



Kid!Klaine || AU || T

It was a chance meeting, an instant connection, a childhood of friendship, and a lifetime of love.

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CONTENTS

ACT 1:

CHAPTER ONE:

My Theater Never Closes - 5 -

CHAPTER TWO:

The Barricades Arise - 11 -

CHAPTER THREE:

These Are My People - 18 -

CHAPTER FOUR:

Love is Everlasting - 25 -

CHAPTER FIVE:

Have No Fear - 32 -

ACT 2:

CHAPTER SIX:

Those Who Falter & Those Who Fall - 39 -

CHAPTER SEVEN:

Must Pay the Price - 48 -

CHAPTER EIGHT:

Only a Kid but Hard to Scare - 59 -

CHAPTER NINE:

The Curtain's Never Down - 69 -

CHAPTER TEN:

One Day to a New Beginning - 79 -

CHAPTER ELEVEN:

Raise the Flag of Freedom High

- 91 -

CHAPTER TWELVE:

Tomorrow You'll Be Worlds Away

- 102 -

ACT 3:

CHAPTER THIRTEEN:

Turning Through the Years

- 118 -

CHAPTER FOURTEEN:

Does He See What I See?

- 131 -

CHAPTER FIFTEEN:

Time for Us All to Decide Who We Are

- 152 -

ACT 4:

CHAPTER SIXTEEN:

Stand Up and Take Your Chance

- 174 -

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN:

There's a River on the Run

- 185 -

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN:

Fighting For A New World

- 201 -

CHAPTER NINETEEN:

This is the Way That I Am

- 223 -

ACT 5:

CHAPTER TWENTY:

The Color of Desire

- 237 -

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

A Heart Full of Love - 254 -

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

No Fear, No Regret - 272 -

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

How Can I Live When We Are Parted - 287 -

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Does He Feel What I Feel? - 302 -

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

A Heart Full of You - 311 -

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Round and Round and Back Where You Began - 333 -

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

So Dark and Deep, The Secrets You Keep - 348 -

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Bring Him Home - 367 -

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

A Life About to Start - 379 -

CHAPTER THIRTY

Born To Be With You - 398 -

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

A Single Look and Then I Knew - 418 -

ACT 1:

CHAPTER ONE:

My Theater Never Closes

Curtains Up

August 19, 2001

Kurt wiggled and giggled in his red seat, his merchandise and playbill in his hand and his jaw dropping at the enormity of the Imperial Theatre. The show hadn't even started yet, but the theater buzzed with excitement and the cacophony of sounds coming from the orchestra warming up only a few rows in front of them made Kurt's body thrum with anticipation.

"Kurt darling," his mother whispered next to him in his ear. "If you don't settle down during the show you're going to distract the actors." Her voice had an airy amusement to it and it only made him fidget more.

"If you don't settle down you're not going to get the chance to distract the actors because I'm going to take you right out of this theater," his father warned on the other side.

Kurt froze and looked up at his Dad. His face was serious, but his eyes still sparkled and Kurt knew what that meant. He was in trouble but he wasn't *really* in trouble. His pale cheeks grew pink and he flipped his feet in front of him, sitting properly on the seat with his hands folded in his lap. "I'm sorry, I'm just so excited!" he said, grinning up at his Dad.

Burt smiled down at him and ruffled his hair. "I know you are son. And we got you these tickets for your birthday because we thought you were a big enough boy at 8 to behave at a show, so prove us right," he said.

"Especially since you're already 8 and 3 months now," Elizabeth smirked and pulled Kurt in for a hug as best she could in the theater's seats. Kurt smiled and snuggled into her side. She was warm and smelled of her perfume which was really the best smell in the whole world and part of him wanted to just brush his fingers through her hair like he did when he was younger but he was too old for that now.

The houselights started to dim and he bounced slightly in his seat again before his father's hand on his thigh settled him. He couldn't believe he was finally here, his first Broadway show, *Les Miserables*, the one he'd been listening to in the back of his mother's car for as long as he could remember. He'd been asking for two years and they hadn't thought he was old enough, and truth be told they still didn't really think he was old enough. Burt had every intention of covering his eyes during some scenes. But finally they could no longer stand his constant whining and begging and handed him the envelope with the tickets at his birthday party in May. And now as the curtain came up on the Chain Gang, the steady beat of "*Look down!*" pounding in his ears, he sat absolutely mesmerized.

Kurt was pretty sure he stopped breathing when Young Cosette sang *Castle on a Cloud*. It was one of the first songs he had ever learned and he sang it on nearly a daily basis in his bedroom at night, staring out the window into the darkened sky. The song meant everything to him and he thought that if the show stopped there he would be happy forever.

That was until his heart stopped and his face blushed red. He thanked the heavens the theater was dark and his parents couldn't see him, but as he stared at the cutest and most talented boy he had ever seen in his entire short life up on that stage, he had to all but resist the urge to gasp. Hints of curls peaked out beneath the adorable cap Gavroche wore and between his voice and his presence on that stage, Kurt saw absolutely no one and nothing else for the rest of the show. When the shots rang out into the theater and Gavroche choked out his final words before falling, Kurt wept and his mother gathered him in her arms, not understanding at all the impact that boy's death had on him. For a moment, Kurt felt like his whole world was over.

Finally Young Cosette and Gavroche came out for their curtain calls and Kurt screamed and jumped up and down and clapped like they were his best friends and he thought, just for a second, that Gavroche caught his eye and smiled. Kurt smiled back but the boy was already looking up at the balcony, beaming at his audience and Kurt suspected he had imagined the whole thing. It didn't matter though. This had been the most incredible day of his life.

He grabbed his merchandise and his mother's hand and pulled her. "Come on, I want to go to the stage door!" he shouted. His mother laughed and allowed herself to be led out of the theater and to the gated section near the side of the building. His father followed after them.

The sun was bright overhead, a hot day even for August, but the wind blew gently to cool them. Kurt was dressed in his finest slacks, a button down shirt, and a black and blue bowtie with just a touch of red

highlight to perfectly match the *Les Miserables* poster. He was bouncing on his toes, unable to keep still as he leaned against the barrier, waiting. His mother and father stood behind him, glowing at his enthusiasm. He held his poster and his Sharpie in his hand and swallowed a scream when the actors finally started coming out. He tried hard to pull it together. Just because he was a child didn't mean he had to act like one. One by one, the chorus went down the line signing, then Marius and Eponine. Kurt squeaked out his praise and quietly asked for autographs and the actors were happy to oblige. Finally the boy who played Gavroche stepped out, a huge smile on his face, and Kurt's heart began beating frantically. He cleared his throat, humming to make sure his voice still worked through the emotions he didn't understand, and rehearsed in his head what he was going to say.

And then the boy was standing right in front of him smiling and reaching a hand out for his poster and pen and Kurt's hands were shaking. "You were incredible," Kurt managed, his voice far breathier than he would like. If he'd thought the boy was gorgeous on stage he was even more stunning in person, a thick mop of short black curls on his head, the most beautiful honey golden eyes, and an adorable face that twinkled with warmth and a hint of mischief. "Could you sign my poster, um..." Kurt blushed. In all the excitement, he'd forgotten to look up the boy's name.

"My name is Blaine," the boy smiled, his gaze lingering on Kurt's face, *or was that just his imagination*, and took Kurt's marker.

"Kurt," he answered. His eyes fell to the ground with embarrassment. He was sure Blaine didn't care what his name was.

"It's nice to meet you Kurt," Blaine said handing the marker back, but he didn't move, his smile bright. "Did you enjoy the show? I saw you in the audience during the curtain call."

"Oh yes!" Kurt answered, eyes wide. "I've been listening to *Les Mis* since probably before I could even sing along, but seeing it in person was incredible."

"I know," Blaine said and draped his arm over the rail, leaning against it. "I felt the same way the first time I saw it. What's your favorite song?"

"*Castle on a Cloud*," Kurt grinned, his cheeks no doubt getting even redder. "That and *On My Own*, but I'm a soprano, so..."

Blaine's eyes widened with intrigue, his head cocking to the side. "Do you perform?"

"Blaine, we need to get going," a woman called and Kurt looked up as she placed a hand on his shoulder. "Come on sweetheart, we need get your things and go home."

Kurt thought for a moment that Blaine's face fell but then it lit up again with an idea. "Hey Kurt, why don't you come backstage with me while I get my stuff?"

Kurt gasped with excitement and turned to his parents. "Can I Mom?" he begged.

"Blaine, I don't think that's a good idea..." the woman said.

"Kurt, I don't know that you're really allowed..." his mother said.

"PLEASE MOM!" Kurt and Blaine both begged.

The people around them were watching and the adults eyed one another while Kurt and Blaine looked at each other hopefully until they heard all three of their parents sigh.

"Fine, but we're just getting your things and leaving," said Blaine's mom.

"Fine Kurt, but only for a few minutes," Kurt's mom said.

"Yay," both boys yelled and jumped up and down.

"We'll meet you at the side door and let you in," Blaine shouted.

Kurt ran ahead, his Mom and Dad yelling behind him to wait and the side door opened, allowing them backstage of the Imperial Theatre. Kurt's jaw dropped in awe from the moment they entered and then Blaine grabbed Kurt's hand and ran him down the hall to the dressing rooms. The parents shouted at them both, but neither boy listened and the grownups didn't chase after them.

"So can you really sing?" Blaine asked as he gathered up the school books that were strewn across his dressing table and threw them in his backpack.

"What?" Kurt asked, his attention brought back from just staring at his surroundings. He'd never really been backstage of any theater before, not just a Broadway one. It was incredible, and he never wanted to leave. "Oh yeah, I guess," he shrugged bashfully.

"Let me hear you," Blaine said. He zipped up his makeup bag and turned to look at Kurt.

Kurt stared at himself in the mirror. He didn't know what was happening here, how this could possibly be true. He was pretty sure he was about to wake up from some amazing dream, so he decided to take advantage of it while he could and he closed his eyes and sang.

*There is a castle on a cloud
I like to go there in my sleep
Aren't any floors for me to sweep
Not in my castle on a cloud*

"Blaine Anderson what on earth is going on in here...who are you?"

Kurt opened his eyes and turned to see a girl their age, arms crossed in front of her. It took a moment for him to realize it was the girl who had played Young Cosette and again his heart raced.

"I'm...um...my name is Kurt..." he stammered, then realized he'd been singing her song. "Sorry...I mean..."

"Ignore her Kurt, she's just jealous of how good you are," Blaine smirked and took his hand. Electricity shot through Kurt's fingers but he ignored it. "This is my friend, Kurt, Kurt this is Rachel Berry. She plays Young Cosette and we go to school together too. She's like a sister to me. A very annoying sister," he added grimly.

"Humph," Rachel sniffed before holding a hand out. Kurt shook it. She had a strong grip. "I'm glad you're a boy. Not that you'd really be competition, but still glad you're a boy."

"Um, thanks?"

"Blaine, it's time to go," his mother said with an eyebrow raised, finally catching up to the boys.

Kurt's mother held her hand out for him and he reluctantly let go of Blaine's and took hers. "Well, it was really nice to meet you Blaine. I hope I get to see you again someday."

"Me too Kurt," Blaine said, though Kurt was pretty sure the wistful tone was only his imagination. His head was spinning after all. "Bye."

"Blaine, I do not know what possessed you to invite that boy backstage today." His mother brushed her fingers through his curls and tucked his blankets tight around him. "But it can't happen again."

"He was beautiful Mom," Blaine breathed and his cheeks blushed pink. "The most beautiful boy I've ever seen, and his voice..."

"Don't let your father hear you say that," she warned quickly, peering over her shoulder. "I'm serious Blaine. I had to lie to the security guards and tell them he was your friend."

"He *is* my friend," Blaine insisted with a pout.

Teresa Anderson smiled softly and tugged on a curl. "You don't even know his last name," she teased. Blaine frowned and turned away, snuggling into his pillow. Grownups just didn't understand.

She sighed and rubbed his back, then got up and turned the light out. She opened the door and went to pull it closed, but stopped for a moment in the doorway. "It's Hummel, by the way."

"What?" Blaine mumbled, still upset.

"His last name. We had to sign him in at the door with the security guards. It's Hummel." She left the room and closed the door behind her.

Blaine smiled and closed his eyes, hugging his pillow tight. Kurt Hummel, he thought, rolling the name over in his mind. Blaine and Kurt. Kurt and Blaine. He wanted desperately to see this boy named Kurt Hummel again and he had absolutely no idea how to find him.

CHAPTER TWO:

The Barricades Arise

September 11, 2001

Kurt watched and listened at the top of the stairs, knowing he was supposed to be asleep but who could sleep after the events of the day. His heart ached at the television news. Usually his parents tried to keep the awful things in the world from him but this could be hidden from no one. So much destruction and pain, but so much strength too. And somewhere in the rubble of New York City was a little boy that Kurt secretly said goodnight to on every evening star. A boy whose war had suddenly stepped outside the realm of Paris and pretend, and into his very real back yard.

Kurt gazed upon the evening star that night, and wished that Blaine was safe.

September 17, 2001

Dear Blaine,

My teacher thought it would be a good idea if we wrote letters to kids in New York so they know they aren't alone after the terrible things that happened last week. She had a list from local schools but she also said if we knew someone we could write to them, and the only person I wanted to write to was you.

I don't know if you remember me. I'm Kurt. I'm the boy you brought backstage. Although maybe you do that all the time. But it was the perfect end to the perfect 8th birthday present.

I've been thinking about you. Worrying, I mean. I snuck downstairs to watch the news and saw the names, so I know you're ok. And I know Les Mis is back up and running again. But I'm still worried if you're really ok. And I hope all the people you love are ok too. It's so scary. Who knows what will happen now?

It meant so much to me when you took me backstage. So I thought I'd try and do something nice for you too. I don't even really know you but I was so proud of you up on that stage and I hope you can keep doing it day after day, night after night. I think the people of New York need that.

Well, writing time is up so I guess I should go. I don't know if you'll get this and you probably won't respond, but if you do just know that I'm thinking about you and pretend I'm in the audience again because I wish I was at every show.

Kurt looked up at the board and copied what the teacher had written about how to end a letter.

Sincerely,

Kurt Hummel

He picked up the envelope and put his name and school address in the upper left hand corner, then wrote the address as best he could in the center.

Blaine Anderson

Les Miserables

Imperial Theatre

New York City, New York

He gave it to his teacher to stamp and she looked up the zip code for him and added it. The rest she kept the same. She smiled at him, and he just shrugged nervously back. Chances are he'd never hear a word from Blaine again. But then again, it never hurt to try.

Blaine arrived at the theater Saturday at half hour and found an envelope on his dressing table addressed to him. His eyes caught the return address. *Kurt Hummel*. His breath hitched and his heart raced. It had been more than a month since he'd seen the boy that still haunted his dreams...at least until recently. Now his dreams had turned to nightmares.

He sat down and ripped it open, reading the letter three times, smiling bigger every time. How could Kurt think he didn't remember him? As crazy as it sounded, sometimes he was all Blaine could think about. And now he knew that Kurt thought of him as well, had worried about him during the madness of the last two weeks.

He quickly got into his costume and makeup, all the while wanting nothing more than to write back. He checked in with stage management then ran back to his table, pulling out his school notebook and a pen.

September 22, 2001

Dear Kurt,

Of course I remember you! You have no idea how happy I was to get your letter. You just made my day! The show just started, so I'm sitting backstage trying to avoid my homework. We had a few days off but school started again this Monday (then we had Tuesday and Wednesday off for the Jewish Holidays). That was the only good part of everything that happened.

I heard it all from my school. The first plane crashed and then we all ran to the windows until they made us move away. It was terrifying. The worst part is the nightmares. I can still hear the explosion of the plane, the crumble of the building. I can still smell the smoke in the air. In my nightmares no one comes to get us at school. We stack the desks and chairs to fight. I say that I know what I'm doing, I've done it before. The ending though doesn't change. I wake the moment the bullet hits.

The show reopened last Thursday and it was the hardest thing I've ever done. I don't think climbing the barricade will ever be the same for me again. Now I really understand what we're fighting for.

My family is all alright and I didn't know anyone who was hurt or killed but some of my friends do and my Dad worked with Cantor Fitzgerald sometimes so he lost a lot. He's angry and sad and that's never a good thing for me or my Mom. I've been trying to stay with Cooper a bit. That's my big brother. He's 19 and has his own apartment. Anyway, my Mom and my Dad aren't doing so well right now so I'm trying to stay with him as much as possible, make it easier for them, but things will have to go back to normal eventually, right?

I'm so glad I met you Kurt and got to bring you backstage. And just so you know, you are the only boy I've ever brought backstage and Mom says I can't ever do it again, so you'll stay the only one. I remember the first time Cooper took me to a Broadway show, it was just the most incredible feeling in the world, I never wanted to leave. I hope you feel the same way because you have a beautiful voice and I would hate for you not to use it. And for me to never hear it again.

I'm hearing Rachel sing so I better get going. I hope you'll write again soon.

Your Friend,

Blaine

Blaine set the envelope aside to send out. He'd bum a stamp off someone in the cast or his brother if he had to. His mother and father couldn't know. They'd never let him keep writing to some stranger and if they did they'd insist on reading every letter to and from and he couldn't let that happen. The things he was writing to Kurt were private, his innermost thoughts. He took a deep breath and realized that he felt like a weight had been lifted off of him. This was the first time he'd really been able to talk about what the attacks had meant to him personally. He knew everyone else would just think he was crazy, even Rachel. His parents might even pull him out of the show if they knew that the role was affecting him like that. But yet he knew somehow that Kurt would listen and tell him it was okay. Maybe soon the nightmares would end.

Kurt had been fidgeting all morning as he got ready. Letters had been pouring in from New York City and everyone's penpal was writing back but Kurt still hadn't heard from Blaine. But when he got to school the letter sat on his desk and Kurt could barely contain his excitement. He ripped it open and read it as quickly as he could, hoping to get a chance to reread it at least once before class started. The letter set his heart aflutter and the dimples in his cheeks were deep from the broad smile that graced his face. But the bell rang, and he had to do morning work followed by math and reading and art. Then came lunch and recess and finally, after going crazy with anticipation the entire day, he finally could sit down and write his response to Blaine.

