her head in response. 'If he goes back at all.'

'What do you mean?' Kurt asked a little more sharply than he meant to, his full attention on her now.

'I've told him we're not going to force him.'

'So, what? Dalton?'

'It's an option.' She paused. 'Or somewhere else entirely. He could stay with my sister in Colorado.'

Kurt stared. 'Colo- Isn't that a bit...'



'But nothing's been decided yet.' She sighed. 'He's just so scared right now. And I'm scared for him too to be honest.'

'People will get over it,' Kurt said with more certainty than he felt. 'And he has the glee club. They may ask some awkward questions at first, but they'll accept him, I know they will.'

'That's not what I'm worried about. Not really.'

'Then what?'

Mrs. Anderson turned around towards Kurt, looking thoughtfully into space for a few moments before her gaze settled on Kurt. 'How much has he told you? About his school in Columbus?'

Kurt wasn't sure where Mrs. Anderson was going, but a feeling of unease crept into his stomach at her words, and he replied as casually as he could. 'I know he was bullied a lot, that they thought he was a freak.'

'And you know how it ended?'

Kurt swallowed. 'The Sadie Hawkins dance.'

'What has he told you about that?'

'Not a lot,' Kurt said, his attempt at a shrug failing as his muscles tensed in anticipation.

'No details about what happened during or after?'

Kurt merely shook his head.

Mrs. Anderson regarded him for a long moment, and Kurt got the sense that she was trying to decide how much to tell him. Kurt found himself both hoping for and fearing "everything." When she stood up, Kurt thought she was about to leave, but she simply walked over to the window at the other end of the room. It was another long moment of her just standing there and looking out at the street before she spoke, still turned away from Kurt.

'There was a time before Blaine came out to us when...he wasn't happy. I think John and I did know in some way, but then we didn't *want* to know, and he wasn't complaining, you know? And the horrible truth is that you get used to it, the way his smile would never quite reach his eyes, and you start to believe that this is normal.'

As Mrs. Anderson turned around, her eyes fell on her son's sleeping form.

'My Blaine, he puts up such a good front, I think even he believed it sometimes.' She smiled a sad sort of smile. 'When he came out, it was hard for a while, yes, but once we'd all had time to adjust and settle in, it was- I mean, the *difference* in him. You wouldn't think it with all the bullying he got, but those first six months of high school was the happiest we'd seen him since... since he was a toddler probably. It was like...watching him come alive again. He didn't like the way people treated him obviously, but he never let it get to him, not really. He was just...*Blaine* for the first time, you know?'

She looked over at Kurt for the first time since beginning to speak, and Kurt nodded. He still wasn't quite certain what Mrs. Anderson's point was, but he resisted saying so, interested to hear more about a past that Blaine didn't speak about much – not, Kurt suspected, out of shame or secrecy, but for the same reason that Kurt preferred not to talk about some of the darker moments from his own career as a bully victim. Because it was too hard to.

'But that night...' Mrs. Anderson began, a dark look crossing her features. She turned and shut the curtains in front of the window in two quick motions, shutting out the darkening street, and the look on her face when she turned back was tired and heartbroken. 'They broke his spirit that night.'

Kurt watched silently as Mrs. Anderson crossed the room again and perched on the coffee table directly in front of Kurt, looking at him when she spoke.

'Those guys didn't just rough him up a bit, it wasn't just some prank gone a bit too far. When his dad and I saw him in the hospital that night, I- I've never seen anything like it. You can't know – and I hope you'll never have to know – what it's like to see your child like that. His face unrecognizable from all the swelling. Cuts and bruises everywhere. More broken bones than I care to count. He didn't wake up at all for the better part of a day, and then when he did, they had to move him to a private room because he kept waking up in the middle of the night, screaming and crying.'

Kurt's eyes were watering and he stifled a quiet sob against his hand. He didn't know exactly what he had imagined when Blaine said that he had gotten "the living crap" beaten out of him, but it certainly wasn't what his mother had just described. Kurt had trouble comprehending the kind of hate it must have taken someone to do that, and to a fourteen-year-old kid – a child basically. It seemed so far from anything Kurt had ever known or experienced. It was the kind of thing that belonged in movies or stories, not real life. Not his Blaine.

Kurt opened his mouth to say something (though he had yet to decide what), but was distracted by sudden stirring from Blaine on the couch. Blaine's head was moving quickly from side to side and faint whimpering broke the quiet of the living room.

Kurt instinctively moved forward to kneel on the floor in front of the couch, a hand touching Blaine's shoulder gently, seeking to soothe him.

'Blaine, honey, you're dreaming,' Kurt said, when Blaine continued to thrash, and finally with a sharp intake of breath, Blaine woke, his eyes flying open, wide and scared. Kurt caressed his face and spoke softly, 'It's alright, I've got you.'

Blaine blinked. 'Kurt? You're here?'

'Yes, I'm here, you dummy,' he said, half laughing, half crying. 'What did you expect?'

Blaine let out a long breath that seemed to calm his entire body. The muscles in his face relaxed, his face opening up even as his eyes closed, long lashes fanning his cheeks. Maybe it was Blaine's sudden vulnerability or maybe it was the things his mother had just told him, but for a moment as Kurt wiped a stray tear from Blaine's cheek, grateful that Blaine couldn't see Kurt's, he felt as though he was comforting a much younger Blaine, and he wished he could go back three years and tell Blaine how very loved he was going to be one day.

Blaine opened his eyes again, sniffing a little. 'I'm sorry for being such a weak mess. I don't mean to fall apart.'

'Hey. You are not weak,' Kurt told him firmly. 'And you'll get through this, I promise. You're gonna be okay.'

Blaine smiled weakly. 'Why do I believe you when you say that?'

Kurt returned the smile. 'Because I'm always right?'

Blaine snorted into the couch, and Kurt let out a short breath of laughter of his own. Silence fell between them, and their hands seemed to find each other of their own accord, not squeezing or stroking but simply holding, like a steady promise. Eventually Blaine's eyes closed again, and before long his breathing slowed into the deep, steady rhythm of relaxed sleep.

'It's amazing how you do that,' Mrs. Anderson said behind Kurt who turned, a little startled. He had almost forgotten that she was there. 'He hasn't looked more peaceful all day. He's lucky to have you.'

Kurt blushed. It felt odd to be complimented like this by Blaine's mother of all people who until recently he hadn't really interacted with beyond "hello" and "goodbye" and who frankly Kurt hadn't even liked a lot of the time.

'We should probably leave him to get some proper sleep,' Mrs. Anderson said, standing up, and Kurt followed suit. 'Let's go into the kitchen.'

Kurt followed Mrs. Anderson into the kitchen, watching uncertainly from the door as she began making coffee, suddenly much more brisk and closer to how Kurt was used to seeing her as though something had brought her out of the moment and she was realizing that getting emotional in front of her son's eighteen-year-old boyfriend was entirely inappropriate.

'Uhm, do you... I mean, was there more? To the story,' Kurt said. As affecting as Mrs. Anderson's words had been, Kurt rather felt like the point was still waiting somewhere around the corner.

Mrs. Anderson, back turned to Kurt, stilled and braced herself against the kitchen counter, sighing. 'Yes, sorry. It's just- bad memories. I don't think I've ever been more scared than I was that night.'

'You don't have to tell me,' Kurt said quickly. There was something a little frightening about seeing a grownup, an authority figure, this vulnerable.

'No, it's fine, you need to know this.' Mrs. Anderson took a deep breath, gathering herself, before turning and facing Kurt again. 'And in case I wasn't sure, that in there' – She gestured towards the living room – 'just proved it.'

Kurt wasn't sure what she was getting at, but he didn't ask, choosing to let her get to the point in her own time.

'Anyway,' Mrs. Anderson continued. 'The cuts healed and the bones mended. Even the nightmares stopped eventually. But he never went back to being the boy he was before.'

'How do you mean?'

'It's hard to explain...' She trailed off, using the moment to grab the finished coffee and two cups, raising one at Kurt in question. Kurt nodded and moved to meet her on the other side of the kitchen island. 'He started being...' She searched for words again as she poured two cups. 'Like with everything he did, he was apologizing for existing. Maybe that's a harsh way of putting it, but it's a far cry from how proud he was before. It's like he got more and more...controlled. In ways a fifteen-year-old shouldn't be. Does that make sense?'

'And you think he's still like that?' Kurt said, doubt in his voice, but even as he did, words and images from the last three months of his and Blaine's relationship flooded his mind, and he knew she was right. *I can't deal with everyone knowing*. A Blaine who uttered those words like it was his worst fear. A Blaine that had seen ghosts the week after coming out to Kurt, because he wouldn't let himself believe that Kurt was really still by his side. A Blaine who would use words like *gross* and *freak* and *wrong* to describe himself.

'You've only known him like this, so maybe you don't see it, and I'm not trying to convince you that there's anything wrong with him. He is who he is, and we deal with that.'

'I didn't- I mean, I always knew that he could be a bit...hard...on himself, but I thought it was just the dysphoria.' Kurt swallowed thickly, and he clutched his coffee cup tighter to keep his hands from shaking. 'I didn't know someone made him like that.'

Kurt reeled from the realization that this wasn't just the way things were. That something had been stolen from Blaine. That someone had managed to convince Blaine that he was somehow less, when, really, he was so, so much. It was heartbreaking to know that Blaine didn't realize that.

Mrs. Anderson watched him with a pained look on her face. 'I'm sorry, Kurt. Maybe I shouldn't have told you.'

Kurt wiped a tear from his cheek. 'No, it's good. I think I needed to understand.'

'Do you see now why I'm scared for him? The first time he was out to a whole school, it didn't just end badly – it *changed* him, whether he realizes it or not. Right now he's not just freaked out because he was stealth and well, it would be easier if people didn't know.'

Kurt stared at a coffee stain on the counter, feeling guilty for the small, secret part of him that had been thinking that Blaine just needed to get over it and face it like a grownup.

'Whatever he ends up deciding to do,' Mrs. Anderson continued. 'I think it's important that you understand that. That you won't be disappointed or think he's a coward if he says he needs to start over at a different school.'

'I wouldn't,' Kurt said immediately, even though he knew he had expressed just that when Mrs. Anderson had mentioned Colorado.

'I hope he doesn't. I hope he can go back there. But if he can't you deserve to know where the decision is coming from, and I'm not sure he'll want or even be able to explain it himself. But I know he would want you to understand, which is why I've been talking your ear off for the past fifteen minutes.'

'Thank you for telling me,' Kurt said, and the two of them shared a faint smile.

'You're welcome,' she said. 'And if he does decide to face school on Monday...'

'Then I'll know what that means to him.'

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Kurt spent the next hour or two with Mrs. Anderson in the kitchen. She was determined to have a proper, home-cooked meal on the table for Blaine that night, but admitted that she had no idea where to start. Luckily Kurt considered himself quite adept in a kitchen and didn't mind giving her a few pointers, nor did he mind when he ended up doing most of the work.

It was odd and awkward at first hanging out with Blaine's mother so casually and without Blaine there, but the more time Kurt spent with her, the more he found that he liked the woman. Unlike Blaine, she wasn't an obvious warm personality, but then neither was Kurt except when it came to a select few people, so Kurt thought he could understand that. It didn't mean that nothing was there.

Dinner was nearly ready and they were just discussing whether or not to wake Blaine, when he showed up in the doorway by himself, wearing an adorable bedhead and looking like someone who had just woken from a much-needed nap.

'That smells w-wonderful,' he said as he stifled a yawn, looking from the pots and pans to his mother. 'Did you do this?'

She nodded proudly before catching herself and smiling at Kurt. 'Well... I may have had some help.'

'Only a little,' Kurt said, winking at her as she walked over to Blaine.

'Wow, did you two, like, bond while I was asleep or something?' Blaine asked, looking mildly horrified, but Kurt just grinned.

'Maybe,' he said mysteriously before stealing a kiss from Blaine's lips and twirling away to pick up the plates and cutlery Mrs. Anderson had set out. Kurt was perhaps overdoing the cheer a little, but he figured it was better than behaving like someone had died and Blaine actually looked okay at the moment. The nap really seemed to have done him some good.

'I made a decision,' Blaine said. Freezing in the act of setting the table, Kurt looked up, and by the stove Mrs. Anderson had paused as well. 'On Monday I'm...I'm going back there. I'm going to face it. I need to. I'm not going to run.'

Silence filled the room as everyone took in the meaning of Blaine's words. Blaine himself looked calm and determined, but Kurt also noticed the clenched fists and the wideness of his eyes, quiet terror apparent. Kurt thought of everything Blaine's mother had told him today. Of Blaine hospitalized and marked for life for the simple act of being himself. Of what was taken from Blaine that night. And he thought - who the hell wouldn't be terrified?

He pulled Blaine into a tight hug, offering strength and finding himself awed by the amount Blaine was showing already by choosing to do this, and the thought occurred to Kurt then that if this pride or sense of self-worth was really something that had been stolen from Blaine, then maybe, *maybe*, that meant that there was a way for him to steal it back.

## CHAPTER 10

### *Part two*

'And remember, any question you don't want to answer, you just say so,' Kurt said as the car pulled into the driveway. He reached over and straightened Blaine's bow tie, although it was more for the gesture than anything. 'They don't get an all access pass just because they're my family.'

Blaine nodded mutely, his head twisted away from Kurt and staring out the window towards the house.

Kurt had made the suggestion to come here the previous night and Blaine had agreed that it would be a good idea to clear the air of any misunderstandings and that it might serve as a sort of practice run for Monday when he would be facing the entire school. He had been quiet all morning, however, and on the drive over to Kurt's house he had been getting steadily paler and paler. Kurt made a mental note to get Blaine a glass of water once they were inside.

'Ready?' Mrs. Anderson asked from the driver's seat and for a moment Blaine looked like he wanted to back down, but then he nodded determinedly.

They exited the car and not many moments later (too few probably, if you asked Blaine) Mrs. Anderson rang the doorbell, Kurt and Blaine standing side by side behind her. Kurt took Blaine's hand momentarily, squeezing reassuringly although he wasn't altogether sure Blaine noticed.

It wasn't until Kurt's dad opened the door that it occurred to Kurt that his and Blaine's parents had never met before, and he and Blaine shared a look as the adults made awkward first introductions. What a way to meet.

'Was that them?' came Finn's voice from the top of the stairs, and a moment later he stood in front of them in the hall. He gave Blaine his best friendly smile. 'Hi, Blaine.'

'Hi,' Blaine breathed, voice barely audible and eyes wide and staring. Kurt got the sudden feeling Blaine hadn't realized that Finn would be there.

'Please, come inside,' Carole said, gesturing towards the living room, which thankfully turned Finn's attention from Blaine's unfortunate reaction.



The plan was for Blaine himself to take the lead in telling Kurt's family what he thought they needed to know. Blaine had specifically asked for that. However, when the moment came – when they had all sat down, been supplied with drinks and tasted Carole's home baking – Blaine was quiet.

'Sweetheart?' Mrs. Anderson said, and on Blaine's other side Kurt took Blaine's hand, hoping to inspire courage.

Blaine kept staring at a spot on the coffee table, still saying nothing.

'Okay, I guess I'll start us off then,' Mrs. Anderson said, turning her attention to the three relative strangers across from her. 'As you now know my son – Blaine – is transgender. In his case that means that he was born into a female body and for many years we viewed him as our daughter, but today he lives and identifies as male.' She paused, and next to him Kurt could feel Blaine relax the tiniest bit, though he still looked like he wanted to sink into the ground. 'I want you to know that this is nothing to be scared of, that he's not dangerous or crazy, but we also understand if you have questions. It's not something most people ever deal with. Trust me, my husband and I had a lot of questions and worries at first, so it's completely normal.'

When Mrs. Anderson fell silent, Carole cleared her throat and looked uncertainly from Blaine to his mother, clearly wondering who it was prudent to address. 'When did you... I mean, how old...'

'It's been four years,' Mrs. Anderson said. 'Blaine was nearly fourteen when he finally came clean. We set him up with a therapist and he began transitioning socially, and then a few months after turning fifteen, he began transitioning medically as well.'

'I'm- I'm sorry, "medically"?' Carole asked, still the only one to really react to Mrs. Anderson's words. Kurt's dad and Finn sat on either side of her, Finn in quiet confusion while his dad's expression was unreadable. 'What does that mean exactly?'

'HRT,' Mrs. Anderson said, then clarified, 'Hormone Replacement Therapy. Bi-weekly injections of testosterone to give him the male puberty he wanted.'

'And how long does that take?' Kurt's dad asked, speaking for the first time since the hellos in the hall.

'Well, it's for life. It is possible to stop treatment, but some things would go back to the way they were before, not to mention the mental effects can be quite profound.'

'Okay, I see,' his dad said. He glanced at Blaine just as Blaine finally looked up, and their eyes met for a moment, at least judging from the way Blaine's hand clenched around Kurt's.

'It's okay, you're okay,' Kurt said quietly enough that he thought only Blaine could hear. He wished his dad would smile or something.

'Can I ask something?' Finn said.

'Sure, Finn. It's why we're here,' Mrs. Anderson said kindly. Kurt really hoped Finn wasn't about to ask something stupid like "What was your birth name?" Finn was a good person and Kurt loved him, but he didn't necessarily recognize when something was inappropriate.

'Right, okay. I just, how did you know?' The question was directed at Blaine, and Finn looked him steadily in the eye as he spoke. Meanwhile Blaine's gaze seemed to flicker nervously between Finn and the rest of the room. 'Because I'm trying to understand, and I get how you might have felt very masculine or whatever, because, like, Kurt is sort of feminine and- and that's fine. Maybe a hundred years ago it wasn't, but today people can do that. You can have dudes who are feminine and chicks who are masculine. So why couldn't you just be a really masculine girl? Wouldn't that be easier? I don't understand why it matters.'

'Well, you see-' Mrs. Anderson began but cut herself off, when Blaine took a breath as if to say something. She looked at him questioningly. 'Do you want to?'

Blaine gave an almost imperceptible nod. When Kurt squeezed his hand again in reassurance, Blaine merely untangled their hands, but Kurt understood that it wasn't in rejection.

'I don't really know why it has to matter. It just does,' Blaine said. He seemed to be speaking to the armrest more than Finn, but his voice was steady enough. 'I didn't choose to be like this. I just know that whoever designed us put sex between the legs, but gender between the ears. Most people never have to think twice about that, because it just... matches. But for transgender people those two things conflict, so you get the mirror telling you one thing, but your brain keeps telling you that something is wrong. What people then choose to do about that "something" can vary a lot. For me it meant transitioning socially and medically, and come May when I have top surgery, it will be surgically as well.'

Blaine paused, cheeks suddenly pink as he seemed to realize that all focus had turned to him. He glanced around uncertainly.

'Was that- Am I making sense?'

Kurt opened his mouth to say something encouraging, but Mrs. Anderson beat him to it. 'You're doing fine, sweetheart.'

From there the conversation flowed quite smoothly. Blaine was able to answer most of the questions directed at him while calmly meeting the asker's eye, letting his nervousness show only through the occasional deep, steadying breath and clinging tightly to Kurt's hand. Kurt, for his part, stayed mostly quiet.

Kurt's three family members each tended towards specific kinds of questions. Finn seemed most concerned with trying to understand what it was like to live in "the wrong body" and Blaine did his best to explain the concept of dysphoria. When he struggled beyond "I don't like my body," he apologized and said that it was kind of like trying to describe a color. You could get all technical about it, but if a person had never seen it, then they would never really know.

Carole had a lot of questions about how Blaine had handled the transition, how friends and family had reacted. Blaine explained that his mother's side of the family had, for the most part, been open-minded ('And if anyone was rude, my mom would pretty much give them hell,' Blaine said with a small smile), but that his father's had been and was a tougher sell. It was also during this line of questioning that Kurt's family were told what had happened to Blaine in Columbus. It was the short version and Mrs. Anderson explained most of it, but Kurt's hand still almost went numb with how tightly Blaine was gripping it.

The questions Kurt's dad asked centered mostly around practicalities and Blaine's day-to-day life, was he still seeing a therapist and what about the future. Would getting into college be a problem, and what about marriage and kids. What kind of discrimination did he face and which laws protected him. At the time the conversation Kurt had had with his dad was still so fresh in his mind that he heard his dad's concerned questions as a thinly veiled message to him. *Do you see? Consequences.* It wasn't until later that it occurred to Kurt that his dad's tone had been more kind than accusing, and that perhaps his dad wasn't testing Blaine's suitability for Kurt as much as he was trying to figure out what he as a politician might be able to do to help his situation.

When the conversation was coming to an end, when everyone seemed to have asked what they were going to, Blaine looked around at them all, uncertainty showing again. 'So you're all... okay with this?'

'Well, it's like you said, isn't it?' Kurt's dad said. 'We may be colorblind here, but that doesn't mean that colors don't exist, and well, you're a good kid.'

Carole nodded, smiling. 'We couldn't ask for a better son-in-law.'

'Yeah,' Finn said eagerly. 'And I figure, like, Kurt is really gay, so if he's willing to date you, that's like a stamp of approval right there.'

'*Finn*,' Kurt said. 'He doesn't need anyone's-'

'It's fine, Kurt,' Blaine whispered, laughter in his voice. 'He means well.'

Kurt swallowed down the angry remark and instead counted his blessings that they had successfully made it through this conversation, all relatively unscathed (his hand did hurt a little), and Blaine seemed fine, all things considered, if still a little pale. Although Kurt knew that the situations weren't exactly the same, he thought this boded well for Monday.

A little while later when they were all gathered in the hall once more, Blaine and Mrs. Anderson getting ready to leave, Kurt's dad stood in front of Blaine and clapped him on the shoulder.

'You keep that chin up, alright?' he said, and Blaine shifted a little under his gaze. 'And if anyone gives you a hard time, they'll have me to deal with in addition to that lioness of a mother you have. Mm?'