October 1, 2001

Dear Blaine,

I'm so sorry you had to live through that. It looked so scary on tv. Being there must have been awful. I'm glad you have your brother to help you. I always wished I had a brother but it's just me and my parents. You should talk to him about it. And about the nightmares if you're still having them. My mom says nightmares are just the brains way of working things out in our heads. You fight on the barricade all the time so you've built one in your dreams to deal with the things in real life that aren't making sense. I think that's kind of amazing. I think you're kind of amazing.

And sometimes I think dads just don't know how to deal with stuff when things get hard. Mine's the best and even he gets mad when things go wrong. My mom doesn't get mad though. She is pretty perfect.

Like when I wanted to go to ballet class. My dad was all worried about it. He thought the kids would pick on me if they found out and he was right. But mom said that I should do what I want to do and ignore the bullies, dancing ballet doesn't make me weak. I think she's right because this girl Santana is in my ballet class and my class at school and she's the toughest girl I know. I don't know. Maybe kids do make fun of me but I don't care. I don't really fit in here anyway. I want to do what you do. I want to be on Broadway. And that takes hard work. But you know that.

So how did you get to be Gavroche? I'm sure living in NY helped. I'm stuck in dumb old Ohio. And my dad says I'm too young to know what I really want to do yet. I want to go on auditions for commercials or shows. My dance school, well it's a theater school really, is doing West Side Story this year and I'm finally old enough to audition. So maybe I'll get my first shot if I don't totally mess up.

Times up and all I did was babble on to you this whole letter but I have to send it anyway because my teacher is staring at me. Don't feel like you have to answer. I know you're busy. But I just wanted to let you know I understand, and you're not alone.

*Your friend,
Kurt*

October 6, 2001

Dear Kurt,

You weren't babbling. Babbling is when my dumb brother goes on and on about some stupid girl he likes which is why I can't come over some nights. But your letter wasn't babbling. I love hearing all about you.

Don't give up on your dreams. Never worry about what other people think. If I did I wouldn't be where I am today. Keep practicing and I know you'll do amazing things.

My brother is in the chorus of Phantom of the Opera. He got his agent to meet with me and made me sing for him. I've been singing with Cooper since probably before I could talk and he's been taking voice lessons since he was 13, so I guess it rubbed off. Anyway, a few auditions later and here I am. I don't take dance. My father would never let me. But I try to learn as much as I can. And I do have vocal and acting coaches now. It makes me more "marketable" which I guess Dad doesn't mind.

I really hope you audition for West Side Story Kurt. I wish I could come see it. I know you'll be fantastic. I still hear your voice in my ear at night.

Blaine blushed and went to erase that part.

"What are you doing?" Blaine jumped and turned, Rachel's voice startling him. He put his pencil down and turned the letter over.

"Homework," he said innocently. "How do you spell *fantastic*?"

Rachel's eyes narrowed. "You're the best speller in class, everyone knows that." Rachel folded her arms and stared at him with complete disbelief. "And today is Saturday. We don't have homework over the weekends. So unless you're trying to get some extra credit, which goodness knows you don't need..."

"Fine Rachel, it's not homework, just...it's private that's all." Blaine turned away, but Rachel could still see the pink in his cheeks in the mirror and she attacked quickly. She grabbed the letter he'd been working on, twisting and turning and reading as quickly as possible before he finally grabbed it from her hand.

"Is this to that boy you brought backstage?" Rachel screeched incredulously.

"Be quiet or the whole audience will hear you," Blaine snapped defensively, putting the paper back on his table beneath a book. "And yes, it's to that boy. He started writing to me in September. It's a school project."

"For him," Rachel teased, her eyes sparkling with fun. "What's in it for you?"

Blaine shrugged. "He's a nice kid,"

"What is he 6?" she laughed.

"He's 8, smarty pants," he frowned. "But his writing is as good as mine so he must be pretty smart. You're just jealous 'cuz he sings as good as you do."

"As *well* as I do," Rachel corrected haughtily. "Which he doesn't. And why would I be jealous of a kid who we're never going to see again."

"I hope I see him again," Blaine let slip.

Rachel's eyes brightened. "Are you in love with him?" she teased, but Blaine froze. Rachel's mouth dropped. "Oh my god you are!"

"That's ridiculous, he's a boy," Blaine said seriously. "And love is stupid."

Rachel huffed and crossed her arms. "It's not ridiculous or stupid at all, my Dads are both boys and they love each other and it's beautiful!"

Blaine rolled his eyes and turned back to his table, fixing makeup that didn't need fixing. He grabbed his cap and slapped it on his head. "I have to go warm up," he snapped and he stormed into the darkness of backstage.

Rachel slipped the letter out again and read it over. She smiled softly and put it back where she found it. Blaine was most definitely in love with this boy. And she thought it was adorable.

CHAPTER THREE:

These Are My People

October 22, 2001

Dear Blaine,

It's almost Halloween. I am so excited. It's my favorite holiday. It's probably not for you. You get to dress up all the time. But Halloween is the one time of year I get to be whatever I want to be.

Well, not whatever. My Dad says I can't be a princess or a butterfly even if I wanted to be. Which I don't, those are some of the most unoriginal costumes ever. Everyone is going to be Harry Potter, but I don't want to be like everyone else. My mom made me this amazing Dumbledore costume, the robe is almost like Joseph's Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat. Do you know that show? I love it.

So what do you do for Halloween in NY? I go around to the houses in my neighborhood but you probably live in an apartment. Be careful. I know people are still scared and we don't know what's out there. But you also can't live in fear, right?

I bet in New York I could dress up like a princess if I wanted to.

Your Friend,

Kurt

October 27, 2001

Dear Kurt,

So if I said I was going as Harry Potter would you think I was boring and unoriginal? Or would you understand that I'm just a huge Harry Potter fan and sometimes I feel like I really am living in the cupboard under the stairs in the Dursley home.

The theater is my Hogwarts.

You probably think that's really silly.

"Hey sweetie, you about ready to go?" Kurt's mom asked. "It's getting pretty dark out and all the other kids are starting out."

Kurt looked up from his letter and set it aside out of her sight. He didn't really care that the other kids were out trick or treating already. They wouldn't hang out with him anyway and the later he and his Mom went the more fun it was anyway. "Yeah, I'll be down in a minute."

She smiled at him. He looked like the perfect Dumbledore with his white wig, cap and beard. All he needed was the finishing touch. She lifted the velvet cape she'd made and offered it up to him. "Let me help you put this on?"

He really wanted to finish reading Blaine's letter but his Mom looked so excited to help him finish his look and he was incredibly proud of the work that she'd done. He hoped that someday he could sew as well as she could. He got up and she flipped the cape behind him, draping it over his shoulders. She took a moon shaped broach and fastened it. "You look perfect," she beamed.

"Thanks Mom," he said. He gave her a hug and a kiss on the cheek. "I just want to fix my hair one more time, I'll be down in a minute."

She rolled her eyes at his constant primping. The boy definitely took after her. "Ok," she agreed, her eyes sparkling with love, and she left to meet him downstairs.

He quickly sat back down again and took out Blaine's letter to finish it.

I go trick or treating in my apartment building. It somewhat lacks the appeal of going around outside in the dark fighting off ghosts and goblins. The fluorescent lights overhead ruin the mood. But this year the ghosts and goblins are a little more real anyway, so I'm glad to be indoors. I wish I had a show that night. I'd go trick or treating backstage. Sounds much more fun. And I bet I'd get more candy. I'll have to steal Rachel's from her dressing room.

Wouldn't it be fun if we could go trick or treating together?

*Your Friend,
Blaine*

November 5, 2001

Dear Blaine,

I don't think it's silly at all to think the theater is your Hogwarts. I think it makes all the sense in the world.

Rehearsal for West Side Story today was amazing, I just want to do this all the time. Being the Jets little brother is just the best, everyone is so nice to me and I feel like I finally belong somewhere. Is that how you feel?

Probably not. You probably just mean it's magical. You probably have no trouble fitting in at school. You are this star on Broadway but I'm just the silly boy who came to kindergarten one day in a tutu.

And now I've told you that and you probably want nothing to do with me too.

Your (hopefully still) friend,

Kurt

P.S. Say hi to Rachel. I hope she shared her candy with you.

November 9, 2001

Dear Kurt,

I have lots of trouble fitting in. I don't really have friends I can talk to here. Not like I can talk to you. Everyone at school either thinks I'm weird or wants something from me. Well, everyone except for Rachel but then again I guess she's kind of weird too. She's not the easiest best friend in the world but she understands me more than the other kids.

So a little tutu is not going to scare me away. I'm jealous, if I'm honest. Not because you wore a tutu but because you were allowed to. It would not be a pretty thing at all around here if my Dad ever caught me in one.

I'm sorry. I hope that doesn't make you hate me. It's nothing bad about you. Just him.

"Blaine!"

He jumped at the sound of his father's voice. He quickly shoved the letter back into his desk and pulled out his math homework. The door swung open without knocking and Blaine gripped his pencil, working on his multiplication.

"Blaine Devon Anderson. Do you care to explain why your playroom is a complete disaster area?" his father barked, arms crossed angrily on his chest. "We have guests coming over for dinner tonight. And your things are supposed to be put away before you leave that room at any time. You know this, I shouldn't have to be having this conversation with you."

"I'm sorry," Blaine muttered, keeping his eyes on his paper. He'd run out the door for the theater the day before and he'd completely forgotten about the playroom after school today, so focused on writing back to Kurt.

"Sorry isn't going to cut it," Mr. Anderson said and Blaine's heart dropped. He was in trouble for sure. "You go clean that room and then it will be locked. 5 days. Your schoolwork and your housework come before that damn show, and if you can't handle it all, the show will be first to go, is that understood?"

"Yes sir," Blaine answered, tears coming to his eyes. He hated when his father yelled like this. It had gotten worse since the attacks but his father had always been known for his temper and his distaste for Blaine's life in the arts. Sometimes it scared him. Sometimes he feared that his father would take it all away. He got up and slipped out the door, making sure his father was following behind and not staying to go through his desk. The last thing he needed was his Dad seeing what he'd written to Kurt. He went downstairs to his playroom, a room no guest would ever see, and put away the games and the Legos and the books he'd had out. When he finally got it clean enough he stood by as his father took the key from his pocket and locked the door. He held in a sigh of regret. And anger. And a little bit of relief. It could have been worse, he supposed.

"Next time maybe you'll think twice before you leave the room like that." Blaine nodded, but said nothing. He was sure he would, because he knew next time it very likely would be worse. "Dinner will be in an hour. I expect you on your absolute best behavior. The Manfers have been through enough this year without having to deal with a petulant child."

"Yes Sir," Blaine said before he hurried back upstairs. He kept the tears from falling until he was safely away, in his room with the door closed. Shaking with emotion, he opened his drawer and took out his letter to Kurt.

Sometimes I wish I was old enough to do 8 shows a week. Live at the theater. Never come home.

I know exactly what you mean. About belonging there. Ever since Cooper left home it's been the only place I've belonged. The guys in the show, they're all like my brothers. I feel safe there with them. Like I know they'd never let anyone hurt me. And on that stage I feel powerful. More powerful than I ever will be off of it.

It's the best feeling in the whole world.

Your (definite) friend,

Blaine

Kurt read Blaine's letter and a heaviness grew in his heart. His belly tumbled in uncertainty. He just knew something was wrong but he had no idea what it was or what to do. He knew who would though.

Kurt ran to his Mom and Dad's room and curled up on the bed. He could hear his Dad in the shower, scrubbing off the grease and grime after a busy day at the garage. His Mom was at her mirror, putting stuff on her face that she said made her skin feel soft and young.

Elizabeth glanced in the mirror back at her son and raised a brow, her lips quirked in a smile. "Are you here just to watch or because you have a question?"

Kurt frowned. "I have a question." His brow furrowed and his voice sounded very solemn.

Elizabeth stopped and turned. "This sounds serious," she said and he nodded. She came and sat next to him. "What's up?"

Kurt fiddled with his fingers nervously but looked up at her, bright blue eyes questioning. "What do you do if you think a friend's in trouble?"

His mother pursed her lips and took a breath. "Wow, that is a serious question. Are we talking big trouble or little trouble?"

Kurt thought about it, but Blaine didn't really say anything specific in his letters. It was more just a feeling that Kurt had. "I don't know."

"Well, I think that's the first thing to find out. So it's important to let your friend know they can talk to you. And for you to listen. "

"And then what?"

"If it's a little trouble then you guys can talk about how to fix it. But if it's big trouble," she warned and lifted his chin with her finger, "then it's important to talk to a grown up about it. A teacher, or me, or your Dad. Okay?"

Kurt nodded and smiled. He knew what he needed to do now. "Okay. Night Mom!" She laughed and kissed him goodnight, hoping that his problems would always be so easy to answer. Kurt scooted off the bed and padded back down the hall to his room. He sat down at his desk and pulled out a piece of paper.

November 15, 2001

Dear Blaine,

I don't know if you'll get this letter before Thanksgiving, but if you do I hope you have a Happy Turkey Day. And if you don't, well I hope you HAD a Happy Turkey Day. I hope you have family there that makes you happy.

Sometimes you seem so sad in your letters. I don't like to think of you as sad. If there are things you need to talk about I hope you can tell me and I will always listen. I don't let anyone read your letters, I promise. Your secrets are safe with me.

So my Dad's letting me take voice lessons! The school told him that I have real potential and he signed me up. So that's dance and voice. I'm on my way to being a triple threat! I hope you get to take dance soon. Maybe if

you ask about Jazz or Hip Hop instead of Ballet? You won't know until you try, right? Even Dads can surprise you.

Speaking of surprises, I asked my Mom and Dad about going back to New York and they said maybe we could go again for my next birthday if I really wanted to. Not sure I could see Les Mis again, they'd probably want to see something different, but maybe we could get together somehow? If you want to I mean.

Your Friend,

Kurt

November 24, 2001

Dear Kurt,

I would love to see you again for your birthday. We'll figure something out, even if I have to sneak away.

Thanksgiving was...Thanksgiving. At least Cooper was here. And my grandparents. Who are okay sometimes and this time they were in a pretty good mood and they got me a keyboard so now I get to play piano. My grandmother used to be a piano teacher, so she gave me my first lesson. I can't wait to learn.

I haven't gotten up the nerve to ask my Dad about the dance lessons yet, but I will, I promise. That's exciting about your voice lessons. You're going to be a star one day, I just know it. Maybe we will star on Broadway together. King Arthur and Lancelot. Archibald and Neville. Or maybe sooner as Colin and Dickon! Or Oliver and the Artful Dodger! Oh Kurt, you have to come out here and start auditioning! Maybe I can introduce you to my agent when you come for your birthday?

Master of the House is playing. Someday I'm going to miss my entrance writing to you. Or the stage manager's gonna start missing her stamps!

You said my secrets were safe, so, Shhh...don't tell!

Your Friend,

Blaine

CHAPTER FOUR:

Love is Everlasting

December 13, 2001

"Sweetie, it's bedtime." Elizabeth peeked into Kurt's bedroom, the light from under the door betraying him. He sat on his bed, a flashlight glowing as he read a piece of paper in his hand. He looked up at her smiling with guilt, and she came and sat down next to him. "What's that?" she asked.

"Just a letter from my penpal," he said, turning the flashlight off and lying down.

She remembered the project. She'd signed a permission slip. "And this letter is so important that you need to read it at nine o'clock on a school night?" Her voice was low and airy, a bit of a laugh on the tip of her tongue. "Must be a pretty special pen pal."

"It's the boy who played Gavroche on Broadway," Kurt admitted, immediately growing bashful. "I wrote to him never thinking he'd write me back, but he did. And we've been writing back and forth now for a few months."

"Well, he must think you're pretty special than too," Elizabeth smiled, brushing a hand through Kurt's hair. "But now it's time to sleep." She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. He reached up for a hug and kissed her on the cheek as well. "Love you."

"I love you too Mommy," Kurt answered and laid down with a smile. "Hey Mom?"

"Yes sweetheart?"

"I want to make a friendship bracelet for him for Christmas. Can you help me?"

"Of course," she said. "Now go to sleep."

She gently put the letter on his desk and blew him one more kiss before closing the door behind her. He waited three...two...one...then jumped out of bed and pulled his chair by the window, grabbing the letter to read again by the moonlight and the light of the back porch. He shivered against the chill seeping in. One more time, he promised himself. Then he'd go to sleep.

Dear Kurt,

Another Saturday matinee, another chance to write to my favorite penpal. Well you're my only penpal, but even if you weren't you'd still be my favorite. I'm so glad your production of West Side story is going well. You really need to send me a picture of you as a Baby Jet. I bet you're absolutely adorable.

I'm also really glad your voice lessons are going well. That's amazing. I finally did what you said and asked again if I could at least take Jazz, but Dad said no boy of mine is dancing like a fairy. I tried to tell him fairies don't dance they fly, but well, he didn't take that very well. But I'm still proud of myself for asking. And, Rachel said she'd teach me in our spare time backstage and at school.

I'm getting a little nervous with the end of my contract coming up. I really hope they'll ask me back for another 6 months. And that Dad will sign. I don't think my Dad wants me staying in the show, but some of the boys are 12 so it's possible I could stay for a long, long time if they let me. It's not like I'm growing very quickly. Cooper says though that everything in theater is fleeting. He's back auditioning. I'm sure he'll get something soon.

Anyway, enough about me. How's third grade treating you? I think it was so much easier than fourth. Fourth grade is hard. I hope you're okay. Do you have another audition coming up after your show closes? I feel like I want to say I miss you even though we've only met once. I wish we could talk on the phone but I know it's kind of weird. Our parents would never understand.

Write soon!

Your Friend,

Blaine

P.S. I hope you like your Christmas present!

January 7, 2002

Happy New Year Blaine!

I'm sorry I didn't get to write much over Christmas break. Thank you so much for my signed book of Les Misérables! Mom says she'll find all of Gavroche's parts and we can read them together. I'm sorry your Dad reacted the way he did about the dance class. Parents can be so dumb sometimes. My mom got me a new tea set. That probably seems silly to you. I mean what boy wants a tea set? But she knows I like those things. Dad told me it would be Mom's job to play that with me, he'll teach me how to throw a football. Not sure I really want to learn, but I love him so I'll try.