Blaine nodded. 'Thank you, Mr.-' Kurt's dad gave Blaine the look he had given him so many times before, and it was kind of nice to know that although some things had changed, other things stayed exactly the same. 'Burt. Thank you, Burt.'

At that moment the doorbell rang and Kurt, who was nearest the door, opened it to find Rachel on the other side.

'Hi, Kurt. I- Oh. Hi, Blaine.'

'Hi, Rachel,' Blaine said, noticeably avoiding her eyes.

Rachel looked around at the many people in the hall. 'Sorry, I'm interrupting something.'

'No no, it's fine. We were just leaving,' Blaine said quickly before turning to Kurt. 'I'll see you tomorrow?'

'I'll come over first thing,' Kurt confirmed before hugging Blaine goodbye. With a few more thank yous and goodbyes they were out the door, and as Kurt invited Rachel inside, the others dispersed from the hall (Finn with what looked like a silent exchange of *I'll talk to you later* to Rachel), leaving the two of them alone.

'I'm sorry, I didn't know he was here,' she said, wincing a little.

'Not your fault,' Kurt said, shrugging and leading the way upstairs to his bedroom.

'So...' Rachel said once they were inside with the door closed behind them. 'Blaine is transgender.'

'I'm not gonna tell you his entire life story,' Kurt said bluntly as he dropped his school bag on his bed.

'I wasn't going to ask you to,' Rachel said quietly, sounding hurt at the accusation. 'I was just going to say that whatever anyone else says, you have my support.'

'Oh.' When Kurt turned around, Rachel was looking at him through earnest eyes, and he reminded himself not to snap at people before giving them a chance to speak. 'Thanks.'

'How long have you known?' Rachel asked as Kurt sat down on the edge of his bed.

'About three months. I walked in on him around Thanksgiving, which kind of forced him to come clean.'

Rachel's eyes grew wide and her mouth fell open. 'Really? That's how you found out?'

'Yep,' Kurt said, amused by Rachel's shock.

'Weren't you angry he didn't tell you?'

'I was,' Kurt admitted, remembering the sharp pain of the lie and the feeling that Blaine didn't trust him. So much had happened since then. 'But I also understood why he didn't, so in the end I forgave him and we moved on.'

'Wow,' Rachel said, joining Kurt on the bed, pulling her legs up and sitting cross-legged next to him. A moment passed before she spoke again. 'Well, I'm glad you found someone like Blaine.'

'What?' Kurt said, head turning sharply to look at Rachel. That was an odd thing to say, even for her.

'Oh god, that made sense in my head,' Rachel said, grimacing at her own words. 'I just mean the fact that you stuck with him despite his lie, and... I mean, I'm not saying he's diseased or anything, but it's gotta be challenging, right?'

'It's...' Kurt drew back and moved to sit against the headboard. 'It's had its moments.'

'And I guess' – Rachel's cheeks pinked a little – 'sex might have been a little different from what you expected.'

Kurt just shrugged, partly because he hadn't really thought about it much, and partly because he was so not going there with Rachel.

'So the fact that you're looking past that,' Rachel went on, her voice soft. 'must mean that...he's something special.'

Kurt smiled. 'Yeah, he is.'

'How's he doing? He looked kind of pale when I saw him downstairs.'

'Well, we just had the big talk with my family,' Kurt said, and Rachel winced sympathetically. 'It went alright, but he's still just really freaked out, I think. He didn't exactly plan for everyone to find out, least of all like this. But he's at least decided to come to school on Monday.'

'Okay, that's good,' Rachel said, nodding. 'And how are you?'

'Me? I'm fine.'

Rachel cocked her head at him. 'It's okay if you're not, you know. You didn't plan for this either.'

Kurt shrugged. 'It's a hundred times worse for him, so I can't really complain.'

Rachel crawled across the bed to sit in front of Kurt. She put a hand on his leg. 'Just because he's not okay doesn't mean that you have to be.'

'It doesn't?' The words were more of a statement than an actual question.

'Kurt.'

'Rachel, I'm *fine*,' Kurt insisted though he avoided Rachel's eyes. 'And he needs me. You don't know the kind of things he's going through. I don't wanna add to that.'

Silence fell between them for a few seconds. Then, 'Have you thought about yourself at all for the past three months?'

'Of course I have,' Kurt said, waving a hand. 'Look, Blaine helped me a lot when I first met him. So...it's my turn now.'

'I don't think you're really supposed to take turns,' Rachel said, frowning. Kurt didn't answer. 'Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying you shouldn't be there for him. You love him, and you absolutely should. But don't forget that you're a person too.'

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'You're quiet,' Blaine said. It was Sunday morning, and the two of them had been watching TV in the Anderson living room for an hour or so, not talking about anything in particular.

'It's a quiet sort of day,' he said, shrugging his shoulders. The quiet before the storm.

'Everything okay?'

'I can't believe you of all people are asking me that, Blaine.'

'What does that-' Blaine cut himself off at the sound of the doorbell ringing, and his eyes lit up. 'That'll be him.'

Blaine rose from his seat, and Kurt followed him out into the hall, where Mrs. Anderson was already opening the door. He watched Blaine's face light up in a smile at the sight of Cooper on the other side.

'Blainey!' he exclaimed, though it was without the usual enthusiasm Kurt had come to expect from him. The moment he had unloaded his bags on the floor, he pulled Blaine into a tight hug, and Kurt saw but didn't hear him mumble something into Blaine's ear as he did.

An hour later the two brothers were sitting in together in the living room, having a serious conversation while Kurt went to and from the kitchen, helping Mrs. Anderson prepare lunch, and as such Kurt only heard snippets of the conversation.

'So what's your plan for tomorrow?' Cooper asked at one point.

'Well, I figured I'd just go to my lessons as usual?' Blaine replied, looking confused.

'And the moment someone looks at you or says something to you, what then?'

Blaine sighed and leaned back into the couch. 'I don't know, run and hide?'

'No, no, no,' Cooper said, tugging at Blaine to make him sit up straight again. 'You gotta stand tall, alright? Show 'em they can't get to you.'

'But what if they can get to me?' Blaine asked quietly, just as Kurt left the living room, heart aching and cutting off his access to the conversation.

Another time Kurt walked back in, bearing two glasses of water, to find the two brothers sitting cross-legged face to face on the couch, both wearing serious expressions.

'Alright,' Cooper said. 'Repeat after me: I am someone.'

'Coop,' Blaine said, expression cracking and if Blaine hadn't been Blaine, Kurt was sure he would have rolled his eyes.

'No, I'm serious, okay,' Cooper said, glancing at Kurt and taking a sip from his water. 'Thanks, Kurt.' He looked back at Blaine. 'This stuff's been proven to boost confidence. Come on, try again.'

Blaine sent Kurt an embarrassed look, flushing a little. 'I am someone,' he mumbled.

'Good. Now again, a little louder, and *mean* it.'



'I am someone,' Blaine repeated, voice firmer.

'I deserve respect,' Cooper went on.

'I deserve respect.'

'I am strong.'

'I am st-' Blaine let out a sudden snort and dissolved into a fit of giggles. 'I'm sorry, Coop. Thank you, but this isn't gonna help.'

'Well, not if you laugh yourself through it,' Cooper said, looking perturbed.

Kurt, on the other hand, was just so happy that Blaine was capable of laughing at all, and he felt lighter than he had for days. The next moment, however, Blaine seemed to catch himself as though he remembered that he wasn't supposed to be having fun right now, and he didn't laugh again for the rest of the day.

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'Pass the peas, please?' Kurt said before accepting them from Cooper a moment later.

When he was done, he offered the bowl to Blaine, who was sitting next to Kurt, playing with the food on his plate. He shook his head without even looking up. Kurt set the bowl down and put his hand on Blaine's leg, stroking gently.

'Are you okay? You're barely eating.'

Blaine shifted in his seat, jerking his leg away from Kurt's touch.

'I'm fine,' he mumbled, still staring down at his plate.

Kurt looked up to find that Cooper and Mrs. Anderson had both been observing this small incident from their side of the table.

'Wow, Mom, this is actually really good,' Cooper said, voice full of false cheer. 'When did you become such a great cook?'

Mrs. Anderson waved a hand, mimicking Cooper when she spoke. 'Oh, with all the whispering in my ear, I probably shouldn't take too much credit.'

Mrs. Anderson smiled at Kurt, and Kurt attempted to smile back but was distracted by the way Blaine was stabbing moodily at his food. He had been quiet for most of the day – more and more so – but now he was adding irritability to it, and it worried Kurt.

'You really should eat, Blaine,' Cooper said, dropping the cheer and speaking sincerely. 'You're going to-'

'Don't tell me what to do,' Blaine said, shooting a glare at his brother.

'You're stressed about tomorrow, we get it. But just, remember what we talked about, and you'll-'

Blaine made a particularly violent stab at a piece of chicken before looking up properly. 'Can we just *not* talk about this for two seconds?'

'Well, we haven't actually since-'

'*God*, Cooper.' Blaine set his fork down with a clatter.

'Honey, he's just trying to help,' Kurt tried.

'Just' – The chair scraped against the floor as Blaine stood up – 'leave me alone.'

Blaine threw his napkin on the chair, and without a second glance at any of them, he turned and walked out of the kitchen, leaving them all to stare helplessly after him.

'I should go talk to him,' Mrs. Anderson said after a moment, eyes flickering uncertainly towards the living room door.

'Don't,' Kurt said at the same time as Cooper put his hand on her arm. 'I think he just needs space for a minute.'

Mrs. Anderson nodded mutely, and they ate the rest of the meal in relative silence, speaking only in short sentences. Afterward Mrs. Anderson busied herself with the dishes, and Kurt and Cooper shared a brief look before moving into the living room.

Blaine was sitting cross-legged on the couch, his face buried in his hands. Kurt sat down next to him while Cooper took a nearby chair.

'I'm sorry,' Blaine whispered. 'I was...'

'I know,' Kurt said, reaching to caress Blaine's leg again, thankful when he didn't shy away this time.

When Blaine looked up at Cooper, he looked suddenly so *tired*, and Kurt knew it was at the prospect of another round of confidence-boosting quotes. Kurt thought maybe it was because it mostly just reminded Blaine how much he didn't believe them.

'You know what, let's just watch some TV. Budge over.' Cooper sat down next to Blaine, turning on the TV as he did. 'Look, Punk'D marathon. Remember how you used to laugh at those?'

But Blaine didn't laugh today. In fact the whole thing ended up becoming an exercise in uncomfortable as they watched things that were supposed to be funny, but which no one felt like laughing at. It only got worse when Mrs. Anderson joined them, all the time looking back and forth between the TV and Blaine, as though she wanted to say something but didn't quite know where to start.

Finally when the third episode ended, Blaine stood up and announced that he was going to bed.

'Wait,' Mrs. Anderson said, grabbing Blaine's arm when he passed her chair.

'Mom, I just wanna go to sleep,' he said, voice small.

'I know. But just' – Mrs. Anderson stood and faced Blaine properly – 'whatever happens know that you have people who love and support you.' Blaine nodded, and when Mrs. Anderson pulled him into an awkward hug, Kurt barely heard her mumble into his ear, 'And we're so proud of you.'

Blaine pulled back out of her arms and glanced briefly around at them all. 'Goodnight.'

As Mrs. Anderson watched him go with a confused look on her face, Cooper rose and went to her, running a comforting hand along her arm. 'It's okay, Mom. He'll be fine.'

Kurt felt like perhaps it was time to leave the remaining Andersons alone and go to bed too, but he still waited twenty minutes before going upstairs, giving Blaine time in case he wanted to pretend to be asleep when Kurt slipped into bed next to him, whispering, 'You awake?'

'Yeah,' came the response, murmured against a pillow. 'I can't actually sleep, but I didn't really want to sit down there any longer.'

'Yeah, I get that,' Kurt said, shifting closer and spooning himself around Blaine. The tension in Blaine's body was unmistakable and even more apparent when Kurt wrapped an arm around his middle. He couldn't even imagine what Blaine was feeling right now.

Without warning Kurt felt tears forming in his eyes, burning them when he tried to keep them back, and he sniffled quietly.

'Kurt, are you crying?' Blaine asked, rolling over to face Kurt, worried eyes visible even in the dark of the bedroom.

'It's nothing, it's nothing,' Kurt said, waving a dismissive hand, which Blaine stilled and held between both of his.

'It's not nothing, you're crying.'

'It's fine, don't worry.' Kurt pulled his hand back to wipe at the few tears that escaped. 'I'm just being silly.'

'Hey,' Blaine implored, cupping Kurt's face with a warm hand. 'Whatever it is, I'm sure it's not silly.'

'It's just-' Kurt's voice broke and he swallowed, trying to get it under control. 'It breaks my heart to see you like this. I know it's not your fault, and I know it's, like, a million times worse for you, so I shouldn't even complain-'

'Hey, no, that's fine. You're allowed to have feelings too.'

Kurt shook his head. 'I wanted to be strong for you. To be there for you and help you in whatever way I can.'

'You are, Kurt. And you do. Every day.' Blaine's eyes were soft and concerned, and he seemed to have set aside his own fears and anxieties for the moment. Kurt almost smiled at the irony. 'But don't put so much pressure on yourself, and don't forget about yourself in the process. I never wanted that.'

Kurt was about to protest that he hadn't forgotten about himself, but had to admit that maybe he sort of had, if only in small ways. He let out a sudden half-choked sob, as Blaine inched closer to him, a hand on Kurt's waist caressing gently. 'This is the worst timing ever, I'm so sorry.'

'No, it's fine.' Kurt's saw Blaine's soft smile through blurry eyes. 'I don't mind the distraction to be honest.'

Something Blaine's quiet, warm voice melted Kurt's last hold on his emotions, and before he knew it he was sobbing into Blaine's chest, releasing months of pent-up worries and feelings he had denied himself at the time. None of them were actually that big, but a lot of small brushed aside – verbally and mentally – issues had somehow added up to a lot, and releasing everything at once was more than a little overwhelming.

'Oh, Kurt, sweetheart,' Blaine murmured as his strong arms wrapped around Kurt. 'You've been doing this a lot, haven't you? Holding everything in.'

Kurt attempted to pull away, already feeling guilty for falling apart like this – he didn't even fully understand what he was crying for – but Blaine wasn't having it.

'It's okay, I'm not gonna break,' he whispered, pulling Kurt impossibly closer.

Minutes passed like this until eventually the tears stopped flowing and Kurt's breathing evened out, everything bad now overshadowed by the simple pleasure of being this close to Blaine. Something that got even more pleasurable when Blaine tipped his face up and placed a gentle kiss on his lips. It was innocent and sweet at first – chaste almost – and Kurt smiled into it, but it soon grew hungrier, more insistent. When the kiss broke and Kurt pulled back a little, Blaine's pupils were very obviously blown.

'Really?' Kurt said, quirking an eyebrow. 'I thought you were supposed to be all scared and upset right now?'

'You're proving to be a very nice distraction,' Blaine said with a grin as he pushed Kurt onto his back and straddled him. He smirked and swiveled his hips, making Kurt groan. 'You don't seem to mind.'

'Mm, you're right, I really don't,' Kurt said, pulling at Blaine's pajamas to claim another kiss. 'But only if we can be really quiet. I'm not having another conversation like the one we had with your dad the other week.'

'It'll be fine,' Blaine said, but Kurt had a feeling he was far too aroused to care at this point. If he was honest, he wasn't very far behind himself. 'But you gotta promise me one thing.'

'What?'

The expression on Blaine's face was serious now. 'Don't worry about me.'

Kurt frowned. 'What?'

'Am I wrong in thinking that me and my issues have always been at the back of your mind whenever we've fooled around?'

'You say that like it's a bad thing that I care about you.'

'No, it's not, and I'm not saying it's not my fault it's been that way but, Kurt, you gotta let it go, at least some of the time. Trust that I'll speak up if I'm not comfortable.'

'Okay, I guess that makes sense.'

'Good boy,' Blaine said, shifting quickly back into flirty mode. 'Now with that out of the way, I thought we might like to try something new.'

'Did you now?' Kurt said, running his hands up Blaine's thighs. 'Do share.'

Blaine seemed to consider for a moment. Then he stretched across the bed, staying on top of Kurt as he did, and opened the drawer in his night table. He rummaged for a moment before straightening back up and dropping a condom on Kurt's stomach.

'For you,' he said. 'But I stay up here.'

When Kurt gave an involuntary moan, he wasn't sure if it had more to do with Blaine's words or the fact that his hands were roaming rather freely now. Kurt let his own explore what they could from his lying position, and gave a satisfied smirk when Blaine's breathing hitched. 'Mm, Mr. Anderson, I like how you think.'

'Of course you do,' Blaine said, grinning mischievously, and Kurt was glad that, if nothing else, Blaine had gained confidence in the bedroom.

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*'Excuse me.'*

*This is how it starts.*

*'Um, hi. Can I ask you a question? I'm new here.'*

*The boy has kind eyes.*

*'My name is Blaine.'*

*The handshake is simple, but to an untouched boy it means so impossibly much. And then even more when the warm hand stays in his all the time as they run. To be touched so effortlessly.*

*Then the strange boy starts singing, and despite a million other boys in the room, it feels like a serenade.*

*'...you brought me to life, now every February, you'll be my Valentine.'*

*Kurt is pretty sure he must have been dropped into the middle of a fairytale.*

.

Kurt felt himself slipping out of the dream and struggled to hold on to it, to still hear the song in his mind. It had been such a nice dream. So simple and hopeful.

Kurt blinked himself awake, suddenly sensing something wrong with his surroundings. The space next to him, the space where Blaine should have been lying, was empty. Kurt felt the mattress. Cold. Blaine had to have been gone for a while then.

Frowning, Kurt rose from the bed and tiptoed into the dark hall. He looked down the hall and was just considering checking the bathroom when soft piano music reached his ears. Assuming that the noise was coming from the living room downstairs, Kurt padded down the hall and down the stairs.

A single small lamp lit the living room where Blaine was sitting at the piano, playing a soft melody, a little hesitant and with small stops and starts as though he was still figuring out how to play it.

'Hey,' Kurt said from the doorway, hoping he wouldn't startle Blaine.

'Hey.'

Blaine didn't turn around or stop playing, but neither did he sound annoyed at being disturbed, so Kurt took that as permission to approach him.

'Couldn't sleep?' he asked when he was next to Blaine.

Blaine shook his head. 'Ran out of distractions.'

The playing stopped, and Blaine scooted over on the piano bench, making room. Kurt sat carefully, just close enough to feel the heat of Blaine's body through thin layers of clothing.

'What were you playing?'

'Just some song that was stuck in my head,' Blaine replied as he ran his fingers across a couple of keys, touching but not tapping hard enough to produce notes. 'I was trying to arrange it for the piano.'

'Do you want to play it for me?' If Kurt knew Blaine right, it wasn't just some random song that was on his mind at a time like this.

'I don't really know how to play it yet,' Blaine said quietly, eyes still on the piano.

'That's okay.' Kurt touched Blaine's leg gently. 'It doesn't have to be perfect.'



'Okay.' Blaine breathed in deeply and readjusted his posture. He began playing, similar notes to the ones Kurt had heard a moment before, and after a short intro he began singing as well.

*'Life's too short to even care at all,' he sang quietly. 'I'm losing my mind, losing my mind, losing control. These fishes in the sea, they're staring at me...'*

.

*'My heart stops when you look at me.'*

*The boy is perfection. Laughing eyes. A cute smile. Killer voice. Confident performer. Most importantly he looks at Kurt with a smile. With kindness. With warmth.*

*And Kurt's lonely heart wants to burst in his chest, because he's ready. He feels ready. Ready to love and be loved.*

*'Be your teenage dream tonight.'*

*The song ends, and Kurt claps so long and hard that his hands hurt a little by the end.*

*His very own Prince Charming.*

.

*'...Restore life the way it should be, I'm waiting for this cough syrup to come down.'*

Kurt blinked himself back to the present. The harsh reality of the here and now where his Prince Charming didn't simply exist to be handsome and perfect. Where he had his own, very real problems.

*'One more spoon of cough syrup now.'*

Blaine was still playing music, just like he had on that first day, but the song had changed a lot. Maybe he and Blaine were not everything Kurt had imagined on that day sixteen months ago. Maybe Blaine wasn't quite the Prince Charming he had expected.

But maybe they were actually each other's Prince Charming, and maybe that was even better.

## **CHAPTER ELEVEN**

*A sea full of sharks and they all smell blood*

.

'Wow,' Blaine breathed when he and Kurt had entered the car, and he was backing out of the driveway. 'I don't think I've been hugged that much in a year, let alone in one single morning.'

His mom and Cooper had been all over him that morning, hugging him every five minutes and then what felt like fifty times just before he and Kurt had left on the insistence that neither his mom or Cooper needed to accompany them.

'They care about you,' Kurt said from the passenger seat. 'It's a good thing.'

'I know, I know. I'm not complaining really. It's just, you'd think I was soldier going off to war or something.'

'Well, maybe you are,' Kurt said thoughtfully.

Blaine raised an eyebrow. 'I'm a soldier?'

'In a way?' Kurt thought for a moment, then a warm smile spread on his face. 'You're a fighter, I know that much.'

'And McKinley's my war,' Blaine mused and added after a moment, 'Actually that's a pretty good metaphor for high school in general, isn't it?'

Kurt snorted in amusement. 'Yeah, I guess it is.' He was silent for a moment or two before turning and looking seriously at Blaine. 'You're gonna win this one, you know.'

Blaine felt his breath catch in his throat, taken aback by Kurt's sudden serious tone. He swallowed. 'Yeah. Yeah, I hope so.'

They didn't talk much for the rest of the journey, and it wasn't until they rolled into the parking lot at McKinley that Blaine realized that he had been gripping the steering wheel rather more tightly than necessary. He breathed out slowly, attempting to soothe himself, but as he and Kurt walked across the lot

towards the entrance, the opposite seemed to be happening, his heart seeming to beat harder and faster with every step he took.

They were just outside the doors, when Kurt – much to Blaine's surprise – took Blaine's hand in his and held it tightly. Blaine looked quizzical, but Kurt simply shrugged.

'They're gonna stare at us anyway,' he said.

Blaine nodded silently. His heart was still thumping so hard it hurt, but it felt muted somehow, like it didn't matter as much when Kurt was here, squeezing Blaine's hand tightly and keeping him reminded that he was not alone. Keeping him grounded and determined. He could do this.

Blaine drew a deep breath before he pushed the door open and led the way inside. They made their way through the semi-crowded hallway, and Blaine could sense heads turning and mouths moving, but he did his best to ignore them and kept his head high as they walked.

He was doing well until they reached Kurt's locker and Kurt let go of his hand. It was as if he had lost his anchor. A surge of panic coursed through him, and he once more became fully aware of his pounding heart. The people around him were suddenly extremely loud, as though someone had just maxed out the volume of a video game everyone was part of, and now Blaine was hearing bits of conversation left and right.

'History first lesson, right?'

'I mean, a C? I told you she hates me!'

'Dude, did you see the game last night?'

'Man, English sucks. They oughta give you points for just speaking it.'

'Did you hear? About the guy from the glee club?'

Blaine turned away from the voices and focused every inch of his being on the motions of Kurt's hands as he gathered his things. Biology textbook thrown into his locker. History textbook shoved into his bag. Locker closing with a snap. He concentrated hard on not paying attention to the conversations going on

around him. On not checking if people were staring at him. On not caring whether the giggle he just heard had anything to do with him.

'Are you okay?' Kurt asked. He hoisted his bag over his shoulder and frowned in concern.

'Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. Don't worry,' Blaine said, sounding more frantic than he meant to. He shook his head at himself and started down the hall, tugging Kurt with him. 'Come on, let's go get my stuff.'

Blaine made quick work of collecting the books he needed for his first class of the day, and continued to ignore his fellow students to the best of his ability.

'Do you want me to walk you to class?' Kurt asked.

Blaine slammed his locker shut. 'Kurt, I'm not five. I don't need a babysitter.'

'Okay, sorry.' Kurt winced. 'I'm just trying to toe the line between "supportive" and "patronizing" here.'

Blaine let out a soft sigh. 'No, it's fine, I didn't mean to snap. But it's like you said, isn't it? The bigger a deal I'm seen to be making out of this, the bigger a deal everyone else will make of it.' He looked at Kurt who nodded. 'So it's probably best if we just go about our day as normal.'

'You're right. We should get to class then.' Kurt looked at his watch and readjusted the bag hanging from his shoulder. 'I'll see you in third?'

'If I'm still alive by the end of second, yeah,' Blaine said with a small smile. 'Which I definitely will be,' he added at the look Kurt sent him.

Kurt rewarded him with a bright smile. 'That's the spirit.'

When Blaine stepped into Algebra a few minutes later, most of the class had already arrived, including three fellow glee club members. Blaine halted in front of a table at the front of the class where Tina, Artie and Sam were gathered, heads together and speaking in hushed voices.

'Blaine!' Sam said in an unnaturally high voice when he spotted Blaine. 'Dude, how are you?'

'I'm...' Blaine whispered, staring at each of his friends in turn. He wasn't exactly surprised to see them here – he had after all shared this class with them all year – and he had given some thought to what he would say and do when he saw the first of his friends, but now that the moment was here, he found himself unable to do anything other than stand there like a deer caught in the headlights.

The seat next to Sam was empty, and Blaine spent a long moment looking at it, trying to convince himself to just go over there and sit down as he would have on any other day, but the longer he stood there, the more impossible the prospect seemed.

When he finally did move, he avoided his friends' eyes as he moved right past them and continued until he reached the very last row of tables where he sat down at the empty corner table, giving a great sigh as he did. He wasn't doing well so far. The best thing that could be said was that he hadn't had a panic attack.

'Hey, Blainey,' the boy sitting at the table in front of Blaine jeered, teeth bared in a wide grin, and Blaine winced at the sound of it. Cooper was the only one who ever called him that, and because Blaine knew that he was only being big-brotherly, the only thing he complained about – and half-heartedly so – was the cutesy nature of it, but it struck him now how very *girly* that nickname sounded.

'Why the scowl?' the boy asked in fake concern. He leaned in confidentially. 'Are you PMS'ing? Is it your time of the month?'

Blaine flushed bright red, and he hated himself for it. He could simply have told his classmate to mind his own business – or even the truth, which was that he hadn't menstruated in years, so the joke kind of missed the mark.

Except it was also entirely on point.

'Oh, ha ha,' a voice said next to Blaine, and Blaine looked up to find Tina standing there, arms folded across her chest and looking very unimpressed. 'Get lost, Mark.'

'Can't.' The boy – Mark, yes that was his name – gave an exaggerated look of apology and tapped the chair he was sitting on. 'This is my seat.'

'Well, then turn around,' Tina said, motioning with her hand. 'sit like a normal person, and mind your own business.'

'Fine, I'll let you have your girl talk,' he said with a roll of his eyes before turning back around to face the blackboard.

Tina sat down next to Blaine who only now noticed that she had brought her things, clearly planning to spend the lesson at his side. He was caught between wanting to thank her and wanting to ask her to leave him alone.

So he ended up saying nothing.

'Hey,' Tina said, voice soft. 'Are you okay?'

'I'm fine, Tina,' Blaine replied, shuffling his notes needlessly.

'What they're saying about you...' she began while Blaine stared at the table, still avoiding her eyes. 'We were talking and...well, I guess it's not really any of our business, but it's just, none of us really know exactly what-'

'Lesson's starting,' Blaine said, relieved to see the teacher walking in.

'What? Oh, right.' Tina glanced to the front of the class where the teacher was settling in. She looked back at Blaine, and Blaine carefully looked ahead. 'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. We're all just hoping you're okay.'

'I'm fine,' Blaine whispered, not wishing to catch the teacher's attention. 'Let's just get through this lesson.'

Thankfully Tina took the hint and stayed quiet. A moment later the teacher addressed the class, and the lesson was underway.

Blaine's cheeks were still burning, and he had begun to sweat with the effort of not panicking. He wanted more than anything to be away from this classroom for a moment, to be given the chance to gather himself in private (from what? Why was he the wimp who freaked out over nothing?), but that wasn't an option now that the lesson had just started. Besides, even if he claimed to need the bathroom, everyone would know why he was really running off, and he had to appear as unfazed as possible.

Blaine took a deep breath. At least no one was looking at him now, everyone's attention more or less (Algebra was not everyone's favorite subject) on the teacher as she talked about the weekend's

homework. Little by little Blaine managed to rid his body of anxiety until the way Tina kept glancing at him out of the corner of her eye was more annoying than upsetting.

When he finally started paying attention to the teacher's words, he found that the lesson actually served as a nice distraction. This, at least, hadn't changed. It was simply his class as usual, and he was *good* at this class. Before long he was fully immersed in it, taking notes and watching the teacher in rapt attention. He didn't volunteer any answers, but he did find himself writing most of them down or muttering them under his breath while he listened to his classmates struggle with them.

'Anyone?' the teacher called out when this had gone on for a while. She pointed to the – particularly difficult – problem on the blackboard. No one had yet offered a sufficient solution, and she was looking increasingly like someone who was losing faith in today's youth. 'Come on, people. You have to *know this stuff*.' She knocked her knuckles on the wooden table as she spoke. 'It's bound to come up in the exam.'

Blaine felt an elbow jab him in the side, and he looked up, startled, to find Tina looking from him to the notebook in front of him, which clearly showed the answer. She raised her eyebrows at him and motioned with her head towards the teacher.

Blaine shook his head.

'No one? Really? Mr. Anderson,' the teacher said and Blaine froze. 'You've been hiding back there long enough. Time to show us what you've got.'

'I- But- I don't-' Blaine spluttered, staring wide-eyed at the piece of chalk in his teacher's hand. He was pretty sure that he had done the calculation correctly, but he was not prepared to go up there in front of anyone. On any other day, yes, he would have done it gladly, but today he would rather keep his head low and not draw any attention.

'You know how to solve it?' the teacher went on, and it occurred to Blaine that she had no idea what today was for Blaine, hadn't been paying attention to the gossip going around the school.

'I- Yes, maybe. I think so, but-'

Next to him Tina whispered, barely audible, 'You're making it worse for yourself.' Blaine looked at her, and she smiled reassuringly. 'It's just like any other day, right?'

Blaine nodded and rose from his seat, because Tina was right. It wouldn't help matters to sit here and stutter like a fool. Anyway, when had he ever been known to deny a teacher's request?

And really, he thought once he was at the blackboard and working his way through the equation, this was not that bad. He had his back turned a lot of the time, and he directed any verbal explanations to his teacher, so he barely even had to look at his classmates' faces. Besides, even though he hated being put on display on a day like this, he was not up here because of who he was, but because of something he could do, and that made all the difference in the world.

At least until he began hearing snickering behind him.

They could be laughing about anything of course. Upon transferring to McKinley, Blaine had quickly learned that every class had one or more students who made a habit of not paying attention and/or being disruptive, so there was a chance that whatever had them so amused didn't have anything to do with him. But today of all days there was also a very high chance that it did, and the thought distracted Blaine.

'So if we multiply B and-' Blaine frowned. 'Wait, that's not right. *Divide* B...'

Another snicker followed by whispered words that Blaine couldn't make out.

'Quiet, Feeney,' the teacher said sharply. 'Or perhaps you would like to come up here instead?'

'No, Ma'am. Sorry, Ma'am,' the offending student said, but Blaine – still resolutely facing the other way, hand raised against the blackboard – heard amusement rather than regret in his voice.

'Good, then you might want to listen to Mr. Anderson. He actually knows what he's talking about.'

It was as though the teacher had pushed a button. One girl giggled, which seemed to set off people around her and within seconds the laughter had spread to what sounded to Blaine like half the class. Somewhere someone was whispering unintelligible words to another, and this time there was no doubt in Blaine's mind as to who or what they were about.

Blaine let his hand drop to his side, vaguely aware of letting go of the piece of chalk in his hand and it hitting the floor a second later.



'What is so funny?' the teacher demanded, when the scattered snickering persisted. Blaine turned around, wishing – not for the first time in his life – that he had the power of teleportation. 'Well?'

'It's just, you said *he*,' someone choked out between giggles – Blaine didn't have the presence of mind to note who. 'Which is funny since he's not really, y'know...'

A loud snort from the boy's neighbor interrupted his explanation, and once again it proved contagious as the entire class seemed to erupt into laughter.

Blaine felt nauseous. Two dozen pairs of eyes were looking at him with amusement and making a mockery of his identity, not knowing or caring how much that hurt. He heard in his mind slurs and comments he had been subject to years ago – *Weirdo. Freak. You're not even a real boy* – and he struggled to distinguish the laughter echoing from his past with the one ringing in his present. They had been laughing then, and they were laughing now. The faces had changed, but they were the same people, really. He might as well never have left Columbus.

Blaine moved on instinct – his mind reduced to a mantra of *I can't, I can't, I can't* – marching to the back of the class where he began to pick up his things and shoving them into his bag.

'Blaine...' Tina said, but Blaine refused to even look at her.

'Jeez, someone's sensitive,' a boy said somewhere behind Blaine. 'Like a *girl* one could even say.'

'Oh, for chrissakes, get over it,' Sam spoke up suddenly.

Thinking that Sam was talking to him, Blaine whipped around, but then he saw that Sam was actually glaring around at the rest of the class. He caught Blaine's eye for a moment, and he looked as though he wanted to say something but before he could, Blaine turned away again. He threw the last of his things into his bag and grabbed it, too intent on getting out of here to care that he hadn't closed it properly.

'Mr. Anderson, please, what is going on?' the teacher asked, looking thoroughly confused.

'I'm sorry, Miss,' Blaine mumbled, avoiding her eye as he strode past the rows of tables towards the door. Before he could get there, however, he found his path blocked by Sam.

'Dude, don't,' he said. 'Stay. Don't let a few idiots chase you away. No one in glee club cares if you're a girl.'

Blaine stared at Sam. 'I'm not a girl.'

'Shit, I'm sorry,' Sam said, eyes widening. 'You know what I mean.'

'Yes. I do. Move, please,' Blaine said, and it took all his willpower to make it sound demanding rather than pleading.

Sam held up his hands in what was probably meant to be a calming gesture. 'Look, just-'

But before Sam could get any further, Blaine pushed past him, making straight for the door and ignoring Sam's continued objections. Once he was out in the hallway, he broke into a run, praising himself lucky that no one was out here to see him. He ran without thinking towards the nearest boys' bathroom, and when he rounded a corner, he all but crashed into something large and burly.

'Hey, watch it,' the something – another student – said, offering Blaine a steadying hand to keep him from falling over. He picked up Blaine's schoolbag, which had been dropped in the collision, and handed it back to Blaine. As he did, he seemed to take in Blaine's person properly, and mischief rose in his eyes. 'It's you.'

'Yeah...' Blaine accepted the bag and took a step backwards, unnerved. 'I...I gotta go.'

He stepped around the bigger boy, eyes on the bathroom door a little further down the hall.

'Hey!' the boy called after Blaine, when the latter's hand was on the door. 'Girls are across the hall!'

Blaine ignored him and pushed open the door, grateful to find the bathroom empty. He went to the nearest sink, dropped his bag on the floor, and braced himself against the sink with both hands as he looked at himself in the mirror.

His skin was pale and clammy, and when he lifted his hand to turn on the faucet, he noticed for the first time that he was shaking. Ignoring it, he splashed cold water in his face in the hope that it would shock him out of his panic and enable him to think about something other than giving up, but all it achieved was to heighten of all his senses.

The light in the bathroom too bright suddenly, blinding him. The stench from the urinals ten times as foul as usual, making him nauseous. His heart hammering wildly in his chest. The bitter taste in his mouth which somehow reminded him of hospitals. His breathing labored as though he had just run a mile.

Blaine closed his eyes, willing himself to be okay. This was ridiculous. He had been supposed to hold his head high today, to show them that he was okay with who he was, even if they weren't. Instead, by panicking and running out on a lesson because he couldn't handle a few jokes, he had given them even more reason to think he was a freak. What was *wrong* with him?

As Blaine stood there, he suddenly heard the bathroom door open, and his heart skipped a beat. His eyes flew open, and he whipped his head around, prepared for the worst, but the boy who had entered seemed as unprepared for this meeting as Blaine did. He was small, younger than Blaine, probably a freshman, and he did not look particularly intimidating.

He stayed quiet and unimposing as he passed Blaine towards the urinals, although he did eye Blaine curiously. Blaine did his best to ignore him and concentrated on keeping his breathing even while the boy did his business. When he had finished at the urinals, he joined Blaine by the sinks and began washing his hands, taking far too long a time for Blaine's liking. Finally he looked over at Blaine.

'Hey, aren't you the one who everyone's-'

Before the boy could finish, Blaine spun around and sped into the nearest stall, where he fell to his knees and vomited into the toilet.

'Are you okay?' the boy asked, sounding concerned. 'Should I get the nurse?'

'Just go,' Blaine rasped, resting his arm against the toilet and pressing his forehead to his arm. 'Leave me alone.'

Blaine reached back with his other arm, found the door and managed to shove it closed, giving him privacy. He could hear the boy shuffle around for a few more moments, but then the bathroom door open and closed, and the room became quiet except for Blaine's own heavy breathing.

Blaine heaved a deep sigh. This day really wasn't off to a great start.

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'Blaine? Are you in here?'

Blaine looked up. Kurt? How long had Blaine been sitting here? He remembered his last few hours as though they had happened in a dream. He recalled throwing up and being left alone by that freshman. He recalled flushing the toilet and collapsing against the wall, still with that putrid taste of vomit in his mouth but lacking the energy to move. He recalled later looking at his phone, debating whether he should text Cooper and tell him he was locked in a bathroom stall, unable to talk himself into getting up and going back to his lessons.

But Blaine never had called.

Because if he had, Cooper might have talked some sense into him, and he would have ended up going back out there, and why would he want to do that when he was perfectly comfortable here? Okay, he was sitting on the hard floor of a smelly boys' bathroom with the taste of vomit in his mouth, so he was not exactly comfortable in the strictest sense of the word, but at least his discomfort here was private and predictable. He didn't have to constantly look over his shoulder and wonder what people were thinking or whispering about him, or when the next insult would fly at him.

'Blaine?' There was a knock on the door to Blaine's stall. 'I know you're there, I found your bag out here.'

'Yeah, I'm here,' Blaine said quietly.

'Are you okay? How long have you been in here?'

'Since first period. I kind of... fled.' Blaine felt his face heat up, ashamed of his own weakness. 'What time is it?'

'I- It's... lunch time.' The door rattled a bit as Kurt evidently tried to open it. 'What happened? Can you let me in?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Because you're just going to make me go back out there, and I-' Blaine heard his voice break. 'I can't. Kurt, I can't.'

'You can,' Kurt said without pause. 'I know you can.'

'I can't,' Blaine repeated. 'I tried. I tried, and the moment things got hard, I ran out of there like a scared child.'

'You weren't prepared. You will be next time. It'll get easier.' Blaine didn't respond. He didn't much want to imagine the next time an entire class of students broke into laughter about him. 'Just come to lunch with me. It'll just be us and our friends as usual. We already know you have the support of some of them. Finn and Rachel, and remember how I told you about Mike?'

Blaine couldn't think of a response other than *I can't*, and he was beginning to hate hearing himself say it, so he simply let the silence speak for itself.

'Remember the day we met?' Kurt said then. 'You told me you regretted running.'

'There's a difference between running and being chased away,' Blaine said, repeating words his therapist had once told him back when he had first transferred to Dalton,

'But it felt like running, or you wouldn't have said that.'

'I know but...' Blaine hugged his knees a little tighter. 'I don't think I'm strong enough.'

Blaine expected Kurt's response to be fierce insistence that *yes he was* and another burst of motivational speech, but instead he heard a sigh and then shuffling on the other side of the door that separated them. After a moment he realized that Kurt was sitting down, the door creaking a little as Kurt leaned against it. Kurt was close enough like this, even through the door, that Blaine could hear the deep, steady rhythm of his breathing.

'I'm not gonna tell you what to do,' Kurt said after a moment had passed, his voice more subdued now than it had been previously. 'Your mom told me everything, and I know why it's hard. Whatever you choose to do, I'll support you, even if it means having you at another school. But...' Kurt paused, and Blaine could tell that he was working up to something. 'If you wanna know what I think... I think that your old school and those guys had you feeling worthless by the end when the truth is that you're priceless. To me you are priceless. I look at you and I see someone who's kind and warm and selfless. I see someone who's handsome and sexy and talented in so many ways, and I feel so, so proud to call you my boyfriend. And I think if you just stayed here and got through this, you might begin to realize that I'm more right than they were, and you could maybe feel better about yourself than ever.'

Kurt finished speaking, and a handful of seconds passed in silence. Then, tired and almost in slow motion, Blaine raised his hand and unlocked the door. He had barely processed what he had done before Kurt was pushing the door open, and he had to shift to avoid getting hit by it.

Kurt crouched down by Blaine's side, and even without looking up and seeing the no doubt caring and concerned expression on Kurt's face, Blaine felt relief wash over him. Everything always seemed a little brighter when Kurt was there, and when Kurt's hand found Blaine's arm and squeezed lightly, the touch seemed to be saying *I've got you, and everything is going to be okay now.*

'Blaine, look at me,' Kurt said, reaching out a hand towards Blaine's face, but Blaine turned his head away.

'I have vomit breath,' he said.

'You were sick?' Kurt asked, sounding worried and placing a hand on Blaine's forehead.

'I'm not sick, I was just... I don't know, it was stupid.'

'Hey, nothing about any of this is stupid, okay?' Kurt said, and Blaine tried his best to hear and believe him.

'Come on, let's get you cleaned up.'

Kurt stood up and extended a hand to Blaine to help him up. They walked over to the sinks – Blaine a little unsteady on his feet from sitting down for so long – where Blaine washed his face and drank water until the taste of sick in his mouth was completely gone.

In the end when he couldn't draw out the moment any longer, he turned off the faucet, dried himself off and turned to Kurt who stood ready with Blaine's bag extended towards him. Blaine took it, slung it over his shoulder and straightened his back. This time he really did feel a lot like a soldier preparing for battle.

'Alright, let's go.'

The distance between the cafeteria and the bathroom Blaine had found himself in was just about the greatest you could get between any two points in the school, but Blaine still found the trip much too short. When they reached the entrance to the cafeteria, Blaine felt his heart-rate pick up and he almost didn't continue, but reminding himself that there was no real alternative, he gritted his teeth and pushed through it, leading the way inside.

Once inside, Blaine's eyes quickly found what looked like the entire glee club gathered as usual around one of the large tables in the middle of the room. When he and Kurt went to get their food, he kept glancing over at them, but no one seemed yet to have taken note of their arrival. Their friends simply continued to eat and talk amongst themselves, and it all looked startlingly normal. Finally with their food ready, Blaine and Kurt turned towards their targeted table.

A hundred feet. Blaine nominated two empty seats between Tina and Mercedes.

Seventy feet. Tina would be nice. She had been nice in class earlier.

Fifty feet. Rachel looked up and when she saw Blaine and Kurt approaching, she poked Finn in the side, prompting him to look up as well.

Thirty feet. Quinn who sat across from them turned around to see what they were looking at, then Santana and Brittany did the same, and within moments the attention of everyone at the table had been caught.