How's Rachel? I feel like I should write to her sometime soon because I know so much about her

"Kurt?"

Kurt looked up from his letter to his teacher at the front of the class. Ms. Wright from the main office was with her and they both looked kind of grim.

"Kurt, pack up your things, your Dad's here to pick you up," his teacher said warmly.

Kurt's heart immediately started to race. He didn't know anything about being dismissed early and scenarios began running through his mind. He tried not to guess as he put his books away and gathered his things. He could see everyone looking at him. He shoved the letter to Blaine into his communication folder. He'd finish it later.

He walked into the main office but didn't see his Dad. Ms. Wright led him into the principal's office and now Kurt was worried he'd done something wrong. His father's back was to him, hunched over, head in his hands. When he and Ms. Wright came in and closed the door behind them, his Dad sat up and turned around. Kurt froze. He looked like he'd been crying.

"Have a seat Kurt," the principal said and Kurt scooted into the wooden chair next to Burt, his feet nowhere near reaching the floor. "Your Dad has something he needs to tell you."

His dad took his hand and squeezed it. Tears formed in Burt's eyes and Kurt felt his own welling up even though he didn't know why. "Dad, what's wrong?"

"Kurt." His dad's voice was rough and he choked on his words. "Bud, your Mom's in the hospital. They're not sure what's wrong with her. She had a headache this morning and now she won't wake up."

Kurt immediately started to cry and his voice shook with fear. "But she's going to be alright, right?" he asked.

Burt shook his head and took a deep breath. "I don't know son. The doctors don't know."

Kurt stood up and grabbed his things. "I need to see her," he demanded with all his strength.

Burt smiled softly at the boy who was stronger than anyone else he knew and stood up, keeping his hand wrapped around his son's. "Ok. Let's go."

Kurt sat by his Mom's bedside as long as they would let him. She looked so peaceful, lying there like she was sleeping, but the beeps and the buzzes and the doctors in and out drawing blood, trying to figure out what was wrong annoyed him. He prayed that God would make her better, but he was beginning to wonder if anyone was truly up there listening. She was on a machine to help her breathe. They said it didn't look good. They told him to say goodbye.

"Kurt, do you remember Dr. Lopez?" his dad asked him and Kurt looked up in the doorway. Santana's dad. He'd seen the man sometimes at dance class. Kurt nodded. "You're going to stay with Santana and her Mom tonight."

"I want to stay here, with you and Mom," Kurt insisted through his tears.

"You need to get some sleep and you aren't going to here. Go have a sleepover with Santana. I'll see you in the morning," Burt said.

"And mom?" Kurt asked.

Burt took his son in his arms and squeezed him tight. He didn't want to let go but he also didn't want Kurt to be here when it happened. "Mommy will always love you, Kurt. Don't ever forget that."

Kurt was lying on a mattress on the floor of Santana's room. He'd never been to her house before. It wasn't like his. It smelled different. It felt different. Spicy. His house was sweet. He stared at the ceiling into the darkness. He didn't know how his father could think he would sleep while his mother lay dying.

He knew that was what was happening.

"Are you asleep?" Santana whispered into the dark.

"No," Kurt breathed quietly.

"Do you think your Mom's gonna die?" Santana asked softly.

"Yes." His tears started falling again. He wasn't sure if they would ever really stop.

"Was she sick?" Santana rolled onto her side and propped her head up on her hand.

"No," Kurt said. "She was fine just yesterday."

"I'm sorry," Santana said.

"I wish Blaine was here."

"Who's Blaine?" Santana asked curiously.

"He's my penpal. From school."

"Oh, you're still writing to yours? I stopped months ago," Santana said.

"He's my best friend," Kurt whispered.

Santana wasn't sure a penpal could be a best friend and she thought it was kind of sad that he would need a best friend that lived so far away, but she thought it would be a little mean to point that out right now while things were so bad. "You can write to him tomorrow," she said instead.

"No," Kurt mumbled. He didn't want to write to Blaine. He wanted to talk to him. Hug him. Have Blaine tell him everything was going to be okay. "I don't really want to write until I know what's going on. I don't want to jinx anything."

Santana nodded. The spirits were mean like that. "That makes sense. I can be your best friend for now."

Kurt didn't say anything. They were quiet for a while, thinking, praying. Santana peaked over and saw Kurt's eyes wide open. "Do you want to come in bed with me? Or do you want me to come down there?"

Kurt just shrugged, so Santana slipped out of bed and snuggled in next to him. She put her arms around him and held him close. "If your mom dies, you can share mine. I know it's not the same but she's really nice."

Kurt swallowed and nodded. He didn't want her mom, he wanted his own, but he knew it would be rude to say that. "Thanks," he said instead. He barely felt Santana's arms around him but it was better than nothing. Very slowly, he drifted asleep.

His mother lasted until the end of the week but in a blink of an eye she was gone. He didn't write until after the funeral. He thought maybe if he didn't put it down into words then she could still come back. But after he saw her coffin lowered into the ground he was pretty sure she was gone for good. He and his Dad returned to the house and he went right up to his room. He wasn't proud of it but while he was at Santana's house he had taken some stamps. He hoped they wouldn't notice. He couldn't stand the idea of going to his mother's drawers yet. He took off his suit coat and his tie and his dress shoes and took out the letter he had started a week ago. He drew a line beneath where he'd stopped and dated it again. By the time he was done the page was stained with tears, but he knew Blaine wouldn't mind.

January 15, 2002

Dear Blaine,

My mom died.

We had the funeral today.

Nothing seems real. Everything is wrong. Her things are still here but she's not.

I don't know what to do.

I wish I could hear her voice.

I wish I could hear your voice.

My phone number is 419-555-0121.

My dad won't even notice if you call. It's like he's in a fog. I could rob a bank right now and he wouldn't even know.

Oh look at that. Humor. I guess it doesn't all go away when someone dies.

Anyway, call me if you want to.

Your Friend,

Kurt

CHAPTER FIVE:

Have No Fear

Rachel skipped to Blaine's dressing room after checking her presets, ready to see if he wanted to work on some of his dance moves. But when she came around the corner, she found him at his table, a letter in his hand, tears streaming down his face.

"What's the matter?" she breathed, frozen at the door.

He looked up at her, his normally warm eyes empty with shock until his brain caught up to his ears and he blinked. His focus returned to see who was standing in front of him. "She died." His voice was barely a whisper.

"Who died?" Rachel came to his side and gently took the letter from Blaine's hand. He didn't protest. She wasn't even sure he noticed.

"Kurt's Mom."

She gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. "Oh my god Blaine, I'm so sorry. I didn't even know she was sick."

Blaine shook his head. "I don't think she was. I don't know what happened." He wiped his eyes, wet from the tears he held back. "I can't even imagine what Kurt is going through."

Rachel read through the letter. "Are you going to call him?" she wondered.

"I want to," Blaine admitted. "I can't call from my house though. I'm going to see if I can go to Cooper's tonight."

"What are you going to say?" she asked.

"To Kurt?" She nodded. Blaine shrugged with uncertainty. "I don't know."

"Maybe you should write to him first?" she suggested, holding Kurt's letter out for him. "Maybe it will help?"

Blaine took it back, holding it sacredly. "Yeah, you're right, maybe it will."

She flipped her Cosette mangled hair playfully. "Of course I'm right," she smiled softly. She gave him a quick hug and kiss on his head and left him to his thoughts.

Feeling heavy in his skin with sadness, Blaine pulled out a piece of paper and a pen from his backpack. He took his cap off and ran his fingers through his curls with a sigh. He closed his eyes and slowly the words came.

January 19, 2002

Dear Kurt,

Hopefully by the time you get this letter we will have already talked. But I'll say it anyway. I'm so sorry about your mom. I honestly can't even imagine what it must be like. It's too hard for me to even think about.

So I hope you're okay. I mean, I know you're not okay but I hope you are okay enough. If you're not I hope you can tell someone. Your dad. A teacher at school. A friend.

Me.

You know how it goes. Trust Gavroche. Have no fear. You can always find me here.

Well it's true. You were here for me when I needed someone to talk to. I'll always be here for you Kurt.

Your Friend

He looked at what he'd just written and he crossed it out. It didn't seem like enough somehow. Not today.

Love,

Blaine

Kurt was curled up on the couch with his Dad watching a movie. They'd done this a lot since the funeral. His Dad wanted to be close to him and Kurt loved the sense of safety he felt in his father's arms. It almost made him believe that someday his life might be okay again.

The phone rang and Kurt jumped, checking the clock immediately as his heart skipped a beat. It had been that way since he'd sent the letter. Every phone call, he hoped it might be Blaine. "I'll get it," he said and his father offered no complaint when he crawled off of him and ran into the kitchen. He climbed the chair that let him reach the phone on the wall and twirled the cord around his fingers as he sat down to answer it.

"Hello?"

"Oh, hi, is um...is Kurt there?" The small nervous voice on the other end of the phone took Kurt's breath away. He wouldn't let himself believe it was him though, not yet.

"This is Kurt," he answered hesitantly.

"Kurt, it's Blaine."

Three simple words. Three simple words that felt like the world shifted and he had absolutely no idea why. He couldn't believe it. Writing the letters it had been easy to hope for the best but dismiss it, tell himself that Blaine was just being nice to a fan. When he'd written his phone number down a part of him never imagined that he mattered enough to Blaine to actually call. But now his voice was on the other end of the telephone and he couldn't even breathe.

"Kurt, are you there? Are you okay?" Blaine's voice was worried now, and it melted Kurt's heart and drew him out of the fog he'd been living in.

"Yeah, I'm here," he said with a soft laugh. "I don't know about the okay part, but I'm here."

"Good, good," Blaine sighed with relief and grew silent for a minute. "Kurt I'm so sorry about your mom. Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really," he admitted. When he talked about it or thought about it he couldn't stop crying and he didn't want to cry with Blaine on the phone. "I can't believe you really called."

"I got your letter this morning," Blaine explained. "I needed to hear your voice. Make sure you were alright. I couldn't wait a week or more to hear back from you and know for sure. Though there's a letter in the mail for you that you should get in a few days."

"I love getting your letters." Kurt blushed. Maybe he shouldn't have said that.

"I love getting your letters too."

Kurt smiled. A real smile for the first time in what seemed like forever. He twirled the cord in his hand again, trying to think of what to say. "So are you home now?"

"I'm at Cooper's, I begged him and my mom to let me come over." Blaine said and then paused. "I told him about you and he let me use his phone."

"You did?" Kurt pulled his knees up to his chest and squeezed them tight. His heart danced with delight. "What did you say?"

"I don't know," Blaine hedged and there was a bashful tone to his voice. "I told him about bringing you backstage and about us writing back and forth for a while now. And I told him how you were there for me after the attacks and I wanted to be there for you now." Kurt's smile faltered. His thoughts went back to his mom. "Cooper said I could give you his phone number. And you could call whenever you wanted. Leave a message and he'd let me know so I can call you back."

"I'd like that," Kurt answered quietly. He played with the cuff of his jeans. He wished Blaine lived nearby. They could go play in the park. "I'd told my Mom about you."

"Did you?" Blaine sounded excited. Like it meant something to him. "What did she say?"

"She helped me make the bracelet I sent you for Christmas. She said that we must be pretty special friends." The words had just poured out of him. He wondered if there was some way to take them back.

"I think she's right. We are pretty special friends." And suddenly there was that grin once more, the one that Kurt had never thought he would feel again. "Does your Dad know?" Blaine asked.

"No. I mean, not unless my mom told him. Which she might have," he considered. "But if she did he hasn't mentioned it to me."

"Do you think he'd make us stop writing if he knew?" Blaine asked. Kurt wondered for a minute if that's why Blaine was afraid of telling his own Dad.

"No," Kurt said. "I don't think so."

"I think you should tell him then," Blaine said. "I mean, what happens if I call one day and he answers the phone? In my experience it's always better when parents find out things from us rather than someone else."

"Yeah." Kurt nodded and unwrapped his legs. "You're probably right."

Kurt heard a voice in the background and a shuffle of the phone. "Kurt I have to go, my brother needs the phone. Is it okay if I call you again?"

"I would like that Blaine," Kurt smiled. "Anytime."

"Let me give you Cooper's number." Kurt scooted off the chair and to the counter where he copied it down. "When do you go back to school?"

"Tuesday," Kurt said sadly, though part of him was looking forward to going back to the routine.

"Well I hope my letter is there waiting for you," Blaine said sweetly.

"Me too," Kurt said. "Bye."

"Bye Kurt."

Kurt hung up the phone and just stood there for a minute, frozen in place by the urge to run up to his mother's room and jump on the bed and tell her that Blaine had just called him. But instead he walked quietly back to the living room. His father still sat there, in the same place where he'd left him. Kurt crawled back up and turned to face him. Burt's soft, sad, tired eyes found his son's and he forced a small smile. "Who was on the phone? You talked for a while."

Kurt took a deep breath and wrung his hands nervously. "Dad, there's something I have to tell you."

Burt sat up straighter and raised an eyebrow. "This sounds serious."

For a moment his Dad looked like the father Kurt remembered and he loved seeing it. "Did Mom tell you about the penpal I have?"

Burt shook his head. "I don't recall her mentioning it."

"Do you remember when we went to Les Mis for my birthday? And the boy who played Gavroche, Blaine, let us come back stage?"

"I don't think that's something I'd really forget kid," Burt teased. "Come on now, out with it."

"Well, Blaine and I have been writing back and forth since school started. He's really special to me. And I know I shouldn't have but when Mom died I gave him our phone number." Kurt saw his father's eyes narrow slightly and he continued quickly. "I just needed to talk to a friend and he's the best friend I have and I thought maybe if I heard his voice then things would be okay again, and I was right, I smiled for the first time, so please don't be mad."

"Kurt stop," Burt said and Kurt stopped but his Dad smiled too. It was small but it was the first real smile he'd had since too. "I'm not mad. Not at all." Burt took Kurt in his arms and hugged him tight, too tight and Kurt wiggled to get out, laughing until his father let go. "If this boy can make you smile then he's welcome to call anytime. Okay?" Kurt nodded, grinning from ear to ear while tears shone in his eyes. "Alright little man, bedtime. Can I tuck you in?"

Kurt hopped off the couch and ran to his bedroom. "Last one there is a rotten egg!"

He got Blaine's letter with the morning mail on Tuesday, but he tucked it away in his pocket, unable to read it until recess. The day wasn't easy. Everybody knew what had happened. The teachers treated him with kid gloves. The kids all stared and whispered behind his back. And after his conversation with his Dad and Blaine the other night he was really ready to move on as much as he could. He wanted to smile more than cry.

At recess he went to sit on the edge of the trees that surrounded the rear of the school. His legs curled beneath him to help keep in the warmth and he pulled the letter out of his pocket, opening it carefully. He read it over and over again.

Trust Gavroche. Have no fear. You can always find me here.

He did. He trusted Blaine with everything. Every secret, every emotion. And Blaine would always be there for him like no one else was. He didn't know how he knew that but he trusted it from the very depth of his soul.

A shadow crossed the paper and Kurt looked up. "Is this seat taken?" Santana stared down at him with her brown eyes raised in expectation. Kurt shook his head, but said nothing. She sat down and immediately looked over to what Kurt was reading. "Is that from him?"

Kurt nodded, then remembered he should probably speak to her. "Yeah. I actually talked to him on the phone the other day. He called."

"Cool," she said as she peered over. She raised a brow. "Love, Blaine?"

Kurt blushed and swiped the paper away from her, folding it back in the envelope. "It's just a way to end a letter. You remember that we learned that."

"Don't worry," she whispered with a sly grin. "Your secret is safe with me." They sat in silence for a few minutes, watching the other kids on the playground. Kurt wondered why she'd rather sit here with him instead of playing with them, but he didn't ask. It was nice to have someone to sit with for a change. "Hey, what do you think of those dance recital outfits?" she suddenly asked. "Pretty boring if you ask me."

He looked at her and he saw. She knew that he just needed someone to be normal around him. Someone that would just let him pretend that everything was okay. "Needs some glitter and rhinestones for sure," he mused. The bell rang and the two stood up to head back inside. "I mean who dances to Madonna without glitter and rhinestones?"

"Not Kurt Hummel and Santana Lopez for sure," she grinned, taking his hand. "You should come over after school tomorrow and we can work on them together with my mom."

Kurt looked at her and wondered why she was doing this. Was it pity? It didn't look like it. He wasn't even sure Santana was capable of pity. Maybe she just liked him. He decided that whatever it was it was better than sitting at the shop with his dad all afternoon and it was most certainly better than dancing to Madonna in basic black. "I'll have my dad call your mom."

ACT 2:

CHAPTER SIX:

Those Who Falter & Those Who Fall

"You promised Dad!" Kurt yelled, his hands on his hips emphasizing the anger in his voice, just in case his father missed. "You promised we could go to New York again for my birthday this year!"

"I did not promise," Burt said, keeping his voice as steady as he could with his own anger beginning to build. "I said we could try, but I'm sorry. With the new staff I've had to hire at the garage and all the time I have to take off to get you to your classes and rehearsals, we just can't afford to take a trip right now."

"But I was supposed to see Blaine," Kurt whimpered, the tears now pouring out of his eyes like his world had just ended. "We were supposed to go to his last performance in June."

Burt sighed. "I'm sorry Kurt. We're just going to have to go another time."

But Kurt wouldn't hear it. There wasn't another time. That would be it, the last chance to see Blaine as Gavroche again and now he was going to miss it. He stared up at his father, eyes full of pain. "Mom would have taken me! She would have understood! I hate you!" He ran out of the room as fast as he could, grabbing the wireless phone his father had finally gotten. He flew to his bedroom, slamming the door shut behind him.

He flung himself on the bed and dialed Blaine's number. Cooper answered the phone.

"Hi," he squeaked raggedly, while he sniffled. "Is Blaine there?"

"No, he's not here today," Cooper answered, worry shooting through him. "Kurt, is everything okay? What's wrong?"

"My dad...says..." he hiccupped through his words, trying to get his breathing under control, "we can't...come...to New York...this summer."

"Aw, man, I'm sorry. I know how disappointed you must be. Blaine will be too," Cooper said softly.