Ten feet. Rachel leaned into the table and looked around at everyone, mouth forming words that Blaine couldn't hear through all the noise in the cafeteria, but he suspected that they were instructions.

Three feet. Rachel looked up and smiled at Blaine.

Blaine did not stop walking.

'I- what- Blaine!'

Blaine heard Kurt's confused yell after him, but he kept walking until he found a smaller, empty table near the corner of the room. He sat down facing the wall, and when he turned and glanced over towards his friends, he saw Kurt still standing there, shrugging apologetically at them before hurrying towards Blaine.

'You can't avoid them forever,' Kurt said when he sat down opposite Blaine.

'I know' – a small sigh escaped Blaine's lips – 'and I'll see them in glee at the end of the day, but just...let me get through all the rest first.'

'But you have classes with some of them,' Kurt argued. 'Don't you think those might be easier if-'

'Can we just do this my way, please? I just- I need a quiet, normal lunch right now.'

Kurt opened his mouth as though to object, but then he closed it again, swallowing down whatever he had been about to say, and nodded instead. 'Sure, okay.'

There was quiet for a few moments as they both turned their attention to their lunch. Much as Blaine wanted to pretend for a little while that this was a normal day, he couldn't readily think of a topic that didn't have to do with the situations he found himself in.

'So did you hear that Mr. Hayes might be throwing us a pop quiz today?' Kurt said then.

'Really?' Blaine said, jumping on the topic and reacting with more shock than he really felt. 'I *knew* I should have done the homework more thoroughly.'

'Oh, I think you'll be fine Mr. I Take French With A Bunch Of Seniors.'

Blaine rolled his eyes. 'That was because of the Dalton transfer, and you know it. Doesn't mean I'm actually any good.'

'Oh, so you mean you *haven't* been getting straight A's all year?' Kurt asked, feigning confusion.

'Well...' Blaine said, beaten. Kurt laughed, and Blaine retaliated by throwing a french fry at him, causing Kurt to squeak and throw up his hands in protection.

'Very mature, Blaine,' Kurt said when he had recovered. He rolled his eyes fondly. 'But fine, we can quiz each other now if you...'

Kurt trailed off, eyes fixed at a point behind Blaine, who froze mid-grin.

'What?'

Kurt looked back at Blaine, slightly wide-eyed.

'Just ignore them, okay?'

'What? Who?' Blaine asked and was about to look around, when a voice drawled in his ear.



'Well, hey there, ladies.' There was his answer.

'JT,' Blaine said. He watched as his old "friend" straddled the chair next to him, and out of the corner of his eye he sensed two other guys doing the same on the other side of the table, but his eyes were fixed on JT.

'So...' JT made a sudden movement with his hand, and Blaine flinched, but all JT did was to reach across the table and steal one of Blaine's french fries. He tapped Blaine's shoulder lightly with the back of his hand. 'How's being a freak working out for you?'

'Ignore them,' Blaine heard Kurt muttering, and with great effort Blaine tore his gaze away from JT and back to his food. Unfortunately he had rather lost his appetite, which meant that there was nothing to distract him when JT started speaking again, this time directing his words to his friends across the table.

'You know, I never would have guessed for this one to turn out to be a tranny. I remember when she used to run around in these cute little dresses, and her hair would be all long and braided or in pigtails.' Blaine felt himself go red all the way up to his ears. 'It was adorable, I tell you. *Adorable.*'

JT and his friends laughed loudly. Blaine wanted to scream or cry or *something*. That there was someone in the school who knew him from before he had come out, back when he had still been trying so hard to fit in as a girl, was humiliating and it made him feel oddly like a fraud.

'And look at her now,' JT continued. 'A sad imitation of a man.'

'And a fag no less,' one of his buddies added.

Blaine's grip on his fork was so tight his hand was shaking, and he turned his head back towards JT, jaw set in anger.

'Something to say?' JT said, raising an almost bored eyebrow.

'Yes,' Blaine said, looking JT straight in the eye. 'Go away. No one cares what you have to say.'

'Oh, I think you'll find a whole school who disagrees with you there,' JT replied, his voice as pleasant as his smile. 'Had a fun first day back?'

'I heard he, like, burst into tears and ran out of class this morning,' one of the guys on Blaine's other side said, and Blaine wished he could make himself look indignant rather than embarrassed. He had *not* cried.

Kurt, meanwhile, looked more annoyed than anything.

'Why don't you just leave us alone?' he said, his words commanding despite forming a question.

'Oh, but we like it here,' JT said. 'Don't we boys?'

'Yeah, why would we wanna leave?' the one of JT's buddies closest to Kurt said. 'We've got great company... Food...' He reached for Kurt's plate, but Kurt slapped his hand hard, and the guy's face fell dramatically. 'Now, that's just rude.'

'Is there a problem, gentlemen?' a new voice said, and they all looked up, surprised to see Coach Beiste there, her eyes wandering from one face to the next and narrowing when they landed on JT.

'No, no problem, Coach,' he said, his face the very picture of innocence. 'I was just catching up with my old buddy here.' JT gave Blaine a jovial pat on the back. 'Blaine and I go *way* back.'

'Hm, I find that hard to believe.' Coach Beiste looked at Blaine who shifted in his seat. 'Blaine?'

'We do go back a long way,' he replied quietly, and JT smirked in satisfaction.

'There, see? Nothing to-'

'But frankly he was harassing me about it,' Blaine said, keeping his eyes on Coach Beiste lest he start to laugh at the shocked look on JT's face. 'He was being transphobic, homophobic and a bully. We asked him to leave, but he refused. And the same thing goes for his friends over there, by the way.' Blaine thought for a moment. 'Oh, and JT stole some of my food.'

Stunned silence followed Blaine's speech. JT's mouth hung open as he stared at Blaine, and the other two looked equally shocked. Clearly they weren't used to being called out in front of a teacher. Meanwhile, Kurt looked like he was on the verge of laughter.

'Right,' Coach Beiste said. She pointed at JT's friends. 'You two, I'm letting you off with a warning provided you're outta here in five seconds.' They didn't need telling twice, and when they were gone, Coach Beiste turned again to JT. 'Thompson: Up, you're coming with me.'

'Anderson, you little shit,' JT mouthed at Blaine, looking angry for the first time that Blaine had seen, but Blaine simply smiled amicably.

'Now, Thompson.'

Defeated, JT threw one last dirty look at Blaine before he did as told and stood up.

'I've had it with you,' Coach Beiste said loudly as she marched JT out, and to Blaine's satisfaction they were attracting a lot of attention from other students. 'This makes three times in two weeks. You just lost yourself your starting position on Friday.'

Blaine turned back to Kurt and smirked while they listened to JT's fading protests. Then, suddenly ravenous, he picked up a french fry from his plate, grinning widely.

'Now, where were we? French?'

---

Blaine's afternoon classes turned out to be a bit of a mixed bag.

French was first after lunch, and it quickly became apparent that Blaine would have to get used to people's stares unless he wanted to run out of this lesson too. Many did try to be subtle about it, but even then not a minute passed without Blaine feeling someone's eyes on him. He wouldn't have minded so much if he hadn't known exactly what they were looking for. It made it difficult for him to concentrate as he got more and more self-conscious and his skin began to crawl with dysphoria.

Was the shape of his face still more feminine than masculine? Were his lips more full than they ought to be? His hands were kind of small, weren't they? What about his chest? Perhaps he shouldn't have let Kurt talk him out of wearing two binders this morning, and it might have been wise not to have shaven either.

At least no one did more than stare. There was no laughter, teasing or snide comments. What the exact reason for that was – Kurt's presence maybe, the students being older and probably more mature than

Blaine's Algebra class, or perhaps Blaine's own increased confidence after getting JT in trouble – Blaine wasn't sure. All he knew was that when the bell signaled the end of the lesson, he was able to breathe a sigh of relief and know that he had made it through one lesson alive.

One more to go and then glee club.

'Right,' Kurt said as they stood at Blaine's locker. 'Who's in Geography with you again?'

'Just Tina,' Blaine said. 'Well, and another twenty-five kids staring at me like I just landed from Mars. Or maybe I should say Venus,' he added, only slightly bitter.

'I'm sorry about that,' Kurt said, grimacing in sympathy. 'People suck.'

'It's okay, I guess I can understand why people are curious. I just wish it didn't make me feel so... ' Blaine trailed off with a shiver, letting his sentence hang. Kurt touched his arm gently.

'You'll be okay, right?'

'Yeah,' Blaine replied quickly, then added with more certainty, 'Yeah, I'll be fine.'

'Good.' Kurt smiled warmly. 'Then I'll see you here by your locker after, and we'll walk to glee together.'

Blaine nodded, and with one last squeeze of each other's hand, they parted for their respective classes.

When Blaine entered the Geography classroom, his eyes wandered for a moment, stopping abruptly when they found Tina. She was sitting at a different table than usual, a little further back, and it occurred to Blaine that she had probably done that for him. When she looked up after a second or two, her and Blaine's eyes met, and Blaine's mind struggled to decide on a course of action. He chewed his lip for what felt like minutes but was probably only a few seconds until he forced his anxiety aside and walked with sure steps towards Tina's table.

'Hey,' he said, managing to sound relatively normal, if weirdly out of breath. 'This seat taken?'

'No,' Tina said, looking happily surprised as she moved her bag from the chair next to her. 'Not at all, feel free.'

'Thanks.'

Blaine sat down and began to take his things out, trying and failing not to feel awkward, considering the incident that morning and again at lunch. Tina, however, didn't seem bothered at all as she babbled about anything and everything, evidently pretending that today was just like any other day.

The lesson itself went as smoothly as Blaine could have hoped, along the same lines as the previous one, and by the end he almost felt used to the stares.

'You're coming to glee club, right?' Tina said when the bell had rung. 'Rory's been standing in for you during rehearsal, and, well, the rap really doesn't work in an Irish accent.'

Blaine snorted as he stood and swung his bag over his shoulder. 'Yeah, I'm coming. But I'm meeting up with Kurt first, so I'll just, I'll see you in there in ten?'

'Yeah, sure,' Tina said, waving Blaine off with a smile.

Moving through the hallways towards his locker, Blaine felt his heart-rate, stable since Coach Beiste had hauled JT out of the cafeteria, begin to pick up again. He was about to see his friends – really properly see them – for the first time since the truth had come out, and this felt different from any lesson he had attended today. The reactions of these fourteen people, how they would treat him going forward, was more important to him than the opinions and stares of a thousand anonymous students put together.

And now was the time to find out what they were.

Or it would be ten minutes from now, when Kurt had given him that last minute pep talk and Blaine had gathered the courage to actually go through with it.

When Blaine neared his locker, the hallways were already crowded with people rushing to get home, but Kurt didn't seem to have arrived yet. Of course Blaine had practically run out of class the moment the bell had rung, so he was early. Figuring that Kurt would be there soon enough, he went ahead and opened his locker, humming to himself while he sorted his things.

A buzz in his pocket interrupted Blaine before he was done, and he pulled out his phone expecting a message from his mom or dad, or maybe Cooper. He frowned when he saw that it was from Sebastian.

*Hey, so are you still mad at me?*

Blaine stared at the message. Had he not been clear the last time they had spoken? *Can you give me a reason why I shouldn't be?* he texted back, barely stopping himself from giving an irritated sigh.

Blaine glanced at the time on his phone, wondering vaguely where Kurt was. The crowd here was starting to thin, most people already on their way home now. Kurt must be stopping by his own locker on the way here, Blaine reasoned just as Sebastian's reply came through.

*I said I was sorry.*

Blaine rolled his eyes and typed out the first words that occurred to him, *Oh you're SORRY? Well, that just makes it all better*, and hit send before he could wonder if his reply was too snarky. He sorted the last of his things and slammed his locker shut just as his phone buzzed once more.

*...I guess there's no chance that wasn't sarcasm?*

Blaine stared at the message, trying to think of words to make Sebastian understand that he wanted nothing to do with him, but after a moment he simply navigated away from his messages instead, deciding that he did not owe it to Sebastian to keep replying. It occurred to Blaine then that a mere two or three months ago, coming to that decision would have been much more difficult, and the idea that it was so easy now felt strangely empowering.

Blaine was just in the process of pocketing his phone when he heard footsteps approaching him, and he looked up wearing a cheerful smile. Maybe he wouldn't need the pep talk after all.

'Hey Kurt, I-'

Except the person Blaine was faced with was not Kurt at all, nor was it any of his friends. It wasn't even just one person.

It was JT with his two friends from lunch, and none of them looked at all pleased.

## **CHAPTER TWELVE**

*They start coming, and I start rising*

'Hey, freak,' JT said as he and his buddies approached. His usual fake-friendly tone had disappeared and been replaced by something a lot more sinister. 'I got detention because of you.'

'No,' Blaine corrected. 'You got detention because of you.' He looked up at JT, refusing to be backed into the lockers behind him even as JT crowded him uncomfortably. 'I just happened to be in the middle.'

Blaine made to leave, but JT's hand flew out in front of Blaine's face and hit the nearest locker with a loud bang. His arm stayed extended, blocking Blaine's path. Blaine swallowed, forcing himself to look unaffected.

'Go away, JT.'

'Look at you, acting all tough and manly,' JT teased.

Blaine's eyes darted around the hallway. It was all but empty now as JT withdrew his arm and moved his entire body in front of Blaine instead. Blaine instinctively began to back away down the hall, but after a few paces he bumped into one of JT's friends and almost tripped. The boy caught him around the shoulders and pushed him back towards JT, whose lips curled into a cruel smile.

'But you and I both know that inside is just a scared little girl, isn't that right?'

Blaine blinked as JT stepped even closer. JT reached out and with the back of his hand he caressed Blaine's face in what would have been tender manner if the whole situation hadn't been so unnerving.

And Blaine let him. Oh god, he let him.

Blaine closed his eyes, trying to think straight and assess the situation. He had JT in front of him, one of his friends behind him, another to his left, and the lockers to his right. There was no way out.

'Hey!' a voice came suddenly – Kurt's voice – and Blaine's eyes flew open. A moment later Kurt pushed past the guy on Blaine's left. 'What is going on?'

'Oh, look, it's your boyfriend,' JT said, somehow managing to make these words sound mocking. He raised his hand towards Blaine's face again, but Kurt slapped his hand away and stepped between them.

'Don't *touch* him.'

'Awh, look at Hummel being a big man and coming to his girlfriend's rescue.'



'You know,' Kurt said, and though Blaine couldn't see his face, the way Kurt's hands were on his hips told Blaine that he was *not* happy. 'calling him a girl doesn't make you clever or funny-'

'It makes me right,' JT interjected.

'It makes you an asshole,' Kurt corrected. He turned around towards Blaine. 'Come on, we have glee.'

Kurt had his back turned to JT, so he didn't see the look JT shared with his friends, but Blaine did and he knew exactly what it meant, because he had seen it before, although back then it had been accompanied by words.

*Restrain the fag.*

Before Blaine could do anything other than recognize that it was happening, let alone try and warn Kurt, Kurt was grabbed and torn away from Blaine. He yelled and struggled, but JT's two friends had a firm hold on each of Kurt's arms, and they were both bigger and taller.

'Leave him alone!' Blaine shouted as he lunged at them – this could not happen again – but JT was too quick, grabbing Blaine and shoving him backwards. Blaine collided hard with the nearest locker, except-

Except the moment he did, it was no longer a locker behind him but a brick wall, and that bright light must be coming from a streetlamp.

'Stop it!' someone was screaming. Tyler? Blaine shook his head, trying to clear the images from his mind. No. Kurt.

Blaine struggled against the restraint, but the more he did, the harder the arm under his chin pressed against his throat, cutting off more and more of his air supply and making him lightheaded. Where was he again?

There seemed to be a lot of noise around him, several people yelling and then metallic banging.

'For God's sake, you're choking him,' a voice cried out.

*No, Ty. Don't. Please, Tyler. They'll get you too.*

Blaine shivered. He should have brought a jacket. Columbus got cold in February. But then, it hadn't been their plan to spend time outside. Tyler's father was supposed to be here by now.

'Blaine...'

*I'm so sorry. Just run, Ty. You should've just run.*

'Who the fuck is Tyler?' a rough voice said near Blaine's ear, and suddenly Blaine was inside again and *oh*, had that been out loud? 'God, you're even more of a freak than I thought.'

'Blaine..' His name was a broken whisper on someone's lips, and Blaine was vaguely aware that it was Kurt's, but all he could hear was Tyler and his own thundering heart. He was dizzy and his mind felt clouded, like those moments between sleeping and waking, except here nightmares waited on both sides, pressing ever closer.

'You know,' Jamie – wow, he was so much bigger than when Blaine had last seen him – said conversationally. 'I'm not sure if this all makes Hummel more or less normal. On the one hand he's actually screwing a girl, but on the other he's going about it all wrong. Because, I mean, what the fuck.'

Someone – several someone's – was laughing coldly, and god, Blaine couldn't even say for sure if it was happening then or now.

'Let me *go*. Blaine... Leave him alone. For Christ's sake, look at him!'

Yes, look at him. The big trans joke who existed just for other people's entertainment and judgement.

'Blaine, honey.'

The voices around Blaine were muffled through the ringing in his ears. All he could think about was lying on the ground in front of that damned school, broken and helpless as the blows kept coming. He could almost taste the blood in his mouth.

But then a different image occurred to him, one of him standing straight and defiant, and he heard his own voice from that night, though it took him a moment to recognize it as such with how much it had changed since then.

*I'm not gonna apologize for who I am.*

His fourteen-year-old self had fought. He might have lost in the end, but he had fought until he couldn't anymore. He hadn't just let people walk all over him.

And actually, Blaine no longer *was* that terrified fourteen-year-old kid being brutally beaten up. He was the nearly eighteen-year-old boy who had made it through that. Who had patched himself up and made a life for himself. Who had mended his relationship with both of his parents and his brother. Who had friends and a boyfriend. Who had faced his body issues and didn't let them rule him. Who no longer took Sebastian's crap.

And who sure as heck wasn't going to take the crap of three prejudiced clowns who by all appearances were more bark than bite. Blaine was better than that. He was not "Freak" or "Amber" or "Worthless." His name was Blaine Anderson, and he was *nobody's* victim. Not today. He had come too far.

JT, whose hold on Blaine had grown slack while Blaine was freaking out, was still grinning like an idiot when Blaine looked up, but Blaine's newfound resolve must be showing on his face, because JT's smirk soon morphed into a scowl.

Blaine pushed JT's arm away easily, and then with strength he didn't know he had, he pushed at JT himself, getting him out of his personal space. JT looked stunned only for half a second before his eyes narrowed at Blaine.

'You stupid little...'

JT lunged forward but Blaine was ready for him and ducked out of the way, causing JT to collide loudly with the lockers. Blaine heard him swear something unintelligible and watched as he turned around, breathing heavily.

'Right, you think you can take me? Us?'

Blaine simply shrugged in response – it wasn't even about that – and when JT motioned to one of the guys who was still restraining Kurt, Blaine smiled and watched in polite interest as the boy let go of Kurt to advance towards Blaine instead. Kurt caught Blaine's eye, and he looked rather like he thought Blaine had lost his mind, but Blaine's panic had vanished, leaving him relaxed and serene, and he gave Kurt a reassuring smile.

Kurt, however, shook his head as vigorously as he could given the arm that was now around his neck. 'Blaine, don't be an idiot,' he hissed.

'Don't worry,' Blaine said.

'Oh, I'd worry,' JT said, watching Blaine rather like a predator on the hunt.

JT and his friend moved at the same time, and Blaine moved in response, but they were quick – much too quick for Blaine – and even though he fought, he still ended up slammed against the lockers once more. The impact was a great deal harder this time, almost knocking the wind out of Blaine, but Blaine was not backing down now. He was not cowering. He was not pleading. He barely even blinked.

Instead he laughed in JT's face.

'What are you gonna do? We're in the middle of a school hallway,' he pointed out. 'And whatever brilliant thing you come up with, trust me, I've been through worse.'

JT seemed to be considering his options, and with each second that went by, Blaine took more and more pleasure in his lack of decision. He was on the verge of suggesting that he and Kurt be let go, when JT's face lit up in a smile as he eyed something down the hall. 'Ah, here come the freak hive.'

JT grabbed Blaine roughly by the shirt, pulled him forward and spun him around to restrain him in a manner that reminded Blaine vividly of hostage situations he had seen on TV, only without the gun to his head. It took Blaine a moment to get his bearings, but then he saw what JT was looking at.

The entire New Directions sans Mr Schue was marching towards them, spearheaded by Rachel and Santana.

'Oh, fun,' JT whispered in Blaine's ear. 'Let's have a chat with your friends. See how long they remain that way.'

'Let them go,' Rachel demanded when she was close enough to be heard clearly.

'Did you even know?' JT asked, ignoring Rachel's order. 'I bet you didn't. I bet Blainey here never saw fit to tell you. Huh, Blaine?'

JT shook Blaine slightly, probably to entice a response out of him, but Blaine stayed stubbornly quiet. If he didn't engage or freak out, there was only so long that JT could remain amused. Blaine closed his eyes, willing himself to stay calm. Nothing had changed since a minute ago. There were just a few more people staring at him now.

People whose attitudes he didn't really know yet.

'Huh? Have you told your friends what you are?'

'He's our friend is what he is,' Mike said, pushing his way to the front.

'Ha!' JT sounded almost maniacal, and Blaine struggled to remember how the two of them had ever been friends. "'He" is not even a real he.'

A hand snaked around Blaine's waist to the front of his pants, and it took Blaine a moment to catch up with the situation, because surely JT would not actually go there? But he was, and he fumbled around Blaine's belt, Blaine's panicked attempts to bat the hand away fruitless as Blaine couldn't use all his strength in this position.

People were shouting around them, Kurt more outraged than any of them, and Blaine would have joined if the arm around his neck had left him any air for it, and if he wasn't already spending all his energy on struggling with his whole body. Writhing, kicking, clawing. He didn't see but could hear the scuffling as presumably someone tried to move past the last of JT's friends who acted as a barrier between the New Directions and the rest.

Despite Blaine's frantic struggling, it only took JT's hand a few seconds to find its way first into Blaine's pants and then his briefs. Blaine felt like he was going to be sick.

'Calm down, I'm not gonna molest you, you moron,' JT hissed, but a moment later when he was holding Blaine's packer into the air for everyone to see, Blaine wasn't sure that this was much of a consolation. 'Look at this! He's a freak!'



Several people gasped. Blaine felt his face burn in embarrassment, and he wished bitterly that he hadn't come here today. He should have taken his parents' offer to switch schools again. At least that way he could have pretended that his friends were still his friends. He wouldn't have had to see the shock and confusion on their faces as they were faced with Blaine's transsexuality for the first time. Knowing it was one thing. Having it shoved in their faces, especially in such a crude and vivid manner, was quite another.

'Ohmigod, let me see,' Santana said as she stepped forward. She came to stand right in front of Blaine, eyes curious and completely ignoring Blaine's continued protests as she took the packer from JT.

'Santana,' Kurt said sharply, his voice a clear warning. 'Santana, I swear to God...'

Santana, however, ignored him. She inspected the packer for a second before shrugging and handing it off to a confused-looking Rachel who had come rushing forward.

Santana crossed her arms, and the hallway was completely silent as she eyed Blaine's crotch for a long – and, for Blaine, very uncomfortable – moment.

'And the amazing thing is,' she said, a familiar smirk on her face as she looked up at JT, and Blaine's brain jammed, trying to catch up with the situation, and *oh*. 'This guy still has more balls than you could ever dream of.' The smirk vanished, and her voice was strained pleasant when she finished, 'Now let them go before we make you.'

'Yeah? You and whose-'

JT broke off mid-sentence when the entire rest of the glee club charged forward, led by Mike and Puck, the latter of which single-handedly shoved aside the guy that still stood in their way. They stopped a few feet behind Santana and Rachel. Rachel beamed at them, but Santana looked unimpressed as though she had expected nothing less. She looked back at JT and raised an eyebrow. 'You were saying?'

The moments dragged by as the two of them continued to stare at each other until finally Blaine felt JT's hold on him lessen. 'You know what, whatever.' JT released Blaine, shoving him forward as he did. 'I was getting bored anyway. Let's go, guys.'

Blaine looked around in time to see Kurt being released too, and the moment he could, Kurt hurried towards Blaine, his hand finding Blaine's quickly.

'You okay?' he asked breathlessly.

For a moment Blaine just stood there, shaken yet weirdly uplifted, and he didn't know whether to laugh or cry, let alone how to respond to Kurt's question. His eyes found Santana's next to him.

'You're welcome,' she said and flashed him her usual detached smile, but Blaine detected a certain warmth there too. She turned to the group and ushered them back. 'Come on, people! Let's get back to the choir room. We have Regionals to prepare for.'

They all started towards the choir room, and as they did, Blaine intertwined his hand with Kurt's and squeezed lightly.

'Yeah, I think I'm okay,' he said and he got a squeeze in return. *Good.*

'Hey, Blaine.'

Blaine looked around to see Rachel fall into step beside him, and his eyes widened when he saw her holding out his packer.

'Your penis, good sir,' she said seriously, giving a small bow. Blaine stared at her for a long moment, but then he gave into the surreality of the situation – Rachel, *Rachel* of all people, had come into possession of his packer and was handing it back to him as though it was his car keys – at the same time as the corner of her mouth twitched, and they both burst out laughing.

\*\*\*

Blaine had friends.

He was out and he had friends.

Friends.

Plural.

And not only did he still have friends, he hadn't lost a single one either. In fact Sam had come up to him after the events in the hallway and exclaimed, 'Dude! What did I tell you? We're a family in here,' and Mike had pulled him aside, looked him in the eye and said, 'You're still my best friend. That doesn't change.'

When Blaine couldn't fall asleep that night, it wasn't because he was upset or anxious, but because he was so damned *happy*, and he couldn't stop going over the day's events in his head. The next day he went to school, slightly bleary-eyed but feeling strong in a way he couldn't remember having been since the moments after receiving his very first shot of T, but even that had been more a case of immediate euphoria and the *possibility* of strength, the feeling that it was within his reach now. It had been momentary, but this felt real. It felt permanent.

Of course throughout the day Blaine was still getting looks and comments wherever he went, which was annoying to say the least, but he managed to mostly roll his eyes at it. Still, at the end of the day when he walked into the choir room for glee practice, he breathed a sigh of relief, because this place was his sanctuary. Sometime between transferring here and today, amidst all the crazy things that always seemed to be happening in this room, Blaine had come to love it and think of it as his home away from home.

With Regionals happening in four days there was a lot to get done, and rehearsals had reached a level of intensity unseen since Cooper had coached the team through Sectionals. Everyone, Blaine included, was so focused on their work – on being better, better, better – that Blaine almost forgot how things had changed for him. In here Blaine was simply Blaine.

After the first hour of rehearsal in the choir room, Mr. Schue called for a break. As people collapsed throughout the room in varying states of exhaustion, he told everyone to hydrate and meet him in the auditorium in ten minutes before sweeping off towards the teachers' lounge, humming *I Believe I Can Fly* to himself.

'Four more days,' Sam said as he sank down in a chair. 'and this'll all be over.'

'Don't tell me you're regretting coming back here?' Finn teased.

'I'm not,' Sam said. 'But man, this is hard work. I don't remember working this hard last year.'

'Last year we lost Nationals,' Rachel said from the floor. She was the only person still standing.

'This is Regionals, Rachel,' Mercedes pointed out.

'Yes, and we're up against the Warblers.'

'Last year we wiped the floor with the Warblers.' Mercedes looked over at Blaine and Kurt, Blaine sitting cross-legged on the floor and Kurt on a chair near him. 'No offense, guys.'

'None taken,' Kurt said in a tone that suggested that he did take offense except he clearly didn't mean it, and Blaine couldn't help his smile at how easy it was to hang out with the New Directions.

'Anyone know if they're still doing Michael?' Artie asked.

'Trent says they're not,' Blaine said. 'Seems the team didn't agree with Sebastian's methods. He wouldn't say what they're doing instead though. Oh, and for the record I didn't tell him anything about our plans,' he added, remembering how the fight for Michael had become an issue to begin with.

'Dude, don't sweat it. You've proven yourself,' Finn said, giving Blaine a small nod when their eyes met.

'Hey, Blaine?' Sam said after a moment's silence. He looked thoughtfully at Blaine. 'Is it okay if we, like, ask you stuff? You know, about the trans thing?'

'Um.' Blaine's eyes drifted to Kurt who chewed his lip, looking uncertain. 'Sure. I guess.'

'I'm just curious, when did this all start?'

'Depends what you mean, I suppose,' Blaine replied, acutely aware that all his friends were watching him. It seemed like everyone had been waiting for someone to bring the topic up. 'I didn't just wake up one morning and decide to be a boy. I've always felt this way, it just took me a while to understand it.'

'So when did you, like...officially?' Mike asked.

'I came out four years ago,' Blaine said, flashing back to the moment he had told his parents, remembering how he had broken down and sobbed into his dad's chest. It felt like a lifetime ago. 'It was right at the end of middle school.'

'Was it hard?' Tina asked.

'I don't know, I guess it was, but it was what I had to do, you know? I couldn't go on living...like that.'

'Totally,' Puck said from across the floor. He was watching Blaine intently, studying him, and Blaine had the uncomfortable thought that Puck was trying to imagine him as a girl.

Well, so much for sanctuary.

'Anyway,' Blaine said, looking away from Puck and back towards Tina and Mike. 'The worst part came later when I lost all my old friends, when I got bullied and pushed around, and when I realized that not all of my family were going to support me.'

'Who doesn't support you?' Rachel asked, coming to sit down next to Kurt.

'Um, my grandma and my dad's oldest brother are the most vocal about it, but pretty much that entire side of the family thinks I'm a freak.'

'That's awful,' Rachel said to general murmurs of agreement, and if Blaine had had the mental wherewithal he might have commented on the irony of this – answering personal questions whilst surrounded by a dozen of his friends, some really more acquaintances than anything, wasn't exactly helping him to not feel like a freak.

'Yeah,' Mercedes said. 'I was going to ask why you lied to us all this time, but I guess it's kinda understandable.'

'I didn't lie,' Blaine mumbled, his voice drowned out by yet more murmurs of agreement. It sounded to him like his friends thought they were being gracious for letting the lie slide, but the word "lie" left a bad taste in Blaine's mouth to begin with.

A buzz from the chair next to Kurt's alerted Blaine to a text, and he took his phone, grateful for a reprieve from this conversation.

*Look, I really wanna make things right with you.*



The text was from Sebastian. Here was another conversation Blaine didn't want to continue, although this one was more annoying than anything. *You just want to keep your spot as lead soloist*, he typed out quickly.

'So when did you have the surgery?' Tina asked, making Blaine look up in surprise, and he almost missed the Send button as a consequence.

'The surgery?'

'The- you know.'

'*Tina*,' Kurt hissed. 'Blaine, you don't have to answer that.'

Truthfully Blaine didn't want to answer – general questions were one thing, questions about what his body looked like was a quite another – but he felt compelled to anyway. These were his friends after all, and they had stepped up and supported him. So what if they had a few questions, didn't he kind of owe them?

'Um, I didn't. I haven't had any surgeries yet.'

'Oh,' Sam said, his eyes widening. 'So you still have...?' He waved a hand up and down his torso.

'Yeah,' Blaine said, and he if could physically have held back his blush he would have, but within seconds it had spread not only across his face but to his ears as well. 'I'm having top surgery in May though. Right after Nationals.'

'Top surgery?' Sam looked confused by the term. 'Is that, like...'

'Boobs, Sam,' Santana said, sounding irritated and bored with the whole discussion. As soon as the words left her mouth, she looked over at Blaine, catching his eye and mouthing the word *Sorry*. Blaine wasn't entirely sure who she was apologizing for, but he appreciated the sentiment regardless.

Blaine's phone buzzed again, and for the first time Blaine found himself happy to get a text from Sebastian.

*What? No, this isn't about the Warblers.*

Blaine was about to type out a response, but was once more pulled back into the conversation he wanted nothing more than to escape from.

'How do you pee?' Puck asked.

'Guys, really,' Kurt said before Blaine could even process the question. 'This is getting wildly inappropriate.'

'Dude, he doesn't mean anything by it,' Sam said, looking at Blaine more than Kurt. 'I think we're all just a bit curious how it all works.'

Blaine stared at Sam for a moment, trying to quell his own discomfort. It was natural to be curious, wasn't it? What was the question again? Right. Blaine looked over at Puck.

'Um, well, there are...devices you can use to, um, stand.' Blaine was pretty sure he must be scarlet by now (wasn't anyone noticing this?). He was talking about *peeing*. 'But they're kind of awkward to use, so I usually don't.'

Not wishing to witness anyone's reactions to his words, Blaine hurried to turn his attention back to his phone. He re-read the message from Sebastian and typed a quick response. *Then what is it about?* While he waited for Sebastian's reply, still staring at the phone, he felt Kurt's hand on his shoulder, calming him. Why was it so hard just to tell them "Stop, you're making me uncomfortable"?

Blaine's phone buzzed for the third time.

*I don't know.*

Blaine gave an exasperated sigh. *Great. Well, get back to me when you figure that out. Or better yet: Don't.* He didn't know whether Sebastian was being genuine or if he was still playing some sort of game, but he was done trying to work it out.

'What was your birth name?' Sugar asked suddenly, and great, now Blaine was back in *that* conversation. She looked at him, head cocked to one side. 'Was it Blair?'

'I- what? Why would it be Blair?'

'I don't know, it's kind of similar?'

'Er, no. It wasn't Blair,' Blaine said, and he probably would have laughed if the situation hadn't been so awkward.

'What was it then?'

Blaine stared at Sugar for a long moment, then down at his phone at his last sent message, which Sebastian had read but thankfully not replied to. He had been straight with Sebastian. If he could do that, then surely he could do the same with his friends. If it offended them, then they weren't really his friends anyway.

When Blaine looked up again, his gaze was steady and unwavering.

'That really isn't any of your business. None of this is,' Blaine said, his tone slightly harsher than he intended, and around him expressions changed from curious to surprised. 'I'm sorry, I don't mean to be rude, I'm just- I'm thrilled that you guys wanna support me, and I thank you, really. I love you guys, but no offense, I don't know all of you that well, and some things are private. I'm not here to answer every question you ever had about transsexuality. That's what Google is for.'

A brief silence followed while everyone – Blaine included – seemed to be processing Blaine's words. Then mumbled apologies could be heard scattered across the room.

'Sorry, dude,' Sam said. 'We weren't trying to be disrespectful.'

'I know, and I'm not saying I won't talk about it with anyone ever,' Blaine said, hating the awkward moment he had created, but reminding himself to stand his ground. 'But this, what you're doing right now, ganging up on me like a group, that's not cool.'

Blaine breathed out and looked around, a little sheepish now that the words were out and the moment was over. He caught Kurt's eye first, and Kurt smiled as though to say *Well done*. The rest of the New Directions were mostly looking uncomfortable or embarrassed, but Blaine knew that they would get back to normal soon enough. What mattered was that he had drawn a line.

Santana was the only one to appear unfazed by Blaine's speech, probably because she alone had seemed almost completely disinterested in what Blaine was telling them. When Blaine caught her watching him now, however, she looked...impressed, and Blaine felt an odd sense of pride at that.

Sanctuary restored.

## **CHAPTER THIRTEEN**

*I win, thrive, soar*

'Hey.'

'Oh, hey, Mike.' Blaine put down the book he was holding and turned to greet his friend. 'What's up?'

'I just wanted to see if you were okay,' Mike said as he leaned against the locker next to Blaine's. 'Tina told me that some of the kids in Algebra gave you a hard time again.'

'I'm okay, Mike. You guys don't need to look after me like that.'

Mike shrugged. 'It's what friends are for, isn't it?'

Blaine closed his locker, barely containing a smile. Two days later he was still kind of astonished that his friends weren't more weirded out by it all. 'Right.'

'Any word on JT?' Mike asked.

'Yeah, suspension. They gave his friends a warning.' Mike looked unimpressed and Blaine shook his head. 'I guess that's McKinley for you.'

'It's ridiculous,' Mike said. 'Pretty sure what he did is enough to file a police report if you wanted. I mean, he...' Mike made an awkward gesture with his hand in front of his crotch.

'I know,' Blaine replied in a dark undertone. He didn't need reminding that what JT had done there could basically be classified as sexual assault. 'But since he didn't actually try to, you know, *touch* me, I'm willing to bet he'd get off with a warning.' Blaine spoke in a carefully controlled voice, keeping the anger that had risen inside him from bubbling over. It was infuriating that JT could do something like that to him – out him, bully him, push him around, stick his hand into his *pants* for Christ's sake – and still get away with nothing more than a slap on the wrist. Blaine let out a heavy breath just as a young girl, a freshman probably, passed by, looking curiously in his direction. 'What are you looking at?' he snapped, and she ran away looking frightened.

'So how are you really?' Mike asked, his expression carefully neutral. "'I'm okay" doesn't usually snap at people.'

Blaine thought for a few moments, opening and closing his mouth wordlessly. Truthfully the constant staring and whispering was starting to get tedious and more than a little distracting when he was trying to concentrate on a lesson or hang out with his friends. And the news about JT had not exactly improved his mood. Blaine let out a long breath. 'I'm dealing with it. It's just kind of...'

'Hey guys!' someone called, and Blaine looked around to see Finn and Puck approaching, both sets of eyes bright with excitement.



'Uh oh, here comes trouble,' Mike said, quirking an eyebrow at Blaine, who bit his lip to keep from laughing, his mood already brightened. Sometimes those two were like a pair of overgrown children.

'Dudes, check it out,' Puck said when he and Finn reached them. 'I've got the house to myself on Friday night, and Finn and I were thinking we should do a guys' night. You know, warm up for Regionals bro-style.'

'Cool, count me in,' Mike said and fist-bumped Puck. 'Just... no porn, okay? Because that got really weird last time.'

Puck rolled his eyes while Blaine quietly thanked God that he hadn't been around for that. 'Fine, no porn.'

'Blaine?' Finn said.

'Kurt's welcome too of course,' Puck interjected. 'As long as we don't catch you guys doing it under the blankets or something.'

While Finn simply looked disturbed at the idea, Mike sent Puck a look that seemed to say something like *Dude, really?*

'What?' Puck gave a defensive shrug. 'Not like I *care*, but it's bros' night. Be unfair to the rest of us.'

Blaine grinned, too busy being happy that his friends wanted him at a guys' night to care that Puck was being a little... well, *Puck*. 'It's fine, I think we can keep our hands to ourselves for one night.' Blaine's eyes widened at his own words. 'I mean, not that we- Or, I mean, we do but-'

Blaine stopped talking, sure that his face must be bright red. The other three simply looked amused, although Finn did look slightly uncomfortable.

'So you'll come?' Puck asked.

'What?' Blaine had almost forgotten what they had been talking about in the first place.

'To the sleepover.'

'I- Wait, it's a sleepover?'

Puck shrugged. 'Yeah.'

'Oh. Well, in that case I don't really think... I mean, it's... Sleepovers just aren't my thing.'

'Dude, why not?' Mike asked, hitting Blaine's shoulder with the back of his hand. 'It's loads of fun, trust me.'

'I- well. It's just...'

'What he's *trying* to say,' said a fifth guy, who had apparently been eavesdropping on their conversation, as he poked his head in between Finn and Puck. 'is "I'm a freak with boobs, it might be weird."'

The eavesdropper grinned at Blaine, clearly hoping to get a rise out of him. Blaine shot him a sarcastic grimace. *Ha ha. Very funny.*

Puck frowned in annoyance and pushed the guy out of his way. 'Dude, butt out.'

The guy sent Blaine a strange wink before walking off without another word, and Blaine rolled his eyes as he watched him go.

'Ignore him,' Finn said. 'He's an idiot.'

Blaine sighed. 'Yeah, he and half the school.' Blaine gestured around the hallway, for the first time openly acknowledging the many eyes that had been furtively glancing his way since he had arrived at his locker

five minutes previously. His friends glanced around at the many onlookers, most of which quickly looked away when they realized they had been caught.

'Is it like this all the time?' Finn asked.

'Yeah, pretty much.' Blaine sighed again. 'It's just so *annoying*. I mean, I can sort of get the comments – it's high school. But *that*.' Blaine pointed at a girl across the hall who had been staring at him on and off for the past few minutes. She quickly looked away and pretended to be interested in her phone. 'What is that? What are they hoping to see?'

'Dude, they're curious,' Puck said. 'Do you have any idea the kind of rumors that are floating around about you?'

'Do I wanna know?' Blaine asked in a dull voice.

'Maybe not,' Puck conceded. 'Point is, a lot of it isn't true, and people suspect that, but then they don't know what to actually believe.'

'So, what? You think I should just start walking up to people and saying "Here's the deal"?''

'I don't know, man. I'm just calling it like I see it.'

'Hm.' Blaine fell into thought and was quiet for a while as they all began to walk towards the choir room.

'I say just keep ignoring them,' Mike offered after a moment. 'It's high school, something else'll come along soon enough and they'll forget all about you. It's none of their business anyway.'

Blaine quirked an eyebrow at his friend. 'Well, *you* all certainly made it your business yesterday.'

'Hey, I'm not the one who asked about *peeing*,' Mike said, giving Puck an admonishing look.

'We're your friends,' Puck said. 'It's different. But, you know, sorry about that.'

Blaine nodded. 'You said. And guys, it's fine. I'm just teasing.' They passed the notice board, and Blaine stopped short, struck by a sudden idea. 'I have to go.'

'Now?' Finn said. 'We have glee club.'

'Tell Mr. Schue I'll be five minutes late,' Blaine said, already headed the opposite way down the hall. 'It's important, I swear.'

'Hey, what about bros' night?' Puck yelled after him. 'You coming?'

'I'll get back to you!' Blaine called over his shoulder.

A minute later Blaine knocked on the door to Principal Figgins's office, and without waiting for a response, he opened it and stepped inside, a little out of breath.

Principal Figgins looked up from the papers he had been poring over. 'Mr. Anderson, how can I help you?'

'I need a favor.'

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Two days later Blaine was pacing the floor to the side of the auditorium stage. This had to work. 'Is he done yet?' he asked as he gave up pacing and walked over to where Kurt was watching Principal Figgins address the school.

Kurt frowned. 'No, he's still talking about broken toilets or something.'

Blaine chewed his lip and waited in silence for Figgins to finish, but he soon grew impatient and began hopping from foot to foot, brimming with nervous energy. 'God, this is torture.'

Kurt turned towards him and steadied him with a hand on his upper arm. 'You'll be fine. You've got lots of people cheering for you. If you get nervous just find one of their faces and focus on them.' Kurt poked his head further out on the stage, enabling him to see the crowd. *So many people*, Blaine thought, slightly panicked. 'The glee club is mostly on the fifth row,' he told Blaine when he turned back.

Blaine nodded, suddenly unable to form words. For the past two days, thinking about and planning this moment had made him feel empowered, in control of his own life, but now actually standing here, he wasn't so sure he didn't just want to call the whole thing off.

'Did Cooper come like he said he would?' Kurt asked.

'Yeah, he should be out there,' Blaine said, voice flat and emotionless. 'My mom texted to say good luck and she mentioned that he was on his way.'

'Okay, good,' Kurt said. 'That's one more friendly face out there.'