"Maybe I should just run away," Kurt said.

"You know what?" Cooper said brightly. "I think that's an excellent idea. You must have enough money in your piggy bank for a flight to NY." Kurt glanced at his box of money on his dresser. He had about 10 dollars in there right now. He didn't know how much a plane ticket cost but he was pretty sure it was more than that. "And you can pack all your clothes in a few suitcases. I'm sure you're strong enough to carry them all to the airport and around New York City once you get off the plane." Kurt frowned. He wasn't so sure. He had a lot of clothes and he couldn't really picture leaving any of them behind. "And I know when you get here you'll be able to hail a taxi and find a hotel with no problem. Then you just need a credit card."

"Maybe it's not such a good idea," Kurt frowned, defeated.

"No?" Cooper asked unsure.

Kurt shook his head. "Probably not. And I'd probably get in big trouble, and I'm already in big trouble anyway, so..."

Cooper's voice immediately turned sincere and concerned. "Why are you in trouble?" he asked.

Kurt scooted back against the wall of his bed and grabbed a pillow that he hugged. He pulled his knees up, making himself small. "I kind of told my Dad I hated him," he admitted shamefully.

"But you don't really," Cooper reminded him.

"Of course not," Kurt said. "I love him more than anything." The door slowly opened and Kurt looked up. His father stood in the doorway. He didn't look too angry, just hurt and sad. "Dad's here, I gotta go. Tell Blaine I called, ok?"

"Of course," Cooper said. "Good luck."

Kurt hung up the phone. His father held a hand out for it and he got up to give it to him. "You know you're not supposed to have this in your room with the door closed," Burt reprimanded. Kurt just nodded. He was in big trouble all around. It was a good thing he hadn't started to pack any bags, that would have thrown his Dad over the edge for sure. Burt set the phone down on the desk and put a strong hand on Kurt's shoulder. He guided him over to the bed, where Burt sat down. Kurt stood in front of him, eyes cast on the floor. "What you said hurt my feelings Kurt," Burt started.

Tears immediately came to Kurt's eyes. "I didn't mean it, I was just mad. I love you, I just..."

"You miss your Mom," Burt finished for him. Kurt nodded. "I miss her too, bud. Every day. But we can't just keep going on like she's here, things change."

Kurt looked up at him, eyes pleading. "I know, I just wanted to see Blaine so much."

Burt sighed. Blaine. It was always about Blaine these days and he had no idea what to do with that. Elizabeth would have known. But Burt was at a loss. "I know he means a lot to you son, but you have friends here too."

"No I don't," Kurt said, voice small. He stared at his fingers. He didn't have friends here. Not like Blaine. Santana was close, but some days they were like best friends and other days she spent all her time with Brittany and he was just another icky boy. Other than her there was no one.

Burt's heart broke. He didn't know what to do to make any of it better. So he just took Kurt in his arms and hugged him. He had always hoped parenting would get easier as Kurt got older but it just seemed to get more difficult. And now he was on his own.

Kurt sniffled, and pulled away. He still felt incredibly guilty for the things he'd said. "Am I in trouble?" he asked in a small voice.

"Do you think you should be?" Burt asked and Kurt nodded and bit his lip. "Ok. Then I'm going to say no phone for three days. That means if Blaine calls you'll have to wait until your time is up, understood?" Kurt nodded again and wiped away a tear. Burt kissed him on the forehead. He was warm from crying. "I love you," Burt said and Kurt threw his arms back around his Dad.

"I love you too."

Burt gave him a moment, then got up from the bed. "Alright. I'm going to make dinner, why don't you stay here until I call you."

"Ok," Kurt agreed and watched his father go with the phone. He immediately got up and sat at his desk, pulling out a sheet of the newest stationary he had bought.

May 5, 2002

Dear Blaine,

I almost ran away from home today. Turns out I can't come and see you this summer after all cause my Dad has to work. I called you but you weren't there and Cooper talked me out of it. He pretended that wasn't what he was doing, but I don't think he's as good an actor as you. And now I can't talk to you for another three days because I told my Dad I hated him. I don't though. I was just mad. I just really wanted to see you.

You'll get this letter after my three days are up and hopefully we'll have talked by then, but here's what I would have said if you'd answered the phone today instead of Cooper.

I miss her so much. And my Dad misses her so much. And we're trying so hard to make it work together between us but it just seems like something's missing and it's because it is. And neither one of us knows how to make up for that yet. I suppose it will just take time, but the only thing I had to look forward to was seeing you and now I don't have that.

I'm sorry. I know ending Les Mis isn't going to be easy and I wanted to be there for you so much and I feel guilty that I won't be. Please know that I would have done anything to be there.

Your Friend,

Kurt

May 8, 2002

Rachel and Blaine leaned against the wall of the school watching as Henry handed out invitations to everyone in their class. Everyone but them. He did it on the sly. Everyone knew you weren't allowed to bring them to school unless the whole class was invited, but the teachers didn't watch the fourth graders so much during recess and everybody knew that too. Henry was the most popular kid in class. His parties were supposedly legendary.

Blaine and Rachel wouldn't know.

"Sorry I didn't invite you to the biggest party of the year," Henry taunted, walking up to them with a grin. "I would have of course, but it's on a Saturday afternoon and well, you two wouldn't be able to come anyway."

"They'd just try to be the center of attention anyway," Henry's friend Claire said haughtily. "That's all the *Broadway Stars* know how to do, even when it's *your* birthday."

"We wouldn't do that you know," Blaine tried to say but Rachel cut him off.

"Well it's your loss, not having us there," Rachel sneered back at them. Blaine wished she wouldn't egg them on, especially on his behalf. "But Broadway calls and we have an audience of thousands to perform for."

She grabbed Blaine's hand and dragged him away until he finally caught up enough to pull his hand away. "Do you believe them?" she ranted, completely ignoring the devastated look in his eye.

"Why can't you at least try to be friends with them," Blaine pleaded, holding back tears that would only make it all worse. "Would it kill you to just be nice to them for a change?"

She stared at him like he'd grown two heads. "Henry and his crew have never been nice to us, they've been jealous of us since 2nd grade when we beat him in the school talent show."

Blaine frowned, shoving his hands in his pockets. Oh how he wished he had Kurt to help back him up right now. "Still, it wouldn't hurt to just try and fit in. Just a little bit?"

Rachel put her hands on her hips and pursed her lips. "I wasn't born to fit in, Blaine. I was born to shine." The bell rang and she stormed off without him, leaving him standing on the edge of the field.

He walked slowly back alone, wishing he could just run in the opposite direction. He knew he was born to shine too. He just wasn't so sure he was born to shine *here*.

"One...Two...Three...Four...Kurt stretch your fingers to the floor. Five...Six...Seven...Eight... Santana keep your neck up straight."

The cane tapped the ground in rhythm to the music and Kurt and Santana followed their teacher's instructions, stretching their fingers, straightening their necks. Every time someone was given a correction every child would correct that mistake and their instructor knew that. She counted on it.

Kurt sometimes talked about his friend on Broadway and his own dreams of being there someday. His instructors pushed him harder because of that, but never past his limit. He was determined and focused and they knew he used his time in the building to escape from the emptiness at home and at school. He was starting to belong there, and that encouraged him even more.

"Oh my gosh, I think my legs might fall off," Santana complained when class was finally done. They'd spent ten minutes at the end of class working on their splits and Santana was certain that someday her body would just bend completely in half. "Do you want to come over this weekend or are you and your Dad busy?"

"I don't know," Kurt said, taking a drink of his water. "I think I have rehearsal for Joseph on Saturday but maybe after that." He was enjoying being in the children's chorus of Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, but it wasn't as fun as West Side Story had been and there were memories of his Mom there. Which was both good and bad. "I'll have to check with my Dad."

"Cool," she said, grabbing her bag. "Maybe Brittany could come over too and we could have a sleepover. She thinks that the three of us should be best friends or something." Santana rolled her eyes, and Kurt wasn't sure if that was something that Santana wanted or not. Or if he even wanted it.

Girls were confusing.

But boys were scary.

Well, boys that weren't Blaine.

"Hey Kid, you ready?" Kurt looked up to see his father grinning in the doorway of the green room. "I'm making a crisp Italian chicken with polenta for dinner."

Kurt's eyes opened wide. "Oh no, Dad, last time you tried to make one of Mom's recipes you nearly burned the house down. I better help you." He grabbed his bag and draped it over his shoulder. "Bye Santana," he yelled, turning around and waving to her before taking his Dad's hand.

"How was dance class today?" Burt asked walking with him to the car.

"My teacher thinks I have the best split in the class," Kurt beamed.

Burt ruffled his hair. "Good for you kid," Burt chuckled. His mother would have been proud.

Blaine called just after dinner. Burt answered the phone and Kurt looked up at him with hopeful eyes, batting his eyelashes trying to overwhelm him with cuteness. It had been three days, he'd served his time, and Burt handed him the phone.

"Yes!" Kurt cheered and jumped up to take the phone from his Dad.

"Keep the door open!" Burt yelled and Kurt ran into his room and jumped onto his bed.

"Hi Blaine!" he nearly shouted into the phone, completely unable to withhold his excitement.

Blaine giggled. "Hey Kurt. Long time no talk," he teased.

Kurt blushed despite the fact that Blaine was hundreds of miles away. "Yeah, sorry about that. Guess I had a little bit of what my Mom used to call a hissy fit."

"Yeah, my Dad calls that cruisin' for a bruisin'," Blaine told him wryly. "You okay?"

"Yeah I'm fine," Kurt assured him. "I missed you though. Sorry I couldn't talk the other night when you called."

"I'm glad you didn't run away," Blaine smirked, remembering what Cooper had told him. "Though I would have loved to see you try and haul what I can only imagine is your extensive wardrobe up and down Broadway."

Kurt laughed but then remembered why he'd wanted to run away in the first place and frowned. "I'm really sorry I can't be there for your last show." He felt like he was letting Blaine down.

"It's okay," Blaine said, but he couldn't hide the disappointment in his voice from Kurt.

"No, it's not," Kurt argued. "I wanted to be there more than anything and I know how hard it's going to be, leaving everyone, saying goodbye. I wanted to be able to cheer you up and take you and Rachel out to celebrate."

"We'll just have to do it another time Kurt," Blaine said, but his voice was so sad that Kurt knew there was something really wrong.

"What's the matter?" Kurt asked then quickly added, "And don't say nothing because I can tell there's something wrong, I know it in your voice by now."

He could hear Blaine settling in under the covers though it was early for bed. But Kurt had learned he sometimes did that when he felt like hiding. "There's this party. At school. And the whole class was invited but me and Rachel."

Kurt frowned. "Was it Henry? I hate that kid and I don't even know him." He didn't need to. He had his own Henries at his school."

"Yeah," Blaine said and he sniffed. Kurt's heart broke, at the sound of Blaine crying. "And Rachel just makes it worse, then I think if I wasn't with her I could fit in on my own. I mean, Wednesdays are the best days at school when she's not there and the other kids are nicer, but then I feel terrible because she's the best friend I have Kurt and I just don't know what to do."

Kurt grabbed a pillow and hugged it on his lap, pretending he was hugging Blaine. "Maybe it would be better if you spent less time with her? Or at least stood up to her?" Kurt suggested. "Maybe the other kids just need to see that you're not like her."

"But then I feel like I'm betraying her," he admitted. "I feel bad enough as it is since..." His voice trailed off and Kurt almost asked *since what* but Blaine continued. "I just...I couldn't do that to her. I'm all she has too."

Kurt smiled as a warm fuzzy feeling moved slowly through him. "That's really sweet of you Blaine." His eyes fell on the picture by his bedside of him and his Mom and he picked it up, her words playing in his head. "Blaine, you know you can tell me anything right? And it's just between you and me."

Blaine was silent for a minute. Kurt wondered what was going on in his head, but he didn't want to push. Blaine would tell him what was bothering him in his own time. "I know," he said softly. "That means a lot. But I'm okay, I promise. "

"Okay." Kurt stuck his head in and gave the signal to wrap it up. "I have to go Blaine," Kurt said with a frown. "Talk to you soon?"

"Write to you sooner," Blaine answered as he always did. "Bye Kurt."

Kurt smiled. "Bye Blaine."

CHAPTER SEVEN:

Must Pay the Price

May 11, 2002

Blaine was getting his makeup on when Rachel came bouncing into the room, a giant grin on her face and a card in her hand. He couldn't help but grin curiously back at her reflection as she circled behind him and dropped the envelope ceremoniously on the table in front of him.

"If we can't go to the party, the party will come to us! You are invited to the Rachel Berry Broadway Bash Monday. Just the Les Mis kids, with all the pizza, raspberry spritzer, candy and karaoke we can handle! Be there or be square!" Rachel ended her announcement with dramatic flair and flitted out of the room as quickly as she'd arrived.

Blaine's eyes fell to the invitation and he reached a hesitant hand out for it. With resignation he opened the envelope and pulled out the card. He knew the party would be a blast and he desperately wanted to go. He also knew his father would never let him.

He set it aside and finished his makeup. He reached for some paper and he got as far as *Dear Kurt* before he realized quickly that nothing he could write would help right now. By the time the letters went back and forth the party would be over and he'd still have no idea what to do.

So instead he got up and left his dressing room heading down the hall to the girls. Rachel was there and she and Olivia, the girl who played little Eponine, were chattering on about the party. Rachel looked up and beamed. "Oh Blaine, I forgot to tell you my dads are going to set up a podium for us to practice our Tony Award acceptance speeches!"

Blaine forced a smile. "That sounds great," he said flatly. "Do you want to go dance a bit? I'm still having trouble with the *assemblée* you taught me last week."

"Sure," she agreed and took his hand. She led him out to the corner backstage she liked to use before the show so they didn't miss their calls. Together they practiced for ten minutes or so before they both became increasingly frustrated. "No Blaine, for the hundredth time you have to land on two feet!" she yelled as he stumbled his landing. "You're never going to be a Broadway level dancer if you can't do this."

"Well maybe you're just a terrible teacher!" he snapped. "Maybe you're the one who's not Broadway level!"

"How dare you!" Rachel screamed loud enough that the audience could have heard her if not for their own rumblings. "You take that back!"

He crossed his arms and jutted his chin in the air. "Try and make me!" he shouted.

Rachel didn't think before she reached out and pushed him. Blaine barely saw it coming and he didn't know what to do in response but thankfully he didn't have to figure it out because suddenly familiar strong arms were around him and their guardian, Ms. Brown, had Rachel in her grasp.

"Alright Blaine, let's take a breather, shall we?" He was soothed slightly by the voice of Gregory, the actor who played Grantaire and the adult he was closest to in the cast. Blaine decided he would much rather talk to him then endure the lecture of Ms. Brown, so with her permission he let himself be shuffled off to the stairway leading to the fly loft and took a seat on one of the stairs. Gregory sat below him and sighed. Blaine felt his eyes on him but he couldn't look back, instead staring at the floor. He was embarrassed by his own behavior, ashamed of the completely untrue things he'd said to Rachel, and at a complete loss for how to make his anger go away. "So," Gregory started with a smile, trying to lighten the mood, "you want to talk about what that was all about?"

Blaine did, but not with Gregory, as comfortable as he was with him. "Not really," he admitted. He needed Kurt to help him figure this out, not a grown up telling him what to do.

"Okay. Can you tell me if it was really Rachel you were mad at?" Gregory asked with a knowing look.

"No it wasn't," he said in a small voice.

"You know the guys and I have noticed you've been spending a lot of time alone in your dressing room lately." Blaine finally lifted his gaze to him to find Gregory's brow arched in question. "You used to hang out with us all the time, but lately you've been hiding away."

"I haven't been hiding," he protested. He played with his fingers clasped on his knees. "I've just been doing some writing, that's all."

Gregory nodded, accepting the explanation. "Okay," he said slowly. "But maybe it would be better today if you hung out with us."

Blaine caught the worried look in his eye and he didn't want Gregory to worry about him. He hadn't meant to distance himself, he'd just been preoccupied. "Okay," Blaine agreed.

"Good," Gregory grinned and squeezed Blaine on the knee before getting up. "You still remember how to play Poker?" he asked.

Blaine's smile was mischievous and his golden eyes glinted with excitement. "You bet I do," he said.

"5 minutes," came the call from the Assistant Stage Manager.

"Thank you five," Blaine and Gregory answered in automatic unison. Gregory rested a hand on Blaine's back and they walked back to the men's dressing room. Blaine smiled up at him. "Maybe I'll even let you win," he winked.

He apologized to Rachel, making up with a hug and a few tears from her before she went on stage, but instead of making it easier it made it harder. If they were fighting it would be easier to tell her he wasn't going to her party, but now the guilt just washed over him again. He had no idea what to do or what to tell her and he hated that a party he could actually go to he wouldn't be allowed to because his father couldn't get over the fact that Rachel had two Dads. He played poker with the guys, but his head wasn't in the game and he found himself losing, something that rarely happened. He shrugged it off as a bad night, but he knew it wasn't that.

Sounds of *Master of the House* filled the dressing room over the speakers and they all pulled on their jackets and headed into the wings. Blaine held his palm up for the handoff, something all the kids had done since long before either he or Rachel were there.

Will there be castles and children to see?

Valjean carried little Cosette off and placed Rachel on her feet behind the curtain. She looked at Blaine and smiled and gave him a high five, handing off the show to him. He grinned and the adrenaline rushed

through him as it did every night. He ran on stage and introduced himself to another audience, always imagining that Kurt was out there.

It wasn't until the quiet solitude of *Drink With Me* and *Bring Him Home*, when his thoughts often started to wander off the stage, that his stomach began tying in knots once again. All Blaine ever wanted was to belong somewhere and though he knew he was too far removed from the other kids at school to ever truly fit in there, here, inside these walls, with these people, he did. They laughed with him, cried with him, praised his talent and were always there when he needed encouragement. They accepted him with open arms the day that he'd arrived and included him in their games and rituals despite the fact that he was so many years younger than them. And Rachel, she was the only one at school who truly understood what it meant to straddle the world of childhood and adulthood at the tender age of 9. She was the closest thing he'd ever had to a friend.

Until Kurt.

They awoke. Onstage the men arose to battle sending the women and children away and Grantaire ushered him away from the barricade but he did not go. This was his cause. These were his friends and he would fight for them. Gavroche didn't let the grownups tell him what to do he just ran around the barricade, shouted his defiance and died a glorious death. And as Blaine lay there he knew what he wanted to do but he had no idea how and the need to talk to Kurt grew stronger than it ever had.

The barricade shifted and he returned backstage to his dressing room. He packed his bag and set out his clothes so he could change as quickly as possible after the curtain call. There would be no stage door for him today. The moment the curtain closed he ran and changed and without a word to anyone he fled out the side door.

Blaine banged on Cooper's door until his brother finally answered it, hair wet, shirt open, buttoning it up. Blue eyes stared down at him in surprise. "Squirt, what the hell are you doing here?"

"Mom dropped me off," Blaine said nonchalantly, breezing right past Cooper and throwing his bag on the couch.

"Without even making sure I'm home?" Cooper asked in confusion.

"Saw your light on in the apartment," Blaine called over his shoulder. He went to the kitchen and grabbed a cheese stick from the fridge, peeling it into strings before eating them. "Can I use your phone?"

Blaine's nervous energy was palpable. "Blaine that doesn't even make sense, is something-" Cooper started but Blaine cut him off.

"Coop, stop asking questions, now can I use your phone?" He stared impatiently at his brother with his hand on the receiver.

Cooper began to answer when a hard knock on the door interrupted them. "Coop, are you in there? Open up!" their father bellowed and Cooper gave Blaine one last baffled look before turning to open the door.

"Hey Dad, what-?"

"You didn't answer your phone," he barked opening the door wider, his eyes searching. "Is Blaine here?"

"Sorry, I was in the shower. Yeah, he's-" Cooper turned and looked but Blaine was nowhere to be seen. His bag though still lay on the couch.

John Anderson stopped and turned to Cooper. "Wait, if you were in the shower, how did you pick him up at the theater?" he asked.

Cooper's brow creased. "I didn't, he said that Mom dropped him off," he answered and his eyes narrowed. "What's going on-?"

"Blaine Devon Anderson get out here right now!" their father yelled.

Blaine slinked, slowly and quietly outside of the guest bedroom that he called his, but he held back against the wall. His eyes were wide with fear and his skin crawled with the sense of impending doom that could only be felt by a ten year old who was certain his life was very likely about to be over. His father was going to kill him.

"How did you get here?" John Anderson demanded from across the room.

Blaine's stomach sank, the first question the one he knew would get him in the biggest trouble. His eyes fell to the floor trying to come up with some explanation that would be better than the truth, when in fact

anything would be better than the truth. Lying wouldn't matter anyway since he was already in trouble for lying to Cooper.

But perhaps it was the morals that his parents had so carefully instilled in him that prevented his brain from thinking of any lie that even sort of remotely made sense. So he told the truth instead. "I took the subway."

"By yourself?" His father sought clarification with hard eyes.

Blaine's cheeks flared with guilt and dread waiting for his father's tirade. "Yes Sir."

But surprisingly Cooper exploded first. "You what?! By yourself? Blaine are you crazy? You could have been killed or kidnapped! And you lied to me?!"

A gentle hand on Cooper's arm silenced him. Blaine ducked his head and sucked in his lips, forcing back the tears. It wouldn't do to cry right now. Big boys don't cry, even when they're in the biggest trouble of their life. "Where's your phone Cooper," John asked softly.

Cooper pointed and Blaine lifted his eyes watching and listening while their father called their mom to let her know Blaine was okay and at Cooper's. He listened to his Dad answer her questions and calm her before his dad set the phone down.

John turned back to Blaine. "When your mother got to the theater and you weren't there and no one knew where you had gone, she and Ms. Brown were frantic," John reprimanded him, his voice unnervingly calm. "Everyone at the theater was looking too. She went home in case you'd gone there but she'll call over to let them know you're safe."

Blaine blinked, not wanting the tears to fall. He hated the idea of the cast and crew looking for him. "I'm sorry," he choked.

John closed the distance between them and knelt down, grasping Blaine's arms in strong but careful hands. "Do you even understand what could have happened to you Blaine, on the subway, alone? No one knowing where you were, no one expecting you?"

Blaine gave a tiny nod. Images of the strange man who had stared at him from across the subway car flashed before his eyes. "Yes Sir."

His father grasped Blaine's chin to meet his eyes. They were angry yes, but scared too. "If anything ever happened to you, your mother and I would never forgive ourselves. It would break our hearts." Blaine couldn't stop the tears now no matter how he tried, he felt so ashamed and guilty for what he'd done and the choices he'd made. John took him in his arms and held him close. Blaine didn't want him to let go because he knew what was coming once he did and it had been too long since he felt his father's love so clearly. But all too soon the inevitable came and his Dad stood up and stared sternly down at his son. Blaine's heart sank further in his chest with every infraction his father listed. "Blaine, you evaded your mother, leaving her and everyone at the theater worried, you took the subway by yourself which you know very well that you are not allowed to do and which put you in tremendous danger, and you lied to Cooper about how you got here. Is that about right?"

Blaine gulped and lowered his head. "Yes sir," he whispered.

"Then you know what we need to do," his father said.

Blaine nodded and chanced a glance at Cooper. He could tell his brother was angry at him because he made no move to argue with his father and that could possibly have been the worst part of it all. He looked back at his Dad who held out a hand for him and Blaine took it, letting his Dad lead the way to his bedroom.

Blaine lay face down on the couch, his forehead resting on his folded arms, his face hidden inside.

"You gonna take up the entire couch all night Squirt?" Cooper teased with a smirk. He took a seat in the armchair and sipped his coffee.

"Yes," Blaine mumbled pathetically into the fabric.

"You know you shouldn't be mad at Dad. If he hadn't spanked you I might have done it myself," Cooper said.

"I suspect that probably would have been preferable," Blaine murmured, more to himself than to Cooper. He turned his head on his arms to look at his brother. "And I'm not mad at him. At least not for that."

Cooper shook his head with disbelief. "I still don't know what on earth you were thinking."

"Apparently I wasn't," Blaine frowned.

"So you gonna tell me what this was all about?" Cooper leaned forward and raised a brow waiting, but Blaine didn't say a word. "I cancelled a date for you, you better talk." Blaine's silence hung in the air. Cooper decided to change tacks. "Look, I know it's not easy Blaine. Dad expects a lot of us. He's given us a lot of freedom and he's been very clear he expects us to be responsible with it." Blaine looked at his brother, quietly listening. He knew it was true, his father had said the same thing. He also knew he'd blown it today. "You know, Dad never wanted either of us involved in theater? That was always Mom's thing. I think he hoped that she would try and we would fail and he wouldn't have to worry about any of it. He knew how much the business had hurt Mom and he didn't want us going through the same thing. But then we both did well and now he worries all the time about the world we're exposed to...things he doesn't approve of."

Blaine looked away and his stomach clenched again. "That's the problem," he said. Cooper took a breath and sat back in his chair. Finally he'd said that right thing to get his brother talking. "There was this party one of the kids at school was having. Rachel and I couldn't have gone anyway, but we weren't even invited. So she decided to have one on Monday just for all the Les Mis kids."

"And Dad said you couldn't go?" Cooper asked.

"No, I didn't even ask him," Blaine admitted. "Why bother when I know what he's gonna say? And I had no idea what to tell her about why I can't go. *Gee I'm sorry Rachel, but I can't go to your party because my parents don't think it's okay that you have two Dads?* It would kill her. And it's not fair I can't go. The show is the only place I belong, those kids are the only ones I fit in with. So during the show I just got this brilliant idea to be like Gavroche and ignore the grownups and fight for what I know is right."

"Blaine," Cooper said softly. "Gavroche dies doing that."

"Yeah, I seemed to have forgotten that part." Blaine scoffed. "Well at least I'm still alive. Though it seemed like a close call there for a bit."

Cooper laughed and got up and went to the kitchen to refill his coffee mug. Their father was strict and old fashioned, and at times overbearing, but he loved them too and he'd never truly hurt either of them. "Hungry?" he asked and Blaine nodded his head. He took out the fixings for sandwiches and put them on

the breakfast bar. "I still don't understand why you ran away to here. I mean if you had snuck out Monday to go to the party that would have made complete sense but what was the point of coming here tonight?"

Blaine scrambled off the couch and joined Cooper, climbing up to kneel carefully on the bar stool so he could make his dinner. He kept his eyes on the food when he admitted the reason. "I needed to talk to Kurt."

Cooper stopped for a moment as it suddenly all made sense. "That's why you asked for the phone," he said. Blaine nodded hesitantly and Cooper picked up a knife and the mayonnaise. "Kurt means that much to you that you'd do what you did just to talk to him?"

Blaine put his sandwich together but left it, leaning his elbows on the table with his chin in his hands instead. He looked up at his brother. "Did you ever have that one friend who just completely understood you? That could tell you when the thoughts in your head were either stupid or brilliant."

Cooper smiled in memory. "Yes, I did."

"Well I haven't," Blaine said. "At least not until Kurt."

Cooper hummed and took a bite of his sandwich, giving himself time to respond in a way that wouldn't upset Blaine. "And you think you have that with him? Even though you two have barely met?"

"When I had that test a few weeks ago that I was struggling so much with, and Dad was pushing me to get a perfect score, Kurt talked me out of cheating and helped me figure out how to memorize everything on my own. When I tell him about the kids at school treating me...differently...he knows how I feel because the kids at his school treat him differently too." Cooper watched him thoughtfully and Blaine blushed at his gaze. "I know it sounds crazy, but it doesn't seem to me like I've only met him once, it seems like I've always known him."

Cooper stared at him, a little bit strangely like he was trying to piece together some sort of puzzle. Blaine shrunk slightly under the scrutiny and concentrated on his sandwich. How was he supposed to explain something he didn't even really understand himself? How was he supposed to expect his brother to accept it when it sounded completely crazy even to him?

"That's good Blaine," Cooper finally said, though his voice was filled with a sadness. "I'm glad you have someone like that."

Blaine was surprised but he didn't know what to say, so he mumbled "thanks," and picked up his sandwich. They ate quietly for a bit, the silence uncomfortable. There was something left in the air unfinished, something Blaine knew very well he needed to deal with. He stared at his plate, picking at crumbs. "I'm sorry," he whispered. He didn't have to say for what, his brother knew very well.

"Don't you ever lie to me again," Cooper scolded.

"I won't," Blaine promised.

"I mean it Blaine." Cooper's voice was firm and Blaine looked up at him through his lashes. "You don't ever have to lie to me. About anything. I'm always here for you, no matter what."

The words were like a salve for Blaine's pain and he smiled softly. "Thanks Coop." They finished up their sandwiches and Cooper put the dishes in the sink. While his brother's back was turned, Blaine took a chance. "So...um...can I use the phone?"

"No," Cooper said and Blaine's face fell. "You can call tomorrow morning before Dad picks you up for the show but it doesn't seem right for me to let you use the phone tonight."

"Oh come on, haven't I suffered enough? You're my brother, not my father," Blaine pouted.

Cooper came around the counter and scooped Blaine up out of the chair and spun him around. "That's right I am," Cooper yelled over Blaine's laughter and yelling. "And I gave up a date with a very hot girl tonight for you so you are going to play a game with me whether you want to or not!"

"Ok, fine, just put me down!" Blaine screeched and he caught his breath as Cooper placed him on the floor. "What are we playing?"

"Careers," Cooper announced, pulling it off the bookcase in the living room.

Blaine rolled his eyes. "I should have guessed. Well be prepared to lose, as you do every time."

Cooper brought it to the coffee table and Blaine laid back down on the couch on his side. "Not a chance, little brother. This time I will get to Hollywood before you."

Blaine took his card and set his goals for fame, happiness and money, knowing he already had this game in the bag. "And that is why you always lose Coop. When will you ever learn? You can't value fame over love."

CHAPTER EIGHT:

Only a Kid but Hard to Scare

"Dad's gonna be here to pick you up in an hour, so if you want to call Kurt you better get on it," Cooper yelled across the apartment.

He'd been up for hours. Showered and dressed, had breakfast, and paced. After a night's sleep and the return of his ability to actually think about all he'd planned to do yesterday, Blaine had come to the conclusion that he'd been crazy.

How did he think he was going to get advice from Kurt about Rachel's party if he was too afraid to even tell Kurt why he couldn't go?

And then he wondered, if he had raced into Cooper's and been able to use the phone right away with no interruptions, would he have forgotten to be scared and told him anyway?

There was no way to know now. All he knew was that he'd gone through enough to talk to Kurt that if he didn't at least pick up the phone to hear his voice, whether he talked about Rachel's party or not, he would always regret it.

He grabbed the phone and dialed, his heart beating nervously in his chest for some reason, until Kurt answered the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hi Kurt, it's Blaine," he said with the biggest smile on his face. He settled on his bed, curling up against the headboard.

"Hey!" Kurt cheered into the phone. "This is a surprise. I thought you couldn't call this weekend cause you were at your parents?"

"Yeah, well, I kinda took an unexpected detour last night to Cooper's," Blaine admitted and the guilt in his voice was clear.

"Detour as in you ran away?!" Kurt gasped in shock.

"Well it's not like I packed my bags and took a plane to New York," Blaine teased for a second but grew somber again quickly. "But yeah, I guess. I snuck out of the theater and took the subway to Cooper's."

"Oh my god, by yourself Blaine?" Kurt gasped again. "Your parents couldn't have been happy with that! What happened?"

Blaine blushed, even over the phone. "Doesn't matter," he muttered dismissively. "The point is, I'm still at Cooper's and getting to talk to you, so...hi."

"Hi," Kurt giggled. He tried to decide whether to pursue Blaine's comment, but he chose to leave it be for then. "So my Dad and I are starting to plan my birthday party. It's kind of a toss up between a Broadway themed party and a bowling party."

"The big 9! Almost at double digits like me," Blaine teased. "You definitely have to go with the Broadway party, then you and Rachel can compare notes after," Blaine blurted without thinking then smacked his hand over his mouth in panic.

"Is Rachel having a Broadway party too?" Kurt asked, unsure. As always, he could tell that something was wrong but he didn't know what. This time though, he wouldn't let it go. "Blaine, what's the matter?" Blaine squeezed his eyes shut and pursed his lips, unable to say the words out loud. The silence was deafening to Kurt. "Look Blaine, if you don't trust me, it's okay, I understand," Kurt said, but his voice was sad.

"It's not that I don't trust you, I'm just afraid..." Blaine started, but trailed off.

"Afraid of what?" Kurt prompted gently.

Blaine looked at his notebook, lying on his desk. "You know what I love about writing to you?" he asked. "It's like writing in a journal that answers back. All those words that are too scary for the air are solid on the paper. Folded and tucked away in a sealed envelope with a stamp. Then they're left, away from prying eyes in any mailbox on the street and it's sent straight to you. For your eyes only. And just when I'm starting to feel scared instead of relieved that I've put those words on paper, your letter comes and makes me know there's no reason to be afraid. Don't get me wrong, I really like talking to you, but words on paper...?"

"They stay secrets," Kurt finished for him.

Blaine smiled and relaxed. Of course Kurt understood. And if Kurt understood that, if Kurt really was the friend that he told Cooper he was, then shouldn't he do what he said he did and tell him everything? Or at least what he'd planned to tell him last night? "I ran away because I knew I couldn't go to Rachel's party," he explained nervously.

"Why can't you go?" Kurt held his breath, waiting for the answer. Waiting to maybe finally be let into Blaine's life just a little bit more than he had been so far.

"My parents...they don't let me go to her house. Because..." He squeezed his eyes shut, hating the words he was about to say. "Because her parents...they're gay. She has two dads." Blaine grabbed the blanket and pulled it over himself, hoping that he didn't just ruin everything.

"Wow," Kurt frowned. His heart jumped and his stomach tensed, though he didn't know why so he tried to shove it aside to worry about later. This was about Blaine. "I didn't know Rachel had two dads."

"Kurt, that's not the point," Blaine whined.

Kurt huffed. "I know Blaine, just give me a second to catch up here." Blaine held his breath, trying to wait patiently. "Okay. So you ran away because your dad said you couldn't go to the party?"

"No," Blaine tried to explain for the second time in two days. "I didn't even ask. He's never let me go to Rachel's house before and I knew this time would be no different. I just...I think I panicked. I didn't know what to do or what to tell her and the only thing I could think of was to ask you and so I had to get to Cooper's house and I just really wasn't thinking."

"Oh," Kurt said with a smile he just couldn't help. Blaine had run for him. To him. His heart fluttered slightly at the thought. "Well I don't know. What have you told her before when she asked you over?"

"I, um," Blaine thought back. "I think I just always told her my Dad said no. Or asked if she could come over instead. I never really told her why."

"So what's he told you about why he doesn't want you to go there? I mean, what's the big deal?"

Blaine shrugged. "I don't know. I don't think there is one, but he does."

"Then maybe you should ask your Dad what you should tell her," Kurt told him. "If he's the one saying you can't go because of her Dads then make him put it into words. Maybe he'll realize he's forcing you to either lie or hurt one of your friends. Maybe he'll realize that's pretty wrong."

Blaine rolled his eyes. "I'll believe that when I see it," he scoffed but he filed away the advice anyway. "So you're not mad at me?" he asked with a note of relief.

"Why would I be mad at you?" Kurt asked, genuinely confused.

"You know," Blaine shrugged. "Because of the things my dad thinks."

"You're not your father, you don't have to think like him," Kurt said. "And you don't, right?"

"Of course not," Blaine said with conviction.

"Then I have nothing to be mad at you about," Kurt promised. "You know the one thing I've learned since my mom died? Parents are people too. They aren't superheroes. They can't stop the awful things from happening and they make mistakes. I think your dad is making a mistake here. But maybe someday you can change that."

Blaine thought about what Kurt said. And he felt his view of the world slip just slightly off its axis. Because maybe it wasn't Gavroche's defiance that made him a hero. Maybe it was just his willingness to be himself and be heard. "Maybe someday I can," he thought aloud.

"I have to go Blaine. You okay?"

"Yeah I think I really am. I'll talk to you soon," Blaine said.

"I'll write to you sooner," Kurt promised.