Before Blaine could respond, they heard Figgins's voice finally announce, 'Thank you for your time. Now if you could please turn your attention towards one of your fellow students who has a message for everyone.'

Blaine breathed out heavily, his eyes fixed on Principal Figgins as he turned and walked towards the side of the stage. 'Okay. Okay. I can do this.'

'Are you sure you don't want me to come with you?' Kurt asked. 'For moral support?'

Blaine shook his head. 'Thank you. But this is something I need to do by myself.'

Blaine knew that the whole glee club would be up there with him if he asked. The idea made him smile and gave him the final bit of courage he needed to nod politely at Principal Figgins before proceeding towards the podium that stood in the middle of the stage.

Once there he reached into his back pocket and pulled out two folded sheets of paper, which he unfolded and flattened against the podium, hands shaking slightly. God, that was a lot of text.

'Um. Hi, everyone,' he said as he adjusted the microphone, wincing when it gave a loud feedback noise. 'My name is Blaine Anderson. I asked Principal Figgins to let me speak here at the assembly today because as you probably know some things have gone down recently, and it's resulted in me getting a lot of attention from you all, ranging from curious looks to some frankly bullying remarks.' Blaine paused for a moment, trying to channel the confidence and conviction he had possessed during his practice runs. He took a deep breath before continuing. 'This needs to stop. In an ideal world I would simply ask you to and you would, but I'm not naïve enough to think that will work, so instead I'm here today to put my cards on the table, which should put to rest some of the false rumors that are going around, and hopefully after today all this will no longer be an issue.'



Blaine paused again to get his bearings in the text. The auditorium was completely silent, and he looked out there, finding some expressions bored, some politely interested, and still other students seemed to be hanging on to his every word. He found Rachel's eyes in the crowd, and she smiled and nodded encouragingly. Next to her Finn gave him the thumbs up.

'So, yes...' Blaine continued, grabbing the sides of the podium tightly and shifting his gaze to look at the audience as a whole. 'I am transgender. "And what does transgender mean?" you might ask. It can mean a lot of different things to different people, but I'm not here to give a seminar, so the short version is...'

Blaine's own voice faded to background noise as he went on autopilot, this part of his speech so much based in fact that he couldn't get nervous about it. He explained the difference between sex and gender, went over a brief list of terms and expressions, and he outlined the choices a person was faced with when they wanted to transition. Amazingly the crowd stayed quiet through all of it, almost respectful, and Blaine kept waiting for the other shoe to drop.

'It's a completely individual choice,' Blaine said, speaking off hormone replacement therapy and surgery. 'And a person's gender isn't determined by how far they go.'

'So how far did you go?' someone yelled.

'Do you have a dick?' someone else yelled, and suddenly the auditorium was buzzing with murmuring and barely suppressed snickering. Shoe dropped.

Blaine swallowed, rattled by the questions. He hadn't accounted for interruptions. He scanned the piece of paper in front of him, furiously searching for a sentence he could use as a response, and when he found none he looked up instead, eyes flickering across the auditorium. He found the New Directions first, some looking annoyed, others apologetic – all of them lost for what to do.

Not finding that particularly helpful, Blaine continued to scan the crowd, searching for Cooper – Cooper would know, would give him some sort of sign telling him what to do – but the auditorium was only dimly lit, and the further back the face, the more difficult it was to make out. Blaine quietly cursed himself for not having thought to text his brother beforehand and get his exact location.

'Well...' Blaine said, because he couldn't stay silent much longer. His panicked eyes searched the crowd again, and he was suddenly aware just how many people were looking up at him. He closed his eyes, blocking them out. When he opened them a moment later, he plastered on a smile, answer ready. 'Well, you'll be unsurprised to learn that I have been on hormones for quite a while. I mean' – Blaine forced a short laugh – 'hello, deep voice, facial hair.'

Blaine heard laughter again, but he breathed out, relieved, because this time they were laughing with him, not at him.

'However,' he went on, silencing the crowd with a sudden, serious tone. Humor only went so far. 'anything beyond that is frankly none of your business, and I will not – I repeat: *not* – be answering questions about what my body looks like or what is in my pants.'

Blaine looked to his right, where Kurt was watching him just outside of view from the crowd. Kurt was quite a few feet away and half shrouded in darkness, but Blaine saw his proud smile clear as day. He

remembered Kurt's words to him four days previously – *so proud to call you my boyfriend* – and for the first time Blaine thought he might understand why he should be.

'While we're on the topic of questions,' Blaine said and turned his attention back towards the crowd, reminding himself that he wasn't finished. 'I do understand that most of you have probably never met a trans person before, and it's natural to be curious. However, if you find yourself with a question on your mind, I urge you to consider two things before asking me. First: Are you and I friends, or do we in fact have any sort of relationship beyond going to the same school? Second: Would you want me to ask you the same question? If the answers to both of those questions are "no", then your question is probably inappropriate and you shouldn't ask me. Google is your friend.'

Blaine glanced down at his notes, relieved to find that he had almost reached the bottom of the second and last page. He skimmed the paragraph once before drawing a breath and looking up again.

'Lastly, I-'

Blaine was pretty sure his heart stopped for a moment. His eyes were drawn to the far left, halfway between himself and the entrance at the back, to a familiar figure dressed in an even more familiar uniform. Even at this distance there was no doubt about it. It was Sebastian.

'I, um...'

Blaine swallowed with difficulty. What was Sebastian doing here? How long had he been sitting there? What was he thinking? What was he going to do? Knowing Sebastian, there was no way that he would sit

and do nothing with this new piece of information. And the guy had put rock salt in a slushie as a joke, so Blaine wouldn't exactly put anything past him.

Blaine glanced down again. He was nearly done, and he was about to make the most important point of all; he could not blow it now. Blaine looked back up, forcing the Sebastian issue away to deal with at a later time, and continued as planned, vaguely hoping that his words might have some effect on Sebastian as well.

'I want to mention that I'm aware that some of you may not like who I am. You might think that it's wrong or weird or crazy or that it's okay to call me names. To you I say: I have heard it all – every argument and every dirty name in the book.' As Blaine spoke, his past experiences flashed before his eyes but, for once, rather than let it throw him off, he was able to draw strength from it. 'I have been taunted and bullied and shoved and pushed around and beaten up and put in the hospital, and you know what? Who I am is not up for debate. So if you do have something against me, then I ask that you please keep it to yourself, or you'll only waste your time, because who I am isn't going to change. Trust me, people have tried. I don't demand that you like it or me, but I do demand respect. I'm a person, just like any of you.'

Blaine took a step back to indicate that he was finished, but the silence still held for a long moment. No talking. No laughing. Not even a cough. Then, just as he was beginning to feel really seriously awkward and that maybe he should just hurry off the stage before he got heckled, someone started clapping. Bewildered, Blaine scanned the crowd, but before he could find the source more people joined in, and within seconds the auditorium filled with noise as what had to be nearly every student applauded him, some even standing and cheering.

Blaine stared at the scene before him, and he gave a laugh of disbelief, inaudible through all the noise. His eyes fell first on his glee club friends, who were all clapping and cheering harder than anyone, and then as he looked around again, overwhelmed by it all, he finally found his brother, standing out now that he was

on his feet. His cheering was quieter, almost reserved, but Blaine could tell by his eyes that he was almost as emotional as Blaine was.

A movement in the corner of his eye distracted Blaine, and he looked around in time to see Kurt running towards him, grinning widely. He flung his arms around Blaine's neck, making Blaine stumble a few steps backwards.

'Sorry,' Kurt breathed in his ear, his voice filled with laughter.

'Don't be,' Blaine said, because with how happy he was right now, he was pretty certain that Kurt could have knocked him off the stage and he wouldn't have cared.

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Blaine was so wrapped up in relief and euphoria in the face of the school's support, and then last minute rehearsals for Regionals, that it wasn't until the next day when he was seated in the auditorium along with the rest of the New Directions, listening to the judges be introduced, that he thought of the Sebastian situation again. His heart skipped a beat when it occurred to him that he hadn't heard from Sebastian at all since the previous morning, and he got a sudden bad feeling. He had little time to ponder it though, because the next moment the curtains parted to reveal the Warblers on stage, unsurprisingly fronted by Sebastian.

Rather than launching them straight into their first song, however, Sebastian addressed the crowd. 'Afternoon, everyone. We're the Warblers from the Dalton Academy for Boys.' Blaine wasn't sure if it was his imagination or not, but he thought he heard a certain emphasis on the word *Boys*.

'Oh my god,' Blaine whispered before he could stop himself. 'He's gonna say something.'

'What?' Kurt whispered back.

'Sebastian,' Blaine said, staring at the Warbler on stage. 'He was at McKinley yesterday, and he heard everything.'

'*What?*' Kurt repeated, twisting in his seat this time. 'Why didn't you tell me?'

'I forgot,' Blaine said truthfully, and Kurt opened his mouth in something like horror, his attention caught between Blaine and the stage.

'Blaine Anderson, your old Warbler friends have a message for you,' Sebastian was saying on stage, and Blaine almost swore out loud, because *oh my god*, he had gone and told the others everything, and what kind of person made a thing of this at a competition in front of a thousand people? It wasn't just humiliating and rude, it was unprofessional. Sebastian was looking straight at Blaine, and Blaine glared back, expecting to find mischief or maybe even malice in the other boy's eyes. Instead what he found looking uncannily like sincerity. 'We miss you, and you're always welcome back here.'

'What,' Blaine said loud enough that it made several people look around.

'This song is for you and anyone else who has ever felt down or stepped on.'

And just like that the moment was over. Sebastian stepped back, blending in next to his teammates, and a second later the song started up.

Blaine looked around at Kurt, who appeared about as surprised as Blaine felt. 'What just happened?' Blaine asked.

'I think... I think Sebastian's being nice about something for once,' Kurt replied, raising an eyebrow at his own words as though he didn't quite believe them.

'It's gotta be an act for the judges, right?' Blaine said as he looked back towards the stage, cocking his head at the performance as he attempted to ascertain its sincerity. If he had had a chance to consider it, Blaine might have expected support from the Warblers, but like this and arranged by Sebastian?

'I... would be very confused right now if I was a judge,' Kurt said slowly as though it was causing him great pain to do so. 'They'll have no idea what he's talking about.'

Kurt fell silent, and Blaine considered his words just as Sebastian sang the words *You will see who are your friends*, which almost made Blaine laugh because while his friendships with the members of the New

Directions had arguably grown stronger this past week, he had never been more confused about his friendship with Sebastian himself.

It occurred to Blaine that perhaps it was time for him to stop brushing off Sebastian's attempts at a conversation, so when the Warblers' set ended, Blaine stood up.

'I'm going to go find him,' he told Kurt as he began to move past Kurt towards the aisle.

'Blaine.' Kurt closed a hand around Blaine's wrist, making him look around.

'I'll be back before we go on,' Blaine assured him, but Kurt shook his head.

'I still don't like him.'

'Are you asking me not to go?'

'No,' Kurt said and let go of Blaine's wrist. 'I'm just saying...I don't know, be careful. Even if he's capable of being nice once in a blue moon, it doesn't mean he's worth having around.'



'I know. I'm just going to talk to him,' Blaine said, and with a last look at Kurt, he moved past the rest of New Directions towards the aisle, muttering 'I'll be back,' in response to their questioning looks.

Outside the auditorium Blaine wandered around for a few moments before he found the classroom that was acting as the Warblers' dressing room today. He heard excited voices through the door and stopped just outside it, peering through the small window. The Warblers stood in one big group in the middle of the floor, evidently talking about – and pleased with, judging by their expressions – their performance.

Blaine watched them wistfully, suddenly missing his own days as a Warbler. He was happy with Kurt at McKinley, but still, the Warblers had brought him up in a sense – not just as a performer, but as a man as well.

'Afraid of going in there?'

Blaine turned around in the direction of the voice and smiled when he saw who it was. 'Trent, hi.'

'No one cares, you know,' Trent said as he approached Blaine. 'Sebastian told everyone during rehearsal yesterday, and well, he probably shouldn't have done that, but everyone's fine with it, Blaine. Or, if they're not, they're keeping it very quiet.'

'I know, I figured from that little speech before your performance.' Blaine shook his head a little, still not quite believing that it had actually happened.

'All Sebastian's idea, believe it or not,' Trent said with a fond smile that had Blaine thinking that Trent was not quite over his crush on Sebastian, though he chose not to comment.

'Yeah, I'm still picking my jaw up off the floor over that one,' Blaine said as he raised an eyebrow.

'Aren't we all.' Trent chuckled and approached the door. 'You coming in?' he asked, looking back at Blaine.

'Maybe just for a minute,' Blaine said, checking his watch for time. 'I only came for Sebastian, really.'

'Well, come on then,' Trent said, waving Blaine towards him. 'You can say hi to the guys first.'

Through the door they went with Trent announcing Blaine's presence loudly and happily, and the effect on the group was instantaneous. Everyone turned to face him, faces lit up in excitement, and within seconds Blaine found himself being hugged left and right. Finally Blaine had to ask that they let go and allow him to breathe. The group dispersed a little, giving him room.

'So... Hi, guys.' Blaine grinned a little self-consciously. 'Good to know you're still happy to see me.'

'Blaine, nothing's changed,' Nick said. 'You're always welcome here. Just like Sebastian said.' Nick gestured with his hand, and Blaine followed it to the edge of the half-circle that had been formed around him. Sebastian stood there, watching the proceedings with rather more reserve than his teammates. Their eyes locked for a moment before Sebastian became the one to look away.

'Yeah,' Jeff said, and Blaine turned his attention back on the rest of the group. 'Mostly we're just sorry if you were scared about what we would think.'

Blaine shrugged. 'I was fifteen when I came here, and transphobia and awkwardness was more familiar to me than acceptance; I was pretty much scared of everything. Don't take it personally.'

Once again Blaine was struck by how easy it was to talk about his past now. Yeah, he had been bullied. No, he didn't let it define him.

He fell into a conversation with his old friends, touching in both old, well-tread topics ('Great performance, guys. You killed it as always.') as well as newer, unfamiliar ones ('So how are the McKinley kids taking the news? They treating you right?'), and it all managed to feel comfortable somehow. After a few minutes Blaine felt someone tugging on his arm, and he looked around and saw Sebastian, who had stayed silent since Blaine entered.

'Can we...' Sebastian gestured with his head towards the hallway.

'Yeah, okay,' Blaine said, and though he still had half a mind to ask Sebastian to leave him alone, he gave a short goodbye to the rest of the Warblers and followed Sebastian outside.

'So I guess I should apologize,' Sebastian said once the door closed behind them, his hands in his pockets and his voice just a little bit off from its usual self-assured drawl. 'Trent kind of yelled at me for telling the other guys. I take it he's always known?'

'We were roommates,' Blaine said simply, not sure yet how much he wanted to engage.

Sebastian nodded, but he seemed oddly distracted and not really taking in Blaine's words. His eyes flickered for a few seconds before they came to rest on Blaine again. 'Were you really put in the hospital for being trans?'

Blaine's eyes narrowed in confusion. 'Yeah, three years ago. Why?'

'I don't know, I just...' Sebastian scratched his chin. 'I've put you in the hospital, haven't I?'

Blaine couldn't really argue with the truth of that, and neither was he interested in being angry right now, so he simply shrugged at Sebastian's words.

'Look, I'm not like that, okay?' Sebastian went on, and he looked almost pleading. 'Or at least, I don't wanna be. No one was supposed to get hurt.' He shook his head slowly, looking away from Blaine. 'It was supposed to be a joke, but it's not- it's not just fun and games anymore.' When Sebastian looked back at Blaine, there was a kind of sincerity in his eyes that Blaine had never seen before. 'I'm not like the people who hurt you.'

Blaine cocked his head to one side, curious but wary. 'I didn't say you were.'

'Then give me another chance,' Sebastian said as he took three quick steps forward, coming close enough that Blaine had to tilt his head up to meet his eyes. 'Let's be friends again.'

Blaine let out a breath that was somewhere between a sigh and a laugh, and he took a few steps backwards. 'I don't think so.'

'Blaine...'

'I accept your apologies,' Blaine said, still retreating slowly. 'And you're not the spawn of Satan, but-'

'You make me want to be a better person.'

Blaine stopped and stared at Sebastian for a long moment, not sure what to make of that statement. Things had been a lot simpler when Sebastian had just been trying to get into Blaine's pants. 'Yeah, I'm pretty sure you just stole that line from a movie.'

'Hey, I changed a word,' Sebastian said, unperturbed and seeming just a little bit more like the Sebastian that Blaine was used to. 'Do I at least get points for referencing a fifteen-year-old movie?' Blaine felt the corners of his mouth twitching, and Sebastian barely suppressed a smirk. 'Come on, admit it, you find me charming.'

Blaine gave an exasperated laugh, but then he crossed his arms in front of his chest. 'Sebastian, I'm with Kurt. That hasn't changed, and it isn't going to.'

'I'm not asking for a date, I'm asking for your friendship back.'

Blaine appraised Sebastian. He seemed genuine enough, but still... Blaine chewed his lip, remaining silent.

'Come on,' Sebastian pressed. 'I know you're the kinda guy who believes in second chances.'

'Fine,' Blaine breathed out finally, relaxing his arms and surrendering. A second later, however, he pointed a warning finger at Sebastian. 'But no flirting. Start that again and we're done.'

'I won't, scout's honor,' Sebastian said, his expression solemn and holding up three fingers.

Blaine rolled his eyes. 'And no rock salt slushies or insulting my boyfriend or cheating or- or anything.'

'Yes, yes,' Sebastian replied, smiling but impatient. 'Nice and boring.'

Blaine glared.

'I mean,' Sebastian corrected himself quickly. '*Nice*. I'll be nice.'

'Mm.' Blaine regarded Sebastian carefully, torn between amusement and exasperation. 'I'm going to regret this, aren't I?'

Sebastian grinned. 'Probably.'

Blaine snorted and shook his head, but before he could reply he felt his phone buzz in his pocket, and he knew it must be his teammates calling for him. 'I have to go.'

'Right, of course.' Sebastian gestured in the direction of the auditorium. 'Good luck up there. See you on stage when we win.'

'Ha, in your dreams,' Blaine called, already heading down the hall. 'We've so got this.'

A short while later, however, as Blaine was on stage with the rest of the New Directions, the idea of winning Regionals got pushed to the back of his mind, because the act of doing this in the first place – with people he was proud to call his friends, and a boy he was even prouder to call his boyfriend – seemed much more important than any award.

Aptly, Blaine's verse in the song that opened the New Directions' set was all about overcoming adversity, and even though he hadn't chosen the song, let alone written the words, in those fifteen seconds, he felt like he was telling *his* story.

*Me, me, me against them*

*Me against enemies, me against friends*

*Somehow they both seem to become one*

As a cheer went through the crowd, Blaine's eyes fell first on Trent, Sebastian and the rest of his Warbler friends, and he did find them all on their feet, cheering enthusiastically, but they weren't alone, and in fact a surprising number of familiar and semi-familiar faces seemed to be in the crowd today. A group of girls from his Algebra class. Some kids from his French class. Still more from his English class. JT's two friends. The odd thing was that it didn't feel like any of these people were here to ogle him like a circus freak. It felt like a show of support.

*A sea full of sharks and they all smell blood*

*They start coming and I start rising*



*Must be surprising, I'm just surmising*

Finally, Blaine's gaze drifted to the far right to the section where most of his friends' parents were seated today, and he found his own parents and Cooper, all there for once and wearing expressions that mirrored a lot of what Blaine himself was feeling. Happiness. Hope. Relief. Pride.

*I win, thrive, soar*

*Higher, higher, higher*

*More fire*

Winning competitions was fun and the validation was always welcome, but in this moment Blaine had not a care in the world about the outcome of Regionals today, because this? This was what victory felt like.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*That much stronger*

### 78 days

February turned to March the week after Regionals, and all at once it hit Blaine just how close his surgery was. Counting the days out on his calendar, he realized that he had less than a hundred days left. A lot less. Blaine's stomach did an excited backflip. Seventy-eight days to be exact. It was still over two months, yes, but when he compared it to the six years he had lived with chest dysphoria, it almost seemed like nothing.

That night, before going to sleep, Blaine ripped off the first sheet of paper on his newly made countdown calendar, smiling at the new number that appeared on the sheet beneath it, written in large, neat numbers and letters. *77 days now.*

### 76 days

On the first Sunday of March, Blaine turned eighteen, and so the night before, he threw a party at his house with all of New Directions and every Warbler invited. While not everyone could make it, there still ended up being almost thirty people at his house that night, a fact his mom was none too happy about, but Blaine insisted that he couldn't leave anyone off the invite list, because both choirs represented an important part of him.

The presence of both the Warblers and the New Directions in a casual setting proved strange for everyone at first, each group keeping mostly to themselves, and Blaine wondered for a while if he had made a mistake in bringing his two worlds together – if maybe they weren't meant to coexist anywhere but inside him – but then Nick took the plunge and asked Sugar to dance, which seemed to break everyone's hesitation and mistrust, and pretty soon Blaine's old friends were mingling with his new ones as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Later, when they had devoured about a dozen large pizzas collectively, there was more music and dancing, and eventually they turned off the stereo, instead taking turns to provide the music themselves. There were mini singing competitions with teams formed by random criteria such as "people who are wearing red" or "people who are only children." There was a game of Truth Or Dare that Blaine wasn't sure after

whether he wanted to preserve in or cleanse from his mind forever. There was laughter and chatter and good-natured teasing from the New Directions about having beat the Warblers once more. Eventually exhaustion hit Blaine, and he collapsed into the sofa, letting Kurt wrap his arms around him, content to just let the rest of the night pass by him in one big happy blur.

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### 75 days

The grandfather clock in the living room struck midnight just as the door closed behind the last party guest. The only person remaining was Kurt, who had been given permission to stay the night, and Blaine turned to him now. 'That was fun,' he said through a tired but genuine smile.