"Everything okay?" Burt asked as Kurt hung up the phone. He hadn't wanted to interrupt, but the conversation seemed to be getting pretty deep. So he made himself look busy in the kitchen, organizing a drawer that had been way over due for a cleaning and kept both ears on his son. "Did I hear you say that Blaine ran away?"

"Sort of, I guess." Kurt turned around on the stool beneath the phone and sat down. "Rachel's having a party and he can't go because she has two Dads."

"Oh, I see," Burt said easily. He closed the drawer and rested his elbows on the counter, trying to remain calm and casual. Inside he was anything but.

"Why won't Blaine's dad let him go just because of that?" Kurt knew that if anyone had the answer his Dad might and then maybe he could call Blaine back.

Burt thought hard before deciding on how to answer. He didn't want to make assumptions, kids had a way of not always understanding what things are about, especially if they'd gotten the information from another kid. But he also didn't want to just avoid the question because it was a good one. And, Burt expected, an important one. "Well, some people are just afraid of people that are different."

"Why?" Kurt asked.

"It's hard to say," Burt explained. "There are a lot of reasons why. Most of them aren't very good, but it's always better to listen before you judge."

"Are you afraid of people that are different?" Kurt looked at Burt like he held every answer in the world.

Moments like these were the most terrifying and exhilarating of every parent's life and as Burt walked around the counter to be closer to Kurt, he knew that this moment could some day be one of the most important. "All that matters to me Kurt, is that you're a good person. The rest just makes you who you are. You see, we're all different. So there's not really anything to be afraid of."

Kurt smiled softly, then his eyes lit up. "Oh that reminds me! I wanted to make a friendship bracelet for Brittany! Since Blaine and Santana both have one."

Burt laughed and smiled. A child's ability to go from zero to sixty in no time at all was priceless. He ruffled Kurt's hair and helped him jump down from the stool. "I think that's a great idea. Come on, we'll go to the store for some more thread."

Blaine fidgeted in his seat as his father drove him to the theater. Owning a car in Manhattan was a rarity but his father had no patience for public transportation or rentals and he had a strong distaste for taxis. Besides, parking wasn't an issue at the theater. His father always just dropped him at the door.

Blaine fussed with his bag, Kurt's words rolling over in his mind, hoping the courage would come to him. His Dad had said little when he'd gotten in. The ride was short in distance, but the quiet felt like forever. The only words he heard were the ones playing in his head. *Ask him what to tell her*, Kurt had told him. *Make him put it into words*.

The incessant honks and roar of the city filled the silence at a red light and Blaine used the cover of the noise to take a deep breath before blurting out, "Rachel is having a party at her house tomorrow."

"You may not go," was his father's immediate answer.

But Blaine was well prepared for that and he turned to look at his Dad. "What should I tell her about why I can't go?"

John glanced over at his son with a look of disbelief. "You tell her that a day after you slipped out of the theater on your own your parents don't feel you're responsible enough to trust to go to a party."

Blaine looked away, his sight focusing inward as he gazed at the glass in the window. "But it's more than that." His father knew it was true. He had to admit it. "You wouldn't have let me go even if I hadn't done what I did. And telling her why would break her heart."

The car rounded the corner to the theater and John pulled up in front of the stage door. "Then I guess there was a positive to you running away. Now you don't have to have that conversation."

"But you always say that telling only part of the truth is lying!" Blaine yelled, close to tears. "And telling her I can't go because I ran away isn't the whole truth."

"It's the whole truth today Blaine," his father said in a tone that made it clear the conversation was over. But at the devastated look on his son's face, John reached out and squeezed Blaine's knee. "Your mother and I have rules because we love you and we want to protect you. Rachel is a lovely girl and we've let you have her over anytime you've wanted. But we don't feel her parents are appropriate to supervise you and we won't put you at risk like that." Blaine said nothing, too afraid to say the things he wanted to say.

Instead he grabbed his bag and pulled the strap over his shoulder. "Your mother will be backstage before curtain call tonight. Break a leg, I love you."

Blaine gave a slight nod but was silent as he opened the door and closed it behind him. He felt his father's eyes follow him until he disappeared into the sanctuary of the theater halls. Only this time he knew that eyes would be on him inside as well. His cheeks reddened, he aimed his gaze to the floor, and he walked with a heavy heart backstage to his dressing room.

Blaine kept his head down until he reached his dressing room, and he closed the door like he never did, slinging his bag over his chair. A note rested on his table, but it wasn't from Kurt.

Please see me when you arrive. ~ Ms. Brown

He sighed, rubbing his face over his hands. He got out his notebooks and his makeup case and pulled his costume off his rack, dressing quickly, putting off the inevitable tongue lashing he was no doubt about to receive. A gentle knock on the door interrupted him and he reluctantly called, "Come in."

Gregory opened the door and peeked his head inside. Blaine watched him through the mirror and closed his eyes with a looming sense of dread. Gregory and the guys had welcomed him, accepted him, like one of the grownups and then he'd acted exactly like a child. He heard the door shut softly behind him.

"I'm sorry," Blaine whispered, burying his face in his hands.

"Stop," Gregory said, leaning against the dressing table and Blaine opened his eyes to look at him. "Nobody here is mad at you, and no one but Ms. Brown is going to say anything. We all know you were having a bad day and we were all kids once. You ask any person in this theater and at least half will tell you about a time they ran away from their parents." Blaine let out a breath he'd been holding and let a tiny smile slip. "The only thing anyone cares about is that you're okay." Gregory raised a brow and frowned at Blaine. "You *are* okay, right?"

Blaine nodded firmly. "Yeah, I'm fine," he promised.

"Good," Gregory said. He picked up the note from Ms. Brown on the table. "You want me to come with you?" he asked.

Blaine's eyes widened with thanks. "Please?"

"Of course," Gregory said and ruffled Blaine's curls. "Let's go."

Gregory draped a protective arm over Blaine and together they found the children's guardian talking with the assistant stage manager. "Ms. Brown?" Blaine's voice was small and scared as he tried to get her attention.

She turned, her hands on her hips in a mix of playfulness and reprimand. "You gave everyone quite a scare yesterday Blaine," she scolded gently.

"I'm really sorry," Blaine apologized, trying very hard not to cry.

"Well, your parents and I want to make sure it doesn't happen again, so I will be escorting you to your dressing room after curtain call from now on. And your Dad said your Mom will be up here before curtain call," she said.

"I know," Blaine frowned, embarrassed that he had to have his mommy come backstage for him. "I promise it won't happen again."

"I'm sure it won't," she smiled and pulled him in for a hug. "You've got 22 more shows Blaine, let's make them awesome, okay?"

Blaine smiled and felt a weight lifted off his shoulders. "Definitely."

"So I suppose you won't be coming to my party tomorrow night," Rachel announced, barging as always into his dressing room and hopping up to sit on the table. "It's too bad, you're going to miss the best party of the year."

"Yeah," Blaine hedged. He got up and folded his clothes, trying not to look Rachel in the eye. "I'm sorry about that. I guess my parents don't really trust me right now after what I did."

"I'm sure they don't, but that's not why you can't go and you know it," Rachel quipped.

Blaine froze, jeans half folded in his hands, and his eyes widened. "What do you mean?" he squeaked.

Rachel clicked her tongue and rolled her eyes. "Blaine. We've been friends for two years and I've been over to your house countless times. And you've been to my house exactly never. I've spent time with your parents," she added with a sigh. "I'm not stupid."

"I never thought you were," Blaine muttered uncomfortably. "I just...I thought maybe you wouldn't like me if you knew my parents...you know..."

"Don't like my dads because they're gay?" she asked. Blaine nodded. She slid off the table and took his hands. "Blaine, you aren't your parents. I know that's not how you feel. It would be a little weird if you did," she said with a strange grin and Blaine's nose crinkled in confusion. She didn't let him ask what she meant though. "What I don't understand is if you were going to sneak away from your parents, why you didn't do it to actually *come* to my party? Kind of a waste of getting into trouble, wasn't it?" She looked at him with amusement.

Blaine lowered his head and chuckled. As the only one who hadn't thought of that, clearly he was going to have to get smarter at this misbehaving thing.

Rachel leaned in and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Have a good show Blaine," she said quietly and glanced toward the notebook sitting out on his table. "Say hi to Kurt for me."

"I will," he said and watched her go. As soon as she was out of sight he quickly wiped the kiss off his cheek and shuddered.

Girls were so weird.

May 12, 2002

Dear Kurt,

You asked me what I was afraid of. And it's really hard for me to admit to being scared of anything because I try so hard to be grown up and brave and show everyone that I have what it takes to make it on Broadway. But the fact is that sometimes I'm just a kid and I make stupid mistakes like every other kid, I run away and

ride the subway alone when I know I shouldn't or I forget to clean up after myself or I get into a fight with Rachel and I really feel like I'm letting everyone who has trusted me down and showing my Dad that I really can't handle it.

I was afraid that if you knew about my Dad that you wouldn't want to be friends anymore. I know now that was silly, for you and Rachel. Rachel kinda knew already anyway and I'm not sure why I thought that the things my parents believed would scare you both away but I'm really glad that both of you are a lot smarter than me. Rachel says hi, by the way.

But that's not all I'm afraid of. I'm afraid my Dad will take theater away from me, especially after what I did. It's the one place I've always belonged and without that I think I might be completely lost.

Because while I know my Dad loves me, I sometimes think that if he truly knew who I was inside he wouldn't like me very much. Sometimes I feel like I'm being smothered. Like I'm walking on eggshells too scared to make the wrong move or say the wrong thing. I feel like there's something inside me aching to come out but the crazy thing is I don't even know what it is.

But I feel like with you in my life I just might figure it out. So I'm so scared to lose you. I'm scared you'll decide I'm not worth the trouble or you'll make so many friends at home that you'll forget about me. I'm scared my Dad will find out and take it all away because he'd insist on seeing every letter I write to you and you write to me and god if he ever saw the things I wrote I might run away for good or crawl into a little hole and never come out and if he ever saw the things you wrote he wouldn't let me near you just like he won't let me near Rachel's Dads.

I want to erase that. I really do. Because I don't ever want you to be afraid to tell me things or be who you are, to wear tutus and princess dresses and go to ballet class and be all the amazing things that you are but those are exactly the reasons that my father can't ever know about this. I promised myself I'd be honest with you. That I'd tell you everything. So that's all I can do and hope that you stay by my side because no matter what, I promised, you can always find me here.

I'm going to run downstairs to the office mailbox before I completely change my mind about sending this letter.

*Your Friend,
Blaine*

CHAPTER NINE:

The Curtain's Never Down

It was a week before Blaine's final performance that the rug was ripped out from underneath him.

"So Rachel's agent gave her a list of the upcoming auditions and if we contact Mr. Gill maybe I can get appointments too," Blaine was chattering to his mother at the dinner table. "That way I shouldn't be without a show for too long."

"There's not going to be any auditions for a while," his father announced.

Blaine froze in the middle of a bite and dropped his fork. He forced the food down his throat. "What do you mean there's not going to be any auditions for a while?" Blaine's heart was suddenly racing. His stomach hurt. But he tried to keep his faith. His father couldn't mean what he thought he meant. He couldn't be doing the thing that scared him most.

"I mean, your mother and I have agreed that you should take a break after *Les Mis* is done," John said.

"But I can't take time off! My name is out there right now, I'm the kid to beat! If I take time off they'll forget me. Other kids will take my place and I'll be starting all over again when I go back," he argued.

"Our decision is non-negotiable Blaine," his Dad told him.

Tears rushed to his eyes but he fought them back. His appetite was completely gone now. He looked from his Mom who looked back with sympathy, to his father who was eating as if he had no care in the world. "Why are you doing this?" Blaine choked.

The clink of his father's silverware on the plate sounded like a drum in his pounding head and his voice was almost like an echo. "I'm doing this because your language is becoming unfit for a bathroom wall and you've started lying even to your brother. I'm doing this because your idea of dealing with a situation is running away on the subway with no one knowing where you are. I'm doing this because you need to remember what it means to be a child."

"This sucks!" Blaine yelled, pushing out of his seat.

"And that is exactly the language that I'm talking about, young man, now sit back down," his father ordered calmly.

"No, I won't!" Blaine's defiance was all he had right now. "This is completely unfair and I will never forgive you!" He ran upstairs and slammed the door, throwing himself on his bed while he sobbed.

John sighed and sat back in his chair. "This is precisely the kind of behavior I was talking about Teresa. He's getting way too big for his britches. It's unacceptable."

Blaine's mom sadly shook her head. "You just dropped a bombshell on him, of course he's going to explode. You should have let me handle it like I said."

John ran his fingers through his hair and rubbed his temples. He knew it was the right decision. And he knew that Blaine would never believe him. Somewhere along the line, he'd become the enemy. "You're right, I should have." He looked up the stairs and back to his wife. "Well, now's your chance."

Blaine felt more than heard the footsteps since it was hard to hear over his crying, but his bed shook like it did when one of his parents hit that spot in the floor at the top of the stairs. That silenced him. The seconds felt like hours while he waited holding his breath, wondering which of them would come up. He braced himself for the possibility it was his Dad.

The knock on the door was soft and he let out his breath in relief, knowing it was his mother. "Come in," he called pitifully.

She walked in and closed the door behind her. He knew he was a mess, his face drenched in tears, his nose dripping and his skin probably puffy and red. He tried to wipe it away with his sleeve, but she was across the room in a flash stopping him. "Here," she said, grabbing tissues from the side of his bed and handing them over. "Your sleeve is not Kleenex."

He cleaned himself up while she sat down. Her eyes bore into him so sternly that he wondered if he was in any less trouble than he knew he would be with his dad. He ducked his head, embarrassed and angry but she lifted his chin then pulled him into a hug. He breathed her in, so soft and comfortable and he wanted to think he was safe but he never knew. The pit in his stomach shrunk slightly though and his heart began to slow. "Better?" she asked. He nodded against her, then sat back.

"Please don't let him take theater away from me?" Blaine begged, his golden eyes shadowed with fear. "It's my whole life, it's the only place I belong."

"That's exactly what your father and I are afraid of," she said gently. She reached up and brushed the sweat and tear soaked curls out of his eyes, cupping his face softly in her hand. "Your father and I know that when it becomes that important, you'll do anything to keep it. And some of those things aren't so good."

Cooper's words came back to him. *He knew how much the business had hurt Mom and he didn't want us going through the same thing.* "Is that what happened to you? Is that why Dad doesn't like Cooper and me acting?"

"Your Dad's reasons are...complex," she admitted. "Some are valid and some aren't. Someday, when you're older, I'll share my story with you. But not now," she smiled gently. "What you need to know now is that your Dad and I aren't trying to hurt you, and we aren't making you give it up for good. We just want you to take a break, remember what it's like to just be a regular kid and not a mini-adult."

"At least performing I get paid for that, here Dad expects it for free," Blaine muttered.

His mom ruffled his hair and leaned in close to whisper as if sharing a secret. "You are too smart for your own good Blaine Anderson."

Blaine didn't feel smart at all. Smart kids didn't mouth off to their dads at the dinner table. "So is dad gonna..." he swallowed hard against the words and decided to try again. "Am I in trouble?"

"No," she assured him. "You're not in trouble. I think given the circumstances you actually handled it pretty well. Though I might consider apologizing to him for your outburst," she added pointedly.

He frowned. He didn't feel like apologizing very much right now. He really wasn't sorry. "So how long of a break do I have to take?"

"I think that depends on you, sweetheart," she said. "When it looks like you're ready again, we won't hold you back. I promise." She kissed him on the head. "Bedtime at 8," she reminded him before leaving him to his thoughts.

June 23, 2002

Dear Kurt,

I remember you saying right after your mom died that you didn't understand how the world kept turning when everything had stopped for you. I don't understand it either. How can you lose the most important thing in the world to you and have no one notice?

My parents say I can't audition after Les Mis. They say it's for my own good to take a break. But how can it possibly be good for me to take a break? How can it possibly be good for me to leave the one place that makes me happy, the one place I can truly belong?

I feel right now like my whole life is over. I know that must sound pretty dramatic to someone who has lost something so much more important. But the people behind the curtain will not be there for me unless I'm there. And in front of the curtain, I have so little.

At least I still have you.

You will need to write me at Cooper's from now on. He'll make sure I get your letters. Please don't stop writing. I don't know how I would get by without you and your words to cheer me. You are the one good thing in my life right now Kurt. I honestly don't know what I would do without you.

Your Friend,

Blaine

"Please Dad, he really needs me," Kurt begged. He sat atop a stool at the garage, his legs swinging in the breeze, nowhere near reaching the floor. In his hand he held Blaine's letter. His eyes were focused squarely on the man who stood beneath the undercarriage of a car.

"We've been through this Kurt." Burt grunted as he loosened one of the bolts and then another. "The show is this weekend and there is no way I can get out of here or afford a trip to New York. I wish we could kid, Blaine sounds pretty upset. But we just can't. Now hand me that hose."

Kurt sighed and hopped down, grabbing the hose from the floor and holding it high above his head for his Dad. He'd known that would be his father's answer. He'd known there wasn't a chance that they'd get to Blaine's last show. Still, he'd had to try just one more time. "I don't understand how his Dad could make him give it up. I mean, being on Broadway means the world to him."

"Well, I think that could be the problem Kurt," Burt said. "From what you've told me, it sounds like Broadway is his whole world. Maybe his parents think it shouldn't be. I know I wouldn't want that for you."

"Why not?" Kurt argued. "I mean, what could be better than being on that stage, performing for an audience of thousands every night." He dreamily imagined himself in the position that Blaine had been in for the past year. "What else could you need?"

"Sports, other activities, school, family," Burt glanced over his shoulder to his son. "Friends? I don't mean to lessen what you and Blaine have because I know it's important and special, but he should have friends his own age around him too, not just hang around with a bunch of grownups."

"He has Rachel," Kurt frowned, but he knew his Dad had a point.

"I'm just saying, theater is an adult world," Burt said. "It's not good for a kid to hang around an adult world all day."

Kurt looked around the garage. Other than his Dad there were three other guys working on cars in the shop. "So...then maybe I shouldn't be hanging around here all day?" Kurt hinted with a sly grin.