'I know,' Kurt said. 'And inviting the Warblers was a great idea. I'm surprised how well everyone got along.'

'Yes.' Blaine smiled. 'Even you and Sebastian.'

'I'd call it civil,' Kurt said somewhat stiffly.

'I'd call that a great start,' Blaine countered gently.

Kurt made a face, Sebastian clearly still not his favorite person. 'Why did you decide to be friends with him again?' he asked as they both headed up the stairs. 'No one would say you owed it to him.'

'I know I don't,' Blaine said. 'But forgiveness isn't about owing or deserving. It's about moving forward in the best way possible.' Blaine pushed open the door to the bathroom, lowering his voice as he continued, because his mom was sleeping in the next room. 'I think he's genuinely trying now, and who am I to discourage that? And there's enough hate in the world as it is.'

Kurt rolled his eyes fondly, and Blaine looked at him in bemusement. Kurt gave a small smile, and as he leaned across to grab his toothbrush from the cup on the sink, he placed a gentle kiss on Blaine's cheek. 'I love you.'

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A short while later the two of them were in Blaine's bedroom, Blaine watching idly from the bed while Kurt finished his skincare routine.

'It won't be the same next year, will it?' Blaine said, breaking the silence that had fallen between them.

'What won't, honey?' Kurt asked from his place in front of the mirror.

'Birthdays and stuff. There'll only be a few of us left here, and everyone else will be scattered all over the country.' Blaine picked at a loose thread in his bedding. 'You'll be in New York...'

'So everyone comes back for a reunion,' Kurt said, screwing the cap on his final product. He turned and walked over to join Blaine on the bed. 'We're a family.'

'People can't come back every time it's someone's birthday.'

Kurt opened his mouth, looking for a moment like he wanted to argue the truth of Blaine's words, but then he closed it again. He gave a small, almost imperceptible shake of the head. 'Anyway, it's a whole year away, let's not worry just yet.'

Blaine looked away. 'Actually, it's only a few months away.'

'Okay, but it's not *now*,' Kurt said, touching Blaine's hand and making Blaine look around again. 'Right now it's well past midnight, and it's officially your birthday.' A mischievous smile played on Kurt's lips, a smile that made Blaine appreciate that they were behind closed doors. 'Time for your present, birthday boy.'

Blaine quirked an eyebrow. Kurt had already given him his present several hours ago along with everyone else.

Kurt shifted on the bed, moving further into Blaine's space, and his eyes followed his hand up the sleeves of Blaine's pajamas, touch feather-light. His eyes were dark and his voice was low when he spoke again, 'I meant the one you can't open in front of other people.'

Blaine made an involuntary noise in his throat, and in one smooth movement he maneuvered Kurt onto his back and himself on top of him. Blaine let his hands roam Kurt's torso appreciatively as he moved further and further down, stopping when his face was inches from Kurt's crotch, hands resting on his belt. Blaine smirked and hummed low in his throat. 'Mm, happy birthday to me.'

## 66 days

Blaine smiled when he pulled into the driveway and saw that his dad's car was parked there. Home again then. His dad had returned home briefly to attend the New Directions' Regionals performance, but he had left again so quickly that Blaine hadn't really had a chance to speak to him, so he felt like it had been much longer than a couple of weeks since he had seen his dad.

He practically skipped to the front door and unlocked it quickly. At first glance the house appeared quiet, but Blaine spotted his dad's shoes in the hall and knew that he must be around somewhere. He made quick work of shedding his own shoes and jacket and was just about to proceed upstairs when his eyes were drawn to a piece of paper lying on the small table where keys and mail were usually discarded.

Blaine stepped closer, letting his school bag slip off his shoulder to the floor. Picking up the item from the table and inspecting it more closely, he found that it was an invitation to a christening. The paper was creased in places and the folds were old, which had to mean that the invitation had arrived some time ago. On top of it it, however, was a newer-looking post-it note with two words in his mom's handwriting. *Call Andrew.*

Blaine frowned, confused as to what his uncle had to do with a christening, but found his answer when he lifted the post-it note and read the text it covered. The invitation was from Blaine's cousin, Katie, and her husband, which made the child in question Andrew's grandchild. His second grandchild; Blaine vividly remembered the christening of the Katie's first child. He had been a few months shy of fifteen, and while he had not been keen on going, he had gone because his dad's family was the kind where you attended that sort of event whether you wanted to or not. Because it was proper or something. Blaine sighed. And now another one.

Except there was no way that he or his parents could make it to this one, he realized suddenly as he read and re-read the date. May twentieth. They would all be in San Francisco then, Blaine recovering from surgery. For half a second Blaine felt relieved that he wouldn't have to go to another of those stupid events and pretend to like everyone, but then he re-read his mom's note, and suddenly the words sounded ominous. *Call Andrew.*

63 days

Three days later Blaine and his parents were gathered around the table in the kitchen. Blaine had been invited to Kurt's house for Friday night dinner, but his dad had insisted that he stay home tonight, and a few bites into his meal, Blaine realized why.

'I have news,' his dad said, making both Blaine and his mom look up. 'I got the promotion! They just announced it today.'

'Dad, that's great,' Blaine said, smiling. Finally they could be a little bit more like a normal family. 'When do you start?'

'April, so in a few weeks. And no more getting back on the road. It's all family dinners from now on,' his dad said, smiling and indicating the meal they were currently sharing. 'And what with you off to college in a year and a half, the raise won't exactly be unwelcome either.'

'That's fantastic, dear,' his mom said, but there was no joy in her voice, and Blaine looked around to find her smile stiff. 'Mommy will be so proud.'

His dad's smile froze. 'Grace, please. Not now.'

'That's your response to everything, isn't it?' Blaine's mom snapped. '"Not now." You've been telling your family your family "not now" for thirty years. Heaven forbid you'd have to actually deal with them, right?' At her last words, Blaine's mom put down her knife and fork with a clatter and stood up, taking her plate with her even though they had just barely sat down.

'That's easy for you to say,' his dad shot at her back. 'Your family is different.'

Blaine looked back and forth between his parents, confused. Hadn't they been celebrating his dad's promotion a moment ago? 'Guys, what...'

'Sweetie, perhaps you should go to your room,' his mom said, appearing at his side and reaching for Blaine's plate.

'No, I'm not finished,' Blaine said, pushing her hand away. 'And I'm old enough to know what's going on, even- *especially* if it's about me.'

'What makes you think it's about you?' his dad said.

Blaine gave him a wry smile. 'Isn't it always?' The silence that followed only confirmed Blaine's suspicion. 'You told Uncle Andrew why we can't come to that christening, right?'

'How did-' His dad shook his head. Clearly, how Blaine knew was not important right now. 'I did.'

'And he told Grandma?'

His dad worried his lip for a second. 'Pretty much.'

Blaine grimaced and continued in a would-be bored voice, 'And now she's threatening to disinherit you or something.'

'Well, nothing quite that extreme,' his dad said, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. 'But she's worried. In her own way.'

There was a loud noise by the sink as Blaine's mom put down her glass suddenly and turned around, looking livid. 'Oh my god, John, stop it. Stop defending her.'

'I'm not, I'm just-'

'*She threatened to call social services,*' his mom said, voice shaking.

'He's eighteen, nothing would happen.'

'That's not the point!' she yelled. 'Point is you barely defended yourself *or* your son. How long are you going to let this continue?'

Blaine kept quiet, but found himself wondering the same thing.

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48 days

Blaine shut the door behind himself and Kurt, and a moment later he collapsed on his bed. He lay there for a moment, looking tiredly up at the ceiling.

'Am I imagining things,' Kurt said, 'or was that dinner really, really tense?'

'You're not imagining it,' Blaine said and propped himself up on his elbows to look at Kurt. 'My grandmother called again today. Mom's not happy.'

'Is she still going on about your surgery?'

'Yep,' Blaine said with more nonchalance than he felt. 'Apparently my desire to have top surgery is akin to wanting to cut off your own foot.'

Kurt rolled his eyes. 'People are idiots.'

'That they are,' Blaine said as he sat up and slid off the bed. He moved over to his desk where his countdown calendar stood propped up against his computer. Next to it in a neat pile lay the sheets he had ripped off this month. He liked to keep them around and look at them sometimes to remind himself how far he had already come.

'You know,' Kurt said as he came up behind Blaine, wrapping his arms around Blaine's middle, and Blaine melted into the touch. 'There are apps for this sort of thing.'

Blaine smiled and picked up the calendar. 'I know, but I like it being a real, physical thing where I get to rip off another sheet every day.' He brought his fingers to the paper, slowly tracing the number 48 as he spoke. 'It makes me feel like I'm not just watching and waiting, but actively participating.' Blaine gave sheepish shrug. 'I don't know, it's silly, I guess.'

Blaine made to put the calendar back, but Kurt took it from him. 'No, no. I think I get it.' Blaine turned around to find Kurt grinning at him and waving the calendar. 'Maybe I should make one of these for myself. You know, for New York? Except I don't really have an exact date of course.'

Blaine bit his lip, watching Kurt's excited expression. Then he took the calendar from Kurt and put it carefully back on the desk before taking a few steps back, putting some space between himself and Kurt. 'Okay, I'm gonna say something, because you're always telling me how I need to be more open about how I feel and such.'



'Of course,' Kurt said, closing the gap between them and taking Blaine's hand. 'You can tell me anything.'

'I just don't want to sound like a selfish jerk here, so don't take this the wrong way.' Blaine moved to sit on the bed, his hand slipping out of Kurt's as he went. 'I'm not trying to- I'm just trying to explain what it feels like from where I'm standing. Or' – Blaine indicated the bed – 'sitting, I suppose.'

'Okay.' Kurt sat on the bed next to Blaine. 'Did I miss the actual thing in there somewhere?'

Blaine smiled carefully. 'No, it's coming.' He took a deep breath and looked up into Kurt's eyes. Might as well do this properly. 'I get that you're excited about New York. It's where you need to be, and you absolutely should be excited about going. I just-' Blaine averted his eyes, searching for the right words. 'Sometimes I feel like you're excited about leaving me behind, or at least that it doesn't bother you much.'

'Oh. Oh, no.' Kurt shifted on the bed to more properly face Blaine. 'Honey, no.'

'I know you said you don't want to break up, but... that's all you've said.' Blaine couldn't stop the emotion from welling up inside him now that he was saying it out loud. 'You don't seem to want to talk about it, but it's a whole year, Kurt. A whole year where I'm here, and you're there, but you don't seem worried at all.'

Kurt regarded Blaine for a long moment. Then he smiled softly and took Blaine's hand in his. 'I'm not worried. Because I love you, and if there's one thing I've learned in the past four months, it's that we make things work regardless of anything that's thrown at us. But...' – Kurt moved again, this time crawling up to the head of the bed and leaning against the headboard. He extended his arms, indicating that Blaine should join him, and Blaine did so happily, melting into Kurt's arms. 'If it's bothering you, we can talk about it. We'll figure it out, I promise.'

.

### 37 days

Stifling a yawn, Blaine stepped into the kitchen, going straight for the coffee pot, but almost stopped short at the sight of his dad sitting at the kitchen table. 'Oh. Morning,' he said through another yawn.

'Morning, buddy,' his dad said. He pointed over his shoulder, keeping his eyes on the piece of paper he was reading. 'Coffee's fresh.'

'Thanks,' Blaine said and moved to grab himself a cup, shaking his head a little at the fact that after a week and a half, he still hadn't quite gotten used to sharing his morning routine with his dad. 'Mom gone already?'

'Mm-hm. Early meeting.'

'Right, of course,' Blaine said, before taking his first precious sip of coffee and turning to regard his dad. He liked these mornings, he had decided. He liked his dad's stories about office life, which Blaine returned with updates about how he was faring in school and how the other kids were treating him (still the odd look or comment, but by and large his peers left him alone).

Today, however, his dad seemed distracted and not in his usual good mood, so Blaine kept quiet and focused his thoughts on deciding on something for breakfast.

'She cannot be serious,' his dad muttered then, breaking the silence and making Blaine look around.

'What?' Blaine asked, abandoning his thoughts of breakfast and sitting down at the table to see what his dad was looking at. He was holding a brightly-colored leaflet in his hand, and Blaine's eyes widened when he saw the words on the front. 'Bible camp? Who sent that?'

His dad gave a small, mirthless smile. 'Guess.'

'Grandma?'

'Bingo.'

Blaine eyed the lengthy letter that lay on the table on front of his dad. 'What does she say?'

'Nothing you need to worry about,' his dad said, picking up the letter and folding it up.

'Dad,' Blaine said, voice even.

His dad looked at him for a long moment, but Blaine stared back, unrelenting. 'Fine. I guess you're old enough to decide for yourself.' Blaine's dad handed him the letter, which had Blaine narrowing his eyes in dislike within two sentences. 'The gist of it is that she spoke to the people in charge of this camp, and they'd be willing to "work with you."'

Blaine forced a laugh. 'Wow, that's nice of them.'

'I'm sorry, Blaine. You shouldn't have to deal with this.' His dad's warm hand came to rest on Blaine's arm. Blaine kept his eyes on the letter. 'I wish I could just shut them all out of my life, but it's not that easy with family. You understand that, right?'

'Yeah, I do. But...' Blaine bit his lip. 'You're not going to let them convince you, are you?' Blaine scanned the letter again, his eyes drawn to words and phrases like "granddaughter" and "only out of concern," reading them over and over. 'You won't change your mind about the surgery?'

'No,' his dad said. He gripped Blaine's arm a little tighter until Blaine finally looked up. 'No, okay? I'd really rather that they all learn to accept it, but if they don't, they don't. You're having that surgery.'

'Right, okay,' Blaine said. He released a soft breath of air and smiled. 'Just checking.'

.

### 32 days

'Admit it,' Kurt said as he and Blaine exited Kurt's car and walked towards their destination. 'Whitney Week is ten times better than Michael Week.'

Blaine laughed, endeared by Kurt's enthusiasm. 'Aside from the fact that it doesn't take much to top a week where I was nearly blinded and fell out with some of my oldest friends, let's just see where this one goes. It's only Monday.'

'Fine, be all boring and reasonable,' Kurt said as he pushed open the door to Between The Sheets, making the bell ding. 'But you'll agree with me on Friday. Besides, aren't I always right?'

Blaine grinned and opened his mouth to make a witty retort, but was cut off by his phone ringing. He frowned at the display. 'Huh. It's not local.'

Kurt shrugged. 'Probably some telemarketer.'

Blaine hit the "answer" button, expecting to be able to brush off whoever it was quickly. 'Hello?'

'Hello, Amber.'

'G-Grandma?' Blaine said, watching as Kurt's eyebrows shot up. Blaine covered the phone with his hand and spoke in a low voice, 'You go ahead. I'll be right there.'

Kurt looked like he wanted to protest, but did as asked, and Blaine moved into the shop a little, finding a quiet corner where he hoped he wouldn't bother anyone. When he brought the phone up to his ear again, his grandmother was talking seriously at him, and he realized that he hadn't taken in a single word beyond the first two. Not that he couldn't guess.

'...and you need- Are you even listening to me, Amber?'

'My *name* is Blaine,' he said through gritted teeth.

'It says Amber on your birth certificate, you silly girl,' his grandmother snapped.

'Actually it doesn't. Not anymore,' Blaine pointed out.

'That's hardly the point.'

'You just-' Blaine made a frustrated sound in his throat. He turned around, eyes scanning the shop for Kurt, and he found him, out of earshot but there, and the thought grounded Blaine. To know that his grandmother was just a voice on the other end of a phone that he could hang up at any time. He forced a polite tone when he spoke again, 'What do you want?'

'This ridiculous surgery that you're planning,' she said, and already Blaine was struggling to keep his cool. 'Since your father seems unable to talk sense into you-'

'He's not *unable* to, he's not *trying*.'

'Watch your tone with me, young lady.'

'I'm not a lady!' Blaine yelled and several people turned to stare at him. Kurt, who had been chatting to a blonde boy in glasses, looked over as well, a concerned look on his face. Blaine made a dismissive gesture with his hand before turning into the corner, continuing in a lower voice, 'When are you going to understand that?'

'I understand that you have a real problem. I don't know what happened to make you feel like this but, sweetheart, this can't go on.' His grandmother's voice shook with emotion suddenly. 'You need help.'

'No, I don't.' Blaine's voice trembled also, not because he doubted his own words, but because his grandmother still did. 'Look, I know this doesn't fit your world view, but I'm not asking you to join the pride parade. I'm just asking you to accept that Amber's gone. There is no Amber. There's just Blaine, but he's just as much your grandchild as Amber was. Please, just try. You should at least want to try. This is who I am.'

'Who you are is a girl,' his grandmother said, the emotion gone again. 'That is a fact. And this elaborate game of pretend doesn't change that.'

'You're the one pretending, Grandma,' Blaine said, losing his patience. 'Who's so desperately clinging on to what's *normal*. And for what? I'm happy like this. Why is that not enough?'

The pause that followed Blaine's words was long, and time seemed to slow down as Blaine allowed himself a snapshot of the moment – the bustling of the customers around him, the classical music playing on a stereo somewhere, Kurt over there, in conversation with some guy and glancing Blaine's way every few seconds – because maybe this was the moment when his grandmother finally accepted him, and he would want to remember that forever.

'It's just not right,' his grandmother said finally. And just like that time was moving at regular speed again.

'Well, that is just the winning argument right there,' Blaine said, something inside him snapping. 'You've opened my eyes. I see now. I *am* a girl, wow.'

'This isn't a joke.'

'No, it's not. It's really not.' Blaine turned and his eyes found Kurt again. He was browsing the music and making what looked like polite conversation with that same blonde boy. 'I think we're done here, Grandma.'

'Wait. This surgery-'

'Goodbye.' Blaine ended the call and stood for a few moments, breathing shakily. Why did he always get his hopes up? He shook his head a little and moved towards Kurt just as the boy he had been talking to turned and left. 'Hey,' he said when he reached Kurt's side.

Kurt turned towards him. 'Hey. Everything okay?'

'Yeah, it's fine. Or,' Blaine corrected himself, 'it's not fine, really. More of the same, you know. But I am. I'm fine.' Blaine nodded towards the boy who was now browsing another section of the shop. 'Who was that?'

'Oh, just some guy. Chandler something.' Kurt cocked his head. 'Actually, I think he might have been coming on to me.'

'Well, can you blame him?' Blaine ran his fingers lightly down Kurt's arm. 'You're gorgeous. So what'd you say?'

Kurt smiled. 'I pointed to you, and told him that I'm very happily taken. *And*' – Kurt turned back towards the rows of sheet music and spent a moment filing through them before he found what he was looking for – 'it made me think of the perfect Whitney song for us.'

'Us? A duet?' Blaine said, smiling and reaching for the sheet music in Kurt's hand. 'Do tell.'

Kurt handed it to Blaine, giving a coy smile. '*All The Man That I Need*.'

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## 21 days

'Hey,' Blaine's dad called, coming into the hall from the living room just as Blaine closed the front door behind himself and Kurt. 'I got your old suitcase down from the attic. I put it in your room if you want to get started on packing this weekend.'

Blaine hung his jacket, avoiding his dad's eye, and his response was dull and disinterested. 'Whatever, I'm not going to Nationals.'

'What, why?' Kurt called after Blaine, who was already headed to his room, taking the stairs two steps at a time. There was scrambling behind him, and once inside his room, he turned to find his dad and Kurt in the doorway.

'Blaine?' his dad said, his expression a mix of confusion and worry.

Blaine crossed his arms in front of his chest. 'We just got the info about the hotel we'll be staying at in Chicago.'

'Yeah,' Kurt said, looking from Blaine's dad to Blaine and stepping further into the room. 'And you're rooming with Artie, Rory and Sam. What's the problem?'

'They're not the problem, I am,' Blaine said and averted his eyes. 'I was so excited I didn't think- God, I'm so stupid.'

'Honey, they don't care.' Kurt stood right in front of Blaine, and he tried in vain to make eye contact. 'They know, remember?'

'There's a difference between knowing and seeing,' Blaine said, looking back at Kurt. It was not without reason that Blaine had attended every New Directions sleepover with the caveat that he would not actually spend the night. 'This is four days of being around New Directions and sharing a room with some of them. I can't wear my binder for that long. And if I did I'd be useless on stage anyway.'

'Have you spoken to your teacher about this?' Blaine's dad asked, stepping forward also. 'That... Mr. Schuester?'

Blaine grimaced. 'And what? They're not going to give me a private room, the school can't afford that.' Blaine let out a mirthless huff of laughter. 'And where would that leave me anyway? Not exactly part of the group.' Blaine gave a tired sigh and sank down on the bed. He looked at the floor as he waved a hand in front of his chest. 'I just wish these were gone already. I know there was no other way of doing it and have me still be fit for Nationals, but I just... I hate this.'

'I know it's tough, buddy,' Blaine's dad said as he crouched down in front of Blaine. 'But I also know you, and you don't give up that easily. Listen' – Blaine's dad put a hand on his shoulder, prompting Blaine to look up – 'go talk to your teacher on Monday. I'm sure he'll understand the situation. Tell him if it's a

matter of money, your mom and I are more than willing to pay. And if he won't help you just give him my number, and I'll yell at him until he does.'

Blaine looked away again, mumbling, 'You can't even yell at your own family.'

'What?'

Blaine looked back at his dad and spoke in a quiet voice. 'They've been calling me.'

'What, "they"?' Kurt said. 'I thought it was just your grandmother that one time.'

Blaine shook his head slowly. 'Uncle Peter and Andrew. Even some of their kids. Lucy, Jackson, Katie. They've all been trying their hardest to dissuade me from the surgery.'

His dad looked lost for words for a moment. Then, 'Why didn't you tell me?'

'I guess I wanted to prove that I could take care of it myself, but I just...'