Burt looked back at him again grimly, then broke out into a smile. "It's not fair that you're already too smart for me." He wiped his forehead on his sleeve and lowered his arms to clean his hands with the rag hanging from his pocket. Kurt shrugged with a smirk and Burt drew closer, his arms crossed on his chest. "Alright, what else would you want to be doing rather than hanging around here?"

He'd been waiting since school was out for the perfect moment to bring it up. This was his chance. "There's a musical theater class on Wednesdays this fall," Kurt bounced excitedly. "My friend Mercedes from my voice class is in it, you remember her with the amazing voice, and Brittany said that she might do it if Santana would, so we could all four start in September if Santana agrees, but even if she doesn't I

could still do it with Mercedes, pleeeeeease!" He clasped his hands beneath his chin and looked up at his dad with the biggest puppy dog eyes he could pull off.

But his Dad took a deep breath and sighed. "I don't know Kurt, all these classes are starting to cost an awful lot of money."

"But that way you could just drop me off after school on Mondays and Wednesdays and not pick me up until you were done with work. Or maybe I could even get a ride there from the girls and you wouldn't have to leave work at all," Kurt argued. "I can do my homework there while I wait, I promise I'll get it all done."

Kurt pouted and begged. He was very hard to resist. "Maybe I can talk to them about some sort of payment plan," Burt relented before going back to the car. "You'll have to take a cut in your clothing allowance though," he warned him.

"Deal!" Kurt screeched and he clapped his hands. He was going to get to Blaine and Broadway, one way or another.

June 30, 2002

His dressing room space was littered with cards and flowers and teddy bears. The stage management staff gave him three books of stamps. Rachel had bought him his very own Gavroche cap and had everyone sign it inside in gold sharpie.

They started the day with a toast of sparkling cider and it ended with tears that didn't stop after the barricade. Blaine's Mom and Dad and Cooper were in the audience and if Blaine imagined really hard he could believe that Kurt was there too. He watched the show from the wings, sitting in the corner out of the way. He breathed in the smell of the wood and the paint and the darkness; the freedom of that darkness where the cares of the world, and the things inside him that ached for no reason, never hurt. For the last time he owned the streets of Paris, climbed the barricade, and reveled in the power he only ever felt here.

*Little people know when little people fight
We may look easy pickens' but we've got some bite.
So never kick a dog because he's just a pup.*

*We'll fight like twenty armies and we won't give up
So you better to run for cover when the pup grows up!*

Gregory held Blaine close when Gavroche died and again after the curtain came down. *Bring Him Home* had broken his heart. The curtain call broke his spirit. He cleaned up his space wordlessly. The understudy would be taking his place as the three day performer and a new kid would be coming in.

The step out the stage door was the hardest step he'd ever had to take.

His father signed the check and looked at his watch. "It's getting late there kiddo, I think it's time to head home."

Blaine sighed. They were at Sardi's, his pick for his last day, and surrounded by the caricatures of Broadway's greats he didn't feel quite so sad. Going home would be a totally different story. "Please can't we stay just a little bit longer?"

"I'll bring him home," Cooper piped in very quickly, a nearly imperceptible wink to Blaine. "I could use another cup of coffee anyway."

Blaine looked to his Dad hopefully and his father acquiesced with a smile. "Fine." John got up and held his hand out for Teresa. She took it and clasped her empty hand in his, the other holding a bag packed with Blaine's gifts that didn't fit into his backpack. "One hour boys, or I'll send out a search party."

"Thanks Dad," Blaine said.

"You did good tonight son," John told him. "I know I don't say it enough but I'm really proud of you."

Blaine's eyes grew bright with surprise. "Thanks."

He watched them leave hand in hand and it was in moments like these with his mother whispering in his father's ear that Blaine could tell how much they were in love. He wondered if he'd ever find a girl he felt like that about. Sometimes he tried to imagine what she'd look like, but the person whose hand he held was always fuzzy.

He couldn't think on it too long, the sound of Cooper sliding an envelope on the table in front of him drawing his attention. Blaine looked up at Cooper, who smiled softly at him, then back down at the envelope. It was from Kurt.

"He overnight shipped it to me," Cooper explained. "With a note that you weren't to open it until after the show tonight and you were alone. I figured this was alone enough."

Blaine swallowed the lump in his throat and wordlessly opened the letter. When he started wiping tears away, Cooper draped an arm around his shoulder and pulled him in close.

Dear Blaine,

I know right now as you read this you're scared. But tomorrow is the first day of the rest of your life so I wanted to remind you of something.

You are so much more than just Gavroche.

You are the boy who loves Harry Potter and wants to dance and hopes that someday he can wear pink without fear.

You are the boy who cared enough to take a fan backstage and to write back to me every time I wrote to you and who made me smile when I thought I never would again with just a single phone call.

You are the boy who dreams big and hopes hard and loves dearly. You are so much more than what you think you are.

Your curtain's never down.

And maybe that's what your parents want you to remember.

And I'll be here to remind you whenever you need it.

You are my friend, and I am yours,

Kurt

"Thank you Coop," Blaine whispered through his tears.

But Cooper's surprises weren't over. He placed something else on the table in front of Blaine. Blaine's eyes opened wide. "You got a cell phone?"

"Now I didn't get it for you Squirt, I got it because my agent said that this way he can get in touch with me any time he needs to," Cooper explained. "But I did program Kurt's number in."

Blaine flipped the phone open and pressed a button. "It's okay, I have it memorized."

Cooper placed a hand on Blaine's. "Not here," he said and they grabbed their bags and headed out to the street. "Come on, we'll go to the park down the street from home."

They took the subway uptown and detoured at the local park. It was small but quiet, especially this late at night, though the sun was just beginning to set. Blaine went straight to the swingset and Cooper handed him the phone. While his little brother dialed, Cooper took a seat on the bench off the sidewalk. The night was beautiful, the late June heat relieved every few moments by a cool breeze from the east. He watched his brother bite his lip and nervously wait for Kurt to answer.

"Hello?"

Blaine's heart quickened even more and his face broke out in a smile at the sound of Kurt's voice. "Hi, it's Blaine. Cooper got a cell phone!" His feet didn't touch the ground and he swung them happily beneath him. "I wanted to say thank you for the letter. You didn't have to overnight it though, I could have waited," he grinned.

"I know, but I didn't want you to have to wait. I wanted to be there and I couldn't, so I figured that was the next best thing," Kurt said.

"It was probably better because this way we get to talk. Other than backstage, I haven't been out of my parents' sight all day until now. If you'd come I probably wouldn't have even had a chance to talk to you anyway," Blaine reasoned.

"Well then I guess I'm glad I couldn't come," Kurt said. "Though I still would've liked to see you as Gavroche one last time."

"Yeah well," Blaine ducked his head and rubbed his neck self-consciously. "Like you said, I have to learn how to be more than Gavroche."

"No, I said you have to remember," Kurt reminded him. "You're already so much more."

Cooper couldn't hear the whole conversation, but he smiled at the grin on Blaine's face and the blush on his cheeks and the adorable way he curled in on himself, even on the swing, as if Kurt's arms around him would make all the difference in the world. And every suspicion that had been building over the years was suddenly confirmed for him. Cooper was almost certain that Blaine had no idea what he was feeling, what he was thinking, or why Kurt was so special to him. But Cooper knew without a doubt in his mind that his little brother was completely in love.

CHAPTER TEN:

One Day to a New Beginning

"Now, I know you're going to want to say no, but Dad, please, you have to let me." Cooper knew he was whining like a child and he knew that was the very worst way to get what he wanted from his father. But somehow standing before the large oak desk in his father's office, facing the wall length window that displayed a glorious view of New York City, he reverted back to the ten year old he used to be. He imagined many of the people who worked for his father would feel the same. He imagined that was somewhat the point of the corner office.

"I don't have to let you do anything, Cooper," John told his son sternly. "Now perhaps if you slow down and talk to me like the adult you are instead of like your brother then I might just agree to whatever crazy scheme you have up your sleeve."

Cooper lowered his head. He'd rehearsed the whole speech on his way over but he'd started talking so quickly and ended up whining that he just hoped he hadn't ruined his chance. He took a breath, chose more concise words and started again. "Sir, I am going to Ohio for a week for some auditions and I would like to take Blaine with me."

John swiveled in his high back leather chair and frowned. "I don't know. Overnight or the weekend in your own apartment is one thing. But for a week on the road? I'm not sure you're ready for that. It's not as easy as it sounds taking care of a ten year old boy. What are you going to do with him while you're auditioning?"

"We'll be fine Sir, I promise. We'll be staying with a friend of mine out there, she'll be driving me to the auditions, and she agreed to watch Blaine while I'm inside." His father still looked unconvinced. "Dad, he's spent the entire month of July moping in his room. He's barely gone out with friends except Rachel and she's leaving for Ragtime rehearsals in London next week. The only time he's happy is during his voice lessons. Otherwise he sits on his bed and reads whatever he can get his hands on. He needs something to cheer him up."

John stood up and looked out his window, hands on his hips. "He needs to start school again. Without being so focused on a show, he'll make new friends, especially with Rachel gone for the year."

"I agree, but school's a month away. Let me have him for a week. He'll be out of the city. See the stars, breathe some fresh air. I promise he'll come back a different kid," Cooper said.

John turned and raised a brow. "Different good or different bad," he asked with a smirk.

"Different good," Cooper assured him with a smile that faded quickly. "He can't really be worse than he is right now."

John took a breath and let it out. Cooper was pretty right about that. "Okay. I'll book you guys a flight."

Cooper smiled and held back a little cheer. "Thanks Dad. You're not as bad as they say you are," he teased.

"Do me a favor?" John asked, his vulnerability seeping through his hard exterior just enough that it was noticeable to Cooper. Cooper raised a brow. "Tell your brother that? I think I'm pretty much persona non grata to him at this point."

Cooper slipped his hands in the pocket of his jeans and frowned. "Well do you blame him? You changed after 9/11. Took your anger and grief out on him probably more than you meant to. Became even more protective, which he was bound to start rebelling against at some point even before. I know you've been better lately, I've seen it, but then you take away the one place he feels happy." Cooper shrugged. "What do you expect?"

"You don't understand," his father tried to argue.

Cooper's face tightened. "Yes Dad, I do. Doesn't mean I agree with you." He turned for the door then stopped to look back once more. "Thanks for letting me take him, it'll mean a lot to him." John nodded and turned to the window. Cooper left the office and headed down to the lobby.

He'd programmed the number in his phone before he'd left, just in case his father said yes. He found a quiet corner and dialed.

The phone rang twice before it was picked up. "Hummel Tire and Lube?"

"Hello, Mr. Hummel? This is Cooper Anderson."

"Who was that?" Kurt asked, bringing lunch into his Dad's office for both of them. He pulled out the sandwiches he'd packed that morning and handed one to his Dad.

"That, Kurt, was Cooper Anderson," Burt said with just a hint of a smile that Kurt missed. Instead awful scenarios immediately raced through his head and he panicked.

"Why did he call? Is everything okay? Is Blaine alright?"

"Everything is fine kid, calm down," Burt chuckled. Kurt was always so dramatic, just like his Mom. He sat back and took a bite of his sandwich, perhaps teasing just a little bit too long, but he could be dramatic as well. Finally he couldn't take the desperate look on his son's face anymore. "It seems that Cooper is coming to our neck of the woods for a bit. He's got a couple of auditions in Columbus and he's staying with a friend in Sidney."

Kurt felt the blood in his veins return to normal speed and he let go of the breath he had been holding as he fell back into his seat. "Oh. Well that's great," he said but his voice betrayed his disappointment that whatever the call had been about had not been about Blaine. "Maybe he'll have a chance to stop by so we can meet him." It wasn't Blaine but it was still his brother and he had to admit it would be nice to meet the guy that made sure they could always talk and write to one another.

"Yeah, I think he did say he'd come by," Burt said, letting a smirk slip from his lips. "Think he said he'd be bringing someone along too."

Kurt's head snapped to Burt's. His eyes opened wide. His dad couldn't mean... "Blaine isn't coming is he?" He felt the air escape his lungs again. He felt his heart race with excitement but he couldn't get his hopes up, not yet, because his Dad wasn't saying a word. "Is he?" he screeched.

Burt let his grin free then and nodded his head. "Yes, Blaine is coming too," he said.

Burt had to cover his ears to protect himself from the piercing scream that erupted from his son. He grabbed his drink to make sure Kurt didn't knock it over as he danced wildly around the room. "Blaine is coming to Ohio!? Blaine is coming here?!"

"Yeah kid, Blaine is coming here," Burt laughed and took another bite of his sandwich. "Now sit down and eat your lunch before you accidentally kill yourself before he gets here."

Kurt did as he was told but it was hard to concentrate on chewing and swallowing. Blaine was coming to see him. For a week. He had to call him. They had to make plans. He had so many ideas swimming in his head.

Kurt was going to make sure it was the best week of Blaine's life.

August 13, 2002

"You guys go," Cooper urged his mother and father out the door of their apartment. They'd decided that since Cooper was taking Blaine for the week they'd take the opportunity for their own vacation getaway. "Really, our flight is in 4 hours, I will make sure he's all packed and ready to go."

"You have the money for the cab?" his father asked nervously. "And the credit card for the trip? And the plane tickets?"

"Yes Dad, we will be fine," Cooper assured them.

"You have the tickets for Lion King tonight?" Blaine piped in, a bright smile lighting up his face. Kurt would be waiting for him there and Blaine was counting the minutes.

Cooper couldn't help but smile back with a wink hidden from his parents. "Yes Squirt, I have the tickets."

"Alright," their mother cooed, coming to the rescue for all three of them. She kissed Blaine on the head first, then Cooper, then John. "I would like to not miss our train, so we will leave and we'll call in 2 hours to make sure you are on your way. Blaine, you're almost done packing right?" she asked pointedly.

"Yes Mom," Blaine rolled his eyes fondly.

"Okay. Goodbye boys. We love you. Have a safe flight," she said rolling her own bag to the door. "Cooper do not take your eyes off of him for one second. Blaine, you make sure you can see your brother at all times. You call when you land and every night. Understood?"

"Yes Ma'am," Cooper and Blaine answered simultaneously.

"Your mom means it," John said sternly, his eyes darting between both his boys. "Don't make me regret letting you do this. Okay?" Cooper nodded in agreement but Blaine's excitement deflated like a balloon at his father's voice and he didn't respond. John's face softened with a hint of regret. "I love you both, boys," he said gently.

"Love you too Dad," Cooper replied. They both looked to Blaine but he just turned and walked back to his bedroom. John sighed. "He loves you too," Cooper told him. "He's just being a kid." John nodded sadly, Teresa took his hand and they left the boys alone in the penthouse apartment.

Cooper turned and followed Blaine to his bedroom, resting his hip against the doorframe, arms crossed. He silently watched Blaine pack for a minute before speaking up. "You shouldn't have done that. Dad didn't have to let you come with me." Blaine looked over his shoulder and shrugged before going back to his suitcase. "Blaine, stop. We need to talk."

Blaine straightened, his shoulders dropping. He turned around settling himself on the bed with a sigh. He'd tried really hard to forgive his father. It had been okay for the first few days after the show but every day he missed his job more and more. He tried to keep himself busy by reading or hanging out with Rachel, but the minute Rachel had booked Ragtime and started going on about how amazing it was going to be performing in the West End for a year, it hurt too much to hear. And when he read his books he just imagined all the characters he wanted to play, the roles he was missing out on. Any goodwill he'd felt for his father telling him he was proud disappeared with each passing day as restlessness coursed through his veins.

Cooper sat next to him and took his hands. "Blaine look at me. Do you understand what we're doing here?" Cooper asked seriously. "Going to Ohio? Meeting Kurt behind Mom and Dad's back? Do you understand what could happen if they find out?"

"Is this speech supposed to make me forgive him and tell him I love him? 'Cause it's kind of doing the opposite," Blaine said. Of course he understood. He wasn't a little kid, he was 10 ½.

"Blaine, Dad isn't letting you do theater because he's worried about the things you're being exposed to and the choices you're making. He doesn't want you doing things that he doesn't think you should do. And here you are, lying to him for the last year about writing to Kurt and talking to Kurt and now we are flying out to Ohio to actually see him. So I know you don't want to believe this at all, but...maybe he has a point," Cooper suggested keenly.

Blaine's eyes narrowed and he pulled his hands away. "Then why are you helping me? If you think what I'm doing is so wrong, why have you been helping me all this time?"

Cooper smiled and reached back out to squeeze his hand. "Because you have a point too. Because I don't think you should have to hide all this and I understand why you are. Because you're miserable and I hate seeing you like that and most of all because I'm your brother, not your father." He pulled Blaine in for a hug and kissed his head. "Look, I'm not saying you have to love the things Dad does or all the things he believes or wants you to be. But try to imagine how you'd feel without him around always on top of you. Whatever he does that you hate so much, it's because he loves you more than anything."

Blaine didn't entirely believe it, but the idea was nice and he smirked up at Cooper. "Even more than you?"

"Well we already know he's not perfect," Cooper smirked back. "Now come on, let's get you packed so we can start on this adventure that Dad won't find out about until you're thirty."

They threw the last of Blaine's belongings in to his suitcase and the things he wanted to bring for Kurt. They closed it up and took it downstairs. Cooper would call a cab in an hour.

Blaine sat on the couch, nervously biting his lip and picking at his fingers. Cooper packed a bag of snacks for the airport and put it in the carry-on. "You look wound as tight as a clock, Squirt, you worried about Dad?" Blaine shook his head. "Then what?"

Blaine looked up, his eyes dark with insecurity. "What if he doesn't like me now that I'm not a Broadway star? What if he's built up this image of me in his head but really I'm just this dumb nerd from New York with no idea how to make friends?"

Cooper smiled softly and sat next to his little brother. "You're already friends, Blaine. And I don't read your letters, but I would guess the secret's out that you're a dumb nerd from New York," he teased. "And he probably knows you better than anyone else in the world. Am I right?"

Blaine blushed and shrugged. "Except maybe you."

Cooper nudged him affectionately with his shoulder. "Well I think you're a pretty great kid, so I'm pretty sure he will too. Don't worry about it. He's going to like you as much as you like him."

Blaine wanted to believe Cooper but he wasn't so sure. He liked Kurt an awful lot.

Kurt nervously paced the lobby of the theater, wringing his hands and chattering away without a breath. He knew he should be excited about seeing *The Lion King*, but he couldn't even think about that because any minute now Blaine was going to walk through those doors. "What if he doesn't like me? What if we're fine on paper or even on the phone but in person we have nothing to say to each other? What if I'm boring or he doesn't like my taste in clothes or we don't like the same games or he doesn't even remember what I look like and he can't find me?" He stared up at his Dad who was smiling amusedly down at him. "What if-"

"Kurt!" Blaine's shout could be heard over the roar of the crowd and Kurt could barely turn around before he was being swept into Blaine's arms, lifted up and swung around in a circle.

"Oh my god Blaine put me down!" Kurt laughed, trying to wiggle out of his arms. Blaine did as he was told and Kurt stared at him, soaking him in like sunrays on a gorgeous summer's day. Their eyes were glowing, their faces lit up like Christmas morning and Kurt had to remind himself to speak. "I can't believe you're really here."

"I can't believe I am either," Blaine said in quiet amazement. Kurt was even more beautiful than he'd remembered him, and his heart raced with something he could only identify as excitement.

"Mr. Hummel." Cooper held out a hand for the older gentleman and shook his firmly. "Cooper Anderson, it's nice to finally meet you."

"You too, son," Burt said. He looked down at Kurt and Blaine. "We should probably get these boys to their seats before they explode."

"Can we get souvenirs first Dad?" Kurt bounced and begged up to his father.

"Please Coop?" Blaine pleaded right alongside him.

"Of course," Burt and Cooper both said, ruffling their hair and grabbing their hands so they didn't get separated.

"So where are you guys staying?" Kurt asked as they made their way to the souvenir stand. Cooper and Burt chatted behind them.

"Cooper's friend Shana picked us up at the airport and we're staying with her. She has an extra car she's letting us borrow for the week too." Blaine leaned in and whispered, "If you ask me, she and Cooper are not just friends but he denies it."

"What was that little brother?" Cooper chimed in with a bit of a glare and Kurt and Blaine both laughed.

They chattered about what they were going to get. They both bought souvenir programs, t-shirts and scarves for winter. When it snowed out Blaine would wear it and smile in the secret knowledge that Kurt was wearing his too.

"Hey, do you want to go backstage after the show?" Blaine asked as they took their seats. "Coop and I have worked with some of the cast so I'm pretty sure we could." Kurt's eyes opened wide then he nodded, unable to speak for a minute. How was this real? How was Blaine real? To Kurt the actors in the show were just magical strangers he hoped to be one day. He had somehow completely forgotten that Cooper and Blaine belonged in that world.

Blaine looked at him questioningly and Kurt ducked his head with embarrassment. "I sometimes forget that you're this big Broadway star and not just the boy in my letters."

Blaine let the words settle in his heart and they filled him with warmth. He didn't know anymore what he had been so worried about. "I think I like that," he admitted softly.

"So did you ever want to play Young Simba?" Kurt asked.

Blaine shook his head. "My agent actually did send my resume over at one point, but they're pretty determined to keep the role ethnic, which is totally cool. I know the kid in this production and he's amazing."

Kurt smiled and they settled into a comfortable silence after that, reading the bios in the Playbill. Kurt took special attention to see who was recently in *Les Mis* or *Phantom* and Cooper pointed out the few chorus members he knew. Once the show began the boys settled back in their seats and lost themselves in the world onstage.

Kurt talked a mile a minute at intermission as they made their way to the restrooms. Everything about the production excited him; the puppets, the singing, the costumes. Blaine smiled and nodded in agreement but was quiet. Cooper knew exactly what was wrong. He felt it too. He always did when he wasn't working.

The pull to the stage was magnetic for them, almost desperate. Their nerves buzzed with restlessness and desire. While Kurt was talking to his Dad, Cooper discreetly pulled Blaine aside and bent down to whisper in his ear. "You okay?"

He nodded, but it was insincere. "I didn't know it would hurt this much," Blaine told him. The tightness in his chest was impossible to ignore. "Just watching. Knowing I can't go back."

Cooper knelt down and took Blaine by the arms. "You *will* go back Blaine. It's a break, it's not forever."

Blaine blinked away the wetness that was trying to form in his eyes. "What if it is though? What if he doesn't let me back?"

"Mom and I would not let that happen Blaine, I promise."

Blaine couldn't answer because Kurt suddenly grabbed his hand and pulled him back into the theater. "Come on, let's go down to the orchestra!" he shouted happily. Blaine could do nothing but laugh and follow. Kurt's excitement at being here made any pain he felt worth it. They leaned over the side of the orchestra pit, listening to the conversations of the musicians and talking to the brass players. By the time the show started again Blaine had forgotten the hole in his heart that was now filled with the sound of Kurt's laughter.

After the show they hung out by the stage door and a number of the cast quickly recognized Cooper and Blaine. They went back stage and both boys were awestruck, Kurt by the costumes and Blaine by the puppets. Cooper caught up with his friends and Blaine and Kurt talked to the kids playing young Simba and young Nala. All in all it was a perfect evening.

Heading back into the parking lot, they planned for the next day.

"If it would be easier for you Coop, we can pick up Blaine after lunch and bring him to Kurt's ballet class rather than you worrying about managing your audition and driving him," Burt suggested.

Blaine looked back at Cooper with eyes hopeful, nearly begging, but Cooper couldn't let him get in a car with a virtual stranger no matter how much he trusted Kurt's Dad. "That's alright Mr. Hummel. I can drop him off before I go."

"I can't believe I get to go to a real ballet class, Kurt. You have no idea how happy that makes me," Blaine beamed with delight.

"Yeah, I think I do," Kurt said, his eyes sparkling at being able to make Blaine so happy. "And after ballet I bet we could visit the jazz class if you wanted, maybe even a modern dance class?"

Blaine wasn't sure if he had ever been so excited in his whole life. He threw his arms around Kurt and hugged him tight. "You are the best friend Kurt, what on earth would I do without you?" Blaine cheered. Kurt giggled with happiness.

"Alright boys, you will see each other tomorrow," Burt said, placing a gentle hand on Kurt's shoulder to pull them apart. "Be at the studio by one Blaine."

"I'll make sure to bring some extra clothes and dance shoes for you to change into," Kurt told him.

"Thanks," Blaine said and waved behind him as Cooper took his hand and pulled him to the car. "See you tomorrow," he called.

Kurt waved and turned with his Dad, getting into the backseat and putting his seatbelt on. He stared out the window on the ride home, tired and too overwhelmed with everything that had happened that day to talk. He wished his mother had been there to meet Blaine, he might have stayed up all night talking to her about how handsome he was and nice and how much he wished Blaine was around all the time so they could always be best friends.

"He's a real nice kid," Burt said, and Kurt saw him glancing at him in the rearview mirror. "His brother's nice too. I'm glad they could come out to visit."

"Me too," Kurt responded softly. All the things he wanted to say to his Mom, and none of it came out to his Dad. "Can he come over to play while he's here? I want to show him my room."

"Of course, I think that would be nice. You should invite him to your voice recital on Saturday. Then maybe he and Cooper can come over Sunday," Burt suggested.

Kurt's eyes opened wide. "Do you think he could sleep over?" Kurt asked.

"I don't know, we'll have to ask," Burt told him. Kurt's body tingled in the back seat with the excitement of possibilities. Maybe he couldn't have Blaine for forever. But he was going to make the most of the week that they had.

"Cooper?"

"Yeah Blaine?"

"It's too quiet here," Blaine whispered in the dark, snuggled into one of the two beds in Shana's guest room. "I can't sleep."

"If you listen carefully, the cicadas and crickets almost sound like horns honking and sirens wailing," Cooper joked.

"I think maybe you had too much to drink tonight," Blaine muttered under his breath and Cooper chuckled. He'd had one can of beer with Shana after they'd gotten home from the show and that was it. "Cooper?"

Cooper chuckled again and raised his brow. "Yeah Blaine?"

"It's really dark too," he said, looking out the window above his bed. All he saw was the twinkle of the stars, no buildings, no lights.

"That's because it is dark Blaine, this is what night really looks like outside of the city. No light but the stars and moon streaming in through the window. It's beautiful, isn't it?"

Not as beautiful as Kurt, he thought, but he kept that to himself. "I guess," Blaine said doubtfully, trying to picture what was outside but unable to. He missed the city lights' reminder that though he was sleeping, others were still awake making their dreams come true. "Cooper?"

Cooper let out an audible sigh. "Yeah Blaine?"

"Thanks for letting me go to the dance classes tomorrow. I know if Dad finds out-"

"He won't," Cooper assured him. "It's part of our ever growing list of things that make this the Anderson Brothers Super Secret Adventure of 2002."

Blaine giggled at that. He loved having a secret with his brother. "What did you think of him? Kurt I mean?"

"I know who you meant," Cooper smiled fondly. "I think he's really sweet and I'm glad you get to spend this time together. Now go to sleep or you'll be too exhausted to dance at all tomorrow."

Blaine closed his eyes and turned over on his pillow. He could hear his brother rustling in his sheets and he opened his eyes again. "Cooper?"

Cooper sat up and glared at him. "What now Blaine?" he scowled, quickly reaching his limit.

Blaine sat up too and curled his legs under him. "You don't have to stay in here until I fall asleep. You can go to her, I won't tell Mom that you let me out of your sight," he promised. "We'll just add it to the list. It's only fair you have a few secrets on there too."

Cooper studied his brother for a minute, then laughed and got out of bed. But instead of leaving he sat down next to Blaine and gave him a big hug and a kiss on his head. "You know, you're the best brother in the whole world," Cooper told him and meant every word.

Blaine smiled, gazed up, and shook his head. "Can't be," he told Cooper. "Because you already have that honor."

CHAPTER ELEVEN:

Raise the Flag of Freedom High

"So where's this Broadway baby of yours Kurtsie?" Santana smirked, sitting across the green room in her white tights and black leotard. Three years ago when she'd started dancing at the Academy she'd won the hearts of the teachers with her beyond-her-age talent despite her stubborn refusal to wear the uniform pink. She hadn't changed one bit since then. The only reason the teachers continued to put up with her attitude as she grew older was the fact that they knew someday she'd out dance even them and no one wanted to be the one to lose her to another school.

"Don't call me Kurtsie." Kurt kneeled nervously on a chair, his elbows resting on the sill of the window that peered out at the front door. "And he's on his way, I know he is. Cooper just probably got lost."

"Or maybe he's not coming," Santana teased.

Kurt shot off the chair, face red with anger. "He *is* coming," he yelled, stomping his foot. "You just need to shut your mouth Santana Lopez."

She smiled mischievously, but kept quiet. Getting a rise out of Kurt was always fun, but she didn't really want him mad at her, especially not now when The Boy Who Could Do No Wrong, was in town. It wasn't that Santana was jealous. She just didn't like anyone being more important to people than her.

A blue jeep pulled up to the front of the building and Blaine and Cooper got out of the car. "He's here!" Kurt yelled. He grabbed his dance bag and raced down the stairs to open the door. Blaine's massive smile greeted him. "Hi!" Kurt bounced excitedly. He immediately grabbed Blaine's hand and pulled him in, not giving Blaine a chance to say a word. "Here, I have clothes for you to match mine. Black shorts and a white top. It's what we have to wear. Boring I know," he added rolling his eyes as he spoke a mile a minute, "but it's the rules. The only one who gets away with breaking the rules is Santana and that's just because she's Santana."

Cooper laughed behind the boys and gave Blaine a squeeze on the shoulder. "Well, looks like Kurt's got you all set here, so I'll pick you up at 4, got it? Do not leave the building under any circumstances."

"Okay Coop," Blaine said, waving as Kurt pulled him up the stairs. "Break a leg!"

"Ok, the dressing rooms are over here," Kurt directed but Blaine didn't really need it since Kurt's grip on his hand was more than enough to get them where they needed to go. Blaine was speechless with amusement, watching Kurt's excitement. He was also more than a little nervous about dancing in a class for the first time, but he didn't want to admit that. Kurt knelt down and pulled the clothes and the boys ballet shoes out of his bag. "I hope everything fits. We're pretty much the same size I think."

"I'm sure it will be great, thanks Kurt." Blaine quickly changed but when he started to pull the shoes on he froze. *No boy of mine is gonna dance around in ballet shoes and a tutu.* The words echoed in Blaine's ear and the gravity of what he was doing hit him like a ton of bricks.

Kurt frowned, worried. "What's the matter? Don't they fit?"

Kurt's voice broke the spell and he blinked up at him. "I never thought I would be able to do this," he whispered, trying to hold back tears of joy as he slipped both shoes on and tied them.

Kurt knelt in front of him and took his hands. "And I never thought I would ever get to go backstage at a Broadway show. But you made that happen for me." Kurt's smile grew. "And today you can do whatever you want Blaine. My dad made sure we could go to any class for our age that you want."

Blaine looked at Kurt, eyes full of wonder. "I want to do everything," he said.

"You're not gonna get to do anything if you don't get finished dressing," Santana arched a haughty brow in the doorway, her arms crossed on her chest. Blaine and Kurt both jumped at her voice then stood up quickly. Santana approached slowly. Blaine stood strong against the scrutiny. "So, you must be Blaine Anderson." She looked him over, up and down and back again. "You look taller in your pictures."

"And you must be Santana Lopez," Blaine said with a charming smile and a glint in his eye. "You look nicer in yours."

"Well looks can definitely be deceiving because I'm nice to only a select few, Anderson, and you have not earned that honor yet. So let me tell you something." She took another step toward him and Blaine shrunk slightly at her glare before pulling himself back up again. "Just because you're from New York doesn't mean that you're better than me or Kurt or any of the other kids here. You haven't even taken a dance class before. This is *our* turf, so you better respect that."

"And you better respect that just because I've never taken a dance class before doesn't mean I can't dance," Blaine challenged, but there was no malice, just confidence in his voice. "I'd ask you to make a deal, but I think I'll just let my performance speak for itself."

Santana's scowl turned slowly to a smile as Blaine stared her down. She could already see what Kurt saw in him, but she wasn't going to let Blaine win that easily. "Alright, so you can hold your own in the dressing room. Let's see how you do in the studio Broadway Boy." She spun on her heel and walked away.

"I'm so sorry," Kurt whispered to Blaine, leading him out of the room and into the hallway toward the dance studio.

Blaine shook his head, a fond smile. "Don't be. She reminds me of Rachel. I just hope I can live up to my threats," he chuckled nervously.

"You will. I'm sure Rachel taught you well." Kurt said stepping into the studio and immediately stretching at the barre. "You scared to go back to school without her? While she's in London?"

Blaine looked around, a little more rattled than he cared to admit because everything Santana had said was true. He'd never formally danced before and he knew he was encroaching in space that was sacred to the other kids. He leaned against the barre next to Kurt. "Terrified. Without Rachel there I'll have no one."

"Or you could have everyone," Kurt shrugged with soft eyes. "You said yourself you might be better off without her there. And now that you're not on Broadway, maybe the idiots who are jealous won't give you such a hard time."

"Talk is over, time to dance," called an imposing woman, tall and lean with dark hair and a large stick which she pounded on the ground mercilessly. Blaine's stomach immediately fluttered with both excitement and a healthy dose of fear. The others scrambled into place in the middle of the floor but he hesitated, unsure, which she of course immediately took advantage of. "You must be Blaine," she said staring down at him.

"Yes...yes Ma'am..." he stuttered and the girls behind him chuckled. Kurt winced. In all the excitement he'd forgotten to warn Blaine that Mrs. Powell was all bark and no bite.

"Well Kurt has told us all a lot about you so it's a pleasure to finally get to meet you," she said. "Santana, make a space for him next to you please. Let's see how New York City rates with Ohio."

Santana smirked as he cautiously took his spot. He knew he could dance, he'd had no issues in shows before *Les Mis*, but ballet was entirely different story. There wasn't really a lot of grace in climbing a barricade or marching behind 76 trombones.

"First position *pliés* please."

No matter how much talent Blaine might have had, and he was pretty sure he had a fair amount, nothing was as important to him in that moment as understanding what Mrs. Powell was asking of them. So as bossy and annoying as Rachel had been, Blaine owed her a very big hug and thank you for being so thorough with teaching him. Proving to Santana that he could hold his own was also proving it to himself. Kurt was his friend and would praise him even if he fell flat on his face. But he knew that if he could earn Santana's respect then maybe he really did have a chance at being a triple threat despite his father.

"Alright, since Mr. Hummel cannot seem to keep his eyes front and off of Mr. Anderson, we will break into two groups to perform."

Kurt blushed red, nearly certain that he was far darker than the adorable pink on Blaine's cheeks. Mrs. Powell separated them and he took a seat at the mirrors while Blaine and his group began to perform the routine they had just learned. He knew he should watch them all, that's how they learned their teacher told them, but he could not take his eyes off Blaine. The look on Blaine's face, the pure joy that radiated from every pore on his body at finally being allowed to dance and learn, was infectious. Kurt watched as Blaine soaked up every instruction, every correction, as if he would never have the opportunity again. In 20 minutes Kurt saw a transformation in Blaine as his stomach muscles pulled in, his neck stretched upward as if it were an extension of his spine, his shoulders relaxed downward and his chin lifted slightly. He watched as Blaine's weight shifted from his heels to the balls of his feet and he suddenly became lighter, in body and spirit, while his movements started to glide. He never wanted to stop watching. Blaine was absolutely beautiful.

But after only a short time it was Kurt's turn on the floor and Blaine's turn to stare at the grace of the boy who truly seemed like an angel to Blaine. Kurt's movements were fluid, but even more so they were filled with a love for what he was doing that most of the other kids didn't have. One other did though. Santana pulled his focus, just for a moment, and though her spirit was far from angelic he was blown away by the raw energy that rivaled some of the girls currently on Broadway. She was everything and more than Kurt had told him. Her beauty while she danced was breathtaking.

After class they collapsed on the floor of the green room. "So Broadway Boy, seems that you actually do have some talent," Santana acquiesced to Blaine.

But Blaine shook his head. "I've got nothing on you and Kurt. The two of you are amazing. You'd have the kids in New York quaking in their boots."

Santana quirked a brow and smiled as if she knew he was right.

Kurt though shook his head and looked away bashfully