'Don't tell me they got to you?' Kurt said, eyes narrowed, though Blaine knew it wasn't directed at him as such.

'No, I want it. I know I do. They just-' Blaine ran a hand across his face. 'They keep telling me what a huge, dangerous step surgery is and arguing the morals of plastic surgery and throwing all these statistics at me. People who had bad results, people who regretted, people who didn't wake up again, and it's...' Blaine rose and went to his desk, staring for a moment at his calendar. The number on there had never seemed quite so frightening. 'I can't really explain it. It's just screwing with my head a little.' He turned and looked at Kurt. 'I'm not sure I'm even in the right headspace to perform at Nationals. I might just ruin it for the rest of you.'

'The only way you'll ruin it is by not being there.' Kurt moved in front of Blaine again and sent him an encouraging smile. 'And listen, I know you, I've seen you. You thrive on stage. There's no way that sitting Nationals out will be better for your state of mind than actually performing.'

Blaine bit his lip, watching Kurt's earnest expression. 'I know, you're right. I want to go, I just...' Blaine blew out a long breath of air. 'I'll talk to Mr. Schue, I guess.'



18 days

Three days later, at the start of that day's glee rehearsal, Blaine raised his hand and brought up the issue. 'The school wouldn't have to pay for it,' he said. 'I can have my parents do it. I just wouldn't want to make anyone uncomfortable.'

Mr. Schue nodded along to Blaine's words. 'Sure, Blaine. We can-'

'No one here is uncomfortable, Blaine,' Mike said, all earnest eyes when Blaine looked around at him.

'Yeah, maybe not *now*, but...' Blaine took a breath, reminding himself that the choir room was his safe space. 'My surgery is not until the week after, and I can't bind 24/7.'

'So?' Sam said.

'So you've only seen me during the day like this, and I wouldn't want to subject you-'

'Alright,' Puck, who sat next to Blaine, broke in. 'Show of hands anyone who doesn't mind Anderson unwinding around us.'

Blaine's mouth opened and closed wordlessly as he watched every one of his teammates raise their hand without hesitation.

'Also, if it helps,' Santana said. 'You won't be alone, since we all know that Finn has a serious case of man boobs.'

'Hey!' Rachel called indignantly, while Finn opened his mouth, but seemed to decide against saying anything. Santana simply shrugged.

'Right, okay.' Blaine let out a shaky laugh. 'I guess I'm staying put then.'

'Right on!' Sam said, clapping his hands together.

'Damn straight,' Puck said, and he clapped Blaine on the back. 'You're one of us now, bro.'

8 days

On their first night in Chicago, Blaine spent a long time in the bathroom, supposedly getting ready for bed, although in actuality he spent most of it staring at himself in the mirror. Despite his friends' nonchalance on the subject, the thought of being binder-less around them, even for the few seconds it would take him to exit the bathroom and slip under the covers of his bed, filled Blaine with anxiety. Just because they were okay with it, didn't mean that he was.

Of course Blaine couldn't exactly stay in here for the rest of the night, and the longer he did, the more awkward finally coming out was going to be. It was with that in mind, a deep breath, and a silent "thank god" that at least the rooms were en suite, that Blaine pushed the bathroom door open and went back into the dimly lit hotel room, holding his day clothes in front of his chest.

A few steps in, however, he stopped short, brow furrowed in confusion. Two of the four single beds had been pushed together, forming a makeshift double bed. Meanwhile Rory's things were gone, and Rory himself was nowhere to be found either. Blaine looked over at Artie and Sam who were casually going about unpacking their things and preparing for the night themselves. 'Guys, what...?'

'We thought you seemed nervous,' Artie said.

'So you kicked Rory out?' Blaine asked, perplexed.

Artie shrugged. 'He volunteered to switch rooms.'

Behind Blaine the door to the hallway opened and closed, and just then Blaine noticed a familiar suitcase on the floor next to the newly formed bed. His eyes flickered and caught Sam's, and Sam winked at him. 'Just don't tell Mr. Schue,' Sam said.

Blaine turned around and there was Kurt, carrying what looked to be the last of his possessions and wearing a soft smile. 'Surprise.'

5 days

'National champions, baby!'

The hotel room where all of the New Directions was gathered exploded in cheer as it had done a number of times throughout the afternoon and evening, although with the lateness of the hour, some of the enthusiasm was beginning to wear off.

Blaine stifled a yawn against Kurt's chest and glanced around at his friends, taking in the scene before and around him. Sam and Finn were sitting on the floor watching – apparently hilarious – Youtube videos on someone's laptop. Rachel, Quinn and Tina could be heard through the open door to the bathroom, giggling about god knew what. Everyone else was scattered across the four beds – not a care given to whose bed was whose, because everyone was welcome everywhere – talking quietly in small groups and occasionally shouting something to someone across the room.

Blaine himself was curled up with Kurt on one half of their makeshift double bed, wearing only slacks and a loose-fitting t-shirt, binder thrown carelessly into his suitcase hours ago, while Santana lounged with Brittany at the foot of the bed, offering occasional remarks on Brittany and Mike's very serious-looking discussion – which was either about dancing technique or unicorns, Blaine had lost track some time ago.

As he lay there, head resting on Kurt's chest and fighting to keep his eyes open, the thought occurred to Blaine that eight months ago, when he had transferred to McKinley, he never would have imagined this moment. The National champions part he might have dared to imagine – he had grown up with Cooper after all, and never let it be said that Blaine Anderson wasn't ambitious – but what he hadn't dreamt off was what being here would feel like, that he would be so happy not just to have won Nationals, but to have won it with the New Directions.

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## 2 days

'I can't believe you leave tomorrow,' Kurt said as he and Blaine stood in Blaine's room on Wednesday night, packing the last of Blaine's things. 'Time has flown by, hasn't it?'

'Speak for yourself,' Blaine said with a breathy laugh and indicated the calendar on his desk.

Kurt smiled. 'All right, point taken.'

'It does feel kind of... unreal though. *Two days*,' Blaine said. 'Less than forty-eight hours.'

'Are you nervous?' Kurt asked.

Blaine shook his head. 'Not really. I mean, a little bit, yeah, but not as much as I was.' Blaine gave a wry smile. 'It helped when I stopped listening to my relatives. Plus, they've stopped calling now, thank god.'

'Finally gave up, did they?'

'Seems so,' Blaine said as he tossed a final pair of socks into his bag. He zipped it closed and gave it two small pats. 'There. All done.' Blaine blew out a shaky breath of air as suddenly the enormity of the situation hit him. 'Okay, I'm getting kind of nervous now.'

Kurt reached out his hand wordlessly, and Blaine took it without question, sitting down on the bed next to him. 'You'll be just fine,' Kurt said as he ran a soothing hand along Blaine's back. 'I wish I could come with you though. Be there when you wake up.'

'I know. Damned school,' Blaine said through a small smile although he meant the words too. Getting top surgery was already a dream come true, but having Kurt there with him would have added the cherry on top. 'But you've been there up until now, and you'll be there in a week when I come home. That's what really matters.'

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## 1 day

The moment the plane touched down in San Francisco, Blaine felt a thrill in his stomach. He peeked out the window, and even though everything was gray, wide open spaces and nondescript airport buildings, he thought it might just be the most beautiful sight ever.

'One step closer, huh, buddy?' his dad said from the seat next over.

'Yeah.' Blaine looked around at his dad and his mom next to him by the aisle. Another surge of happiness went through him, and he was both unable and unwilling to stifle the smile that appeared on his lips.

The smile stayed as they disembarked the plane and went to collect their luggage, and it earned Blaine a number of strange looks as they moved through the airport. He knew he must look a bit crazy, smiling so widely at what appeared to be nothing at all, but Blaine couldn't care, because he was here in San Francisco now, the moment he had been waiting for so long almost upon him, and when he left the city again next week, his life would have been forever changed for the better.

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### Day of surgery

Blaine woke early on Friday morning to the light snoring of his roommate, a transman in his late twenties who had been a few hours post-op when Blaine had been admitted the day before. They had chatted briefly, but Aiden, as his name was, had been drugged out and tired and thus not very talkative.

Blaine found his phone on the table next to the bed and when he saw that it was only just past five, he let out a silent groan. Breakfast – let alone his surgery, which required six hours of fasting – was still hours away. He supposed he should get back to sleep, but now that he was awake, he felt so bright and alert that he couldn't fathom how he had been asleep two minutes previously, so he resigned himself to passing the time by playing games on his phone and texting Kurt who was three hours ahead of him and bound to be awake also.

By six o'clock Blaine realized that his phone was almost out of battery, and he just managed to text his mom, asking her to please bring his charger when she and his dad came over later that day, before it died. With nothing that didn't require light or noise to distract him now, Blaine fell into thought about his coming surgery. He conjured up images of what the result might look like; imagined standing shirtless in front of a mirror and not feeling dysphoric; fantasized how sex might be different in the future.

At seven o'clock they were finally officially woken by a nurse. Aiden grumbled initially about being woken up, but once he had been served his morning coffee and was eating breakfast along with Blaine, he turned out to be a chatty fellow with a story quite different from Blaine's. He was older, but not as far into his transition as Blaine, and he was bisexual with a long term girlfriend. They ended up spending the next few hours sharing and comparing experiences.

By ten o'clock Blaine's parents had arrived, and soon his phone was alive again and practically glowing with good luck and well wishes from his friends back in Ohio. Cooper called to wish Blaine good luck, and he promised to make it down for a visit before Blaine left San Francisco next week.

By eleven o'clock Aiden's girlfriend had arrived also, and soon after Aiden was discharged. He left Blaine with a good-luck fist bump and a promise that he would come check up on him in a couple of days, since they were staying at the same hotel.

At noon, as he entered his final two hours before surgery, Blaine emptied the glass of water by his bedside. This was the last fluid he was allowed before surgery, and as he put the glass down, his mind swam with the knowledge that the next time he had anything to eat or drink, he would be post-op. It was really happening.

As the clock hit one in the afternoon, the final countdown began, and Blaine started to get fidgety and unable to hold a conversation for longer than a minute at a time. The TV had been turned on, and though Blaine tried to pay attention it, he mostly found himself staring at the little clock in the corner of the screen, willing time to move faster.

A little before two o'clock Dr. Blackstone – Blaine's surgeon – entered, and finally, finally, *finally* things seemed to be happening. Dr. Blackstone went over the procedure one more time, and last minute questions were posed and answered.

'Okay, that should be all,' Dr. Blackstone said and indicated to a flushing Blaine that he could put the gown back on. 'I will see you in the OR in a little while. A nurse will...' The doctor trailed off, distracted, as a commotion outside the room intensified.

'Ma'am, I'm telling you, you can't just-'

'Let go of me, you imbecile, that's my granddaughter you're about to cut up.'

Blaine's mouth fell open, and he looked around at his parents, both sets of eyes wide with shock.

'Mom, it's in here, I think,' came another voice from the hallway.

'Sir, please. You can't go in there.'

'Oh, god,' Blaine's dad said as he ran a hand across his face.

'Looks like someone took a detour on their way to cousin Katie's,' Blaine said darkly.

Seconds later the door burst open, and there stood Blaine's eighty-year-old grandmother. She was followed moments later by a whole crowd of people; Blaine's uncles and his cousin Lucy as well as their spouses. A nurse came trailing after them, hurrying inside and looking apologetically at the doctor. 'Sir, I'm so sorry, they just...' She turned to the group and attempted to gently guide Blaine's grandmother out of the room. 'Ma'am. Sirs. Please, this is a private room.'

'Get your hands off me, woman,' his grandmother snapped, making a movement as though to swat off a fly. 'I'm allowed to see my own granddaughter.'

'Grandson,' Blaine's dad muttered so low that Blaine didn't think anyone else heard.

'Now, ma'am,' Dr. Blackstone said and stepped forward, hands raised in peace. 'I understand this can be a difficult thing to process. Trust me, I've been doing this for thirty years, and I've seen my share of distraught relatives, but let me assure you that this' – he indicated Blaine – 'is a young man who has thought carefully-'

'Oh, please. Spare me your platitudes.' With a roll of her eyes, Blaine's grandmother turned away from the doctor and towards the bed where Blaine was lying, flanked by a parent on either side. He prepared himself for another verbal attack and to defend himself, but she let her eyes pass over him like he was air, apparently deciding that he was such a lost cause that speaking to him directly would be pointless. She looked instead at Blaine's dad. 'You think this makes her a man?'

'No,' his dad said, speaking in a dangerous tone that Blaine rarely heard him use. He stood up and took a few steps closer to the old woman, towering over her. On Blaine's other side, his mom covered his hand with her own, stroking gently with her thumb while her eyes followed her husband's every movement. 'I think it makes him happy. He's a man because he says so.'

Just as Blaine's dad finished speaking, running feet could be heard outside and a second later two young, familiar faces appeared in the doorway.

'Mommy, the vending machine's broken,' Paige said as she ran up to Lucy. She pulled at her arm and waved what appeared to be a fifty-dollar bill. 'I'm hungry.'

Meanwhile, her older sister, Jessica, had stopped short and was looking around the room, taking in the scene. 'What's going on?' Her eyes found Blaine's. 'Are you sick?'

Blaine shook his head. 'No, I-'

'Girls, go wait outside,' Lucy said, prying Paige's hands off her. She looked at her husband. 'Michael, can you...?'

Lucy's husband nodded and grabbed his daughters' hands. 'Girls, come on, let's go find something to eat, okay?'

'But, Daddy, what's wrong with Blaine?' Paige said, she too sensing that something was off with the situation.

'Many things, sweetheart,' Michael murmured.

Blaine's dad had been keeping still the entire time, eyes focused on Blaine's grandmother as though she was the only person there, but Michael's words seemed to have the effect of jerking him out of this trance. He took several steps forward and raised his hand in a way that might have made Blaine fear violence if he hadn't known his dad better. 'You- How dare-'

'John,' Blaine's mom said, voice tense. Blaine couldn't tell if she was encouraging his dad or telling him to take it easy.

'Why's Uncle John mad?' Paige asked, and the little girl's voice seemed to ground Blaine's dad somewhat as he lowered his hand and took a small step back, though he was still breathing heavily.

'You see, John?' Blaine grandmother said, indicating the scene around them. Tension and alarm in the adults' faces. Fear and worry in the children's. 'See what you have created? This is insanity.'

'No, Mother,' Blaine's dad said. 'It's real life, and it's not black and white, no matter how much you want it to be.' He shook his head, huffing out a humorless laugh. 'You know, I appreciated that it was difficult for you. We all had to adjust, but come on, it's been four years, and you're not even trying.'

'John,' Andrew said. 'Don't you think you oughta just relax and-'



'Stop talking, Drew,' his dad snapped. It was as though a fire had been lit inside him, and now there was no stopping him. He looked around at each of his estranged family members in turn, making it clear that he was speaking to all of them. 'Listen, I don't care what biology says, I don't care what society says, and I am so far past caring what you all say.' He looked around at Blaine, and their eyes met briefly. 'Blaine is my *son*, and that's all there is to it. If you can't support that, if you can't even respect that enough to call him by his proper name and pronouns, then thank you and goodbye. There's the door.'

The silence following these words stretched out for a long moment, no one moving a muscle. Then Blaine's grandmother turned her gaze to Blaine, looking him over in a less than polite manner. When their eyes met, Blaine saw disgust mixed with pity, and though he couldn't pretend to himself that it didn't hurt, he crossed his arms over his chest and returned the gaze, unflinching.

'I can't,' she said and looked away. 'I can't support this.'

'Then I guess you and I finally have something in common,' Blaine's dad said. 'We both have two sons.' He sat back down in the chair next to Blaine's bed, twisting his body so as to block anyone that wasn't Blaine or his mom from view. 'You can all leave now.'

'You disappoint me, John,' his grandmother said, but his dad's only response was a wry smile. Blaine thought he knew what his dad was thinking. That she couldn't be nearly as disappointed in him as he was in her. Five second later she was gone.

'Well, I just hope you're happy with yourself, John,' Peter said. 'You're lucky you didn't give her a heart attack, you selfish-'

*'Get out.'*

Peter stood silent for a moment, before huffing out a breath, and then he and his wife were gone too.

Andrew and his wife exchanged uncomfortable looks that Blaine couldn't quite read. 'We should get going,' Andrew said finally. 'Katie will be expecting us soon.' Then they too were gone.

Lucy and her family lingered for a few short moments in which Lucy opened her mouth to say something only to shake her head and abandon the idea. 'Come on, let's leave these people alone,' she said, and they began filing out of the room.

'Mom, I don't understand why it's such a big deal,' Jessica said on the way out.

'Well, sweetie-'

'And don't just say I'm a child. Explain it to me properly.'

Lucy sighed. 'I'm honestly not sure how to anymore.'

'That's okay,' Paige's bright voice could be heard saying just as the door closed behind them. 'I can explain *everything*.'

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Ten minutes later Blaine found himself in the operating room, undergoing the final preparations before his surgery. He was lying on the table, chest exposed and arms spread wide. Two nurses were talking to him, explaining what was happening as they administered drugs and sterilized the area they would be working on.

'All right,' a nurse said, speaking softly. 'I'm giving you the sedative now, and you'll start to drift off.' She touched his hand, stroking the inside of his wrist, a gesture that felt strangely out of place to Blaine. 'Don't be scared.'

He wouldn't have been able to explain why, because god knew he had thought plenty about this moment – this dreamless sleep he was about to experience – but now that he was here, he was not scared or nervous at all. Rather, when his eyes drifted closed a couple of seconds later, his lips were curved in a small serene smile.

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A moment later Blaine heard voices, though he struggled to recognize them or make out what they were saying. Then it hit him: *Not* a moment later. Hours later. It was done.

With great difficulty Blaine managed to open his eyes. Everything was out of focus, but he registered that he was back in his room. There were people around him. His parents somewhere on his left, standing close together, and a nurse to his right, appearing so close that she blocked most other things out of view.

'Hi, there,' the nurse said. 'It's all over. Everything went great, they just wheeled you in. Now, the sedative is still wearing off, so don't worry if you still feel a bit fuzzy.' Blaine blinked several times, mind working hard to process her words. 'How are you feeling?'

'Fine. Sort of' – Blaine groaned as he tried to shift his body – 'heavy.'

'Good, that's normal. Any pain or nausea?'

Blaine shook his head. Words were difficult at the moment.

'Okay. The pain will come once the anesthesia wears off, so I want you to take these.' Seemingly out of nowhere the nurse produced a small plastic cup containing two pills and a larger cup of water. She watched as Blaine swallowed them obediently. 'Good boy. I'll leave you with your family now, but I'll be back to check on you later.'

Blaine followed the nurse with his eyes as she left, and his gaze landed on his parents. He could see them more clearly now, and he sent them a small smile before falling back onto his pillow, feeling like he could sleep forever. With the nurse gone, however, he saw for the first time what her presence at his side had shielded. Or rather who.

'Hi, honey.'

A smile spread on Blaine's lips as he watched the figure step forward and into sharper view. 'Mm, I'm dreaming,' he mumbled. 'Must be dreaming. I like this dream.'

A hand covered Blaine's, squeezing. 'It's not a dream.'

Blaine blinked, looking at the hand, then up at its owner. 'Kurt. You came.'

'My dad relented finally,' Kurt said. 'He seemed to think I wouldn't be able to concentrate in school anyway. I have to go back on Sunday, but I'm here now.'

Blaine's heart swelled, and though he felt like the moment deserved its own epic love poem, his mind was still too foggy to let him express everything he wanted to. The sleepy 'Yay, you're here,' that came out hardly seemed to suffice.

Kurt didn't seem to mind, however, and smiled fondly. 'How are you feeling?'

'Brilliant.' Blaine giggled, his mind swirling with thoughts and emotions, and somehow the first words that came to mind after that was, 'My dad's a superhero.'

Kurt laughed, caught between amusement and confusion, and he looked over at Blaine's parents on the other side of the bed.

'There may have been an incident with my family,' his dad said, and Blaine didn't miss the proud look his mom sent him.

'He was just...' Blaine breathed out, struggling to explain. 'With his words... he just...*told* them.' Blaine closed his eyes, replaying the moment in his mind. 'It was awesome.'

'I bet it was,' Kurt said.

Several moments passed in silence, before Blaine opened his eyes again. He raised his hand with difficulty, bringing it to his bandage-covered chest. It was done. It was really done. He let out a soft involuntary whimper.

'You okay, buddy?' his dad asked. 'Are you in pain?'

'Yeah. No. I'm just...' He met his dad's eye. 'I'm so happy.'

No one responded with anything more than soft murmurs, but Blaine took that as a good thing. It meant that they were right there with him.

'I wish I could go back in time,' Blaine said, eyes drifting half shut as sleep threatened to overtake him. 'To my twelve-year-old self. I'd tell him...' Blaine blinked, trying to stay awake and finish the thought, but this was a thought that would have been difficult to express even if he had been lucid and not half asleep. 'I'd say to him...'

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Blaine found the words in his sleep.

He was standing inside what looked like a large animal cage. It was gray and bare, except for himself and a small boy who stood at the very edge of the cage, looking at the world beyond.

'They're not as strong as you think,' Blaine said, closing his hand around a metal bar.

The young boy looked up at him, the dark hair not quite his yet, nor the clothes, but the eyes – oh yes, the eyes, those were his. Big and frightened and young in so many ways, but his. The boy shook his head, rejecting Blaine's words and turned his gaze to the world outside where a boy his age was playing catch with his dad. 'I wish this wasn't happening to me.'

'I don't,' Blaine said.

The boy turned his head sharply, looking betrayed almost, bottom lip trembling.

'I know right now it seems like you might not even make it to tomorrow,' Blaine said, turning the boy away from the cage's edge and kneeling in front of him. 'But I promise you you will. You'll make it so much farther than that.'

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**THE END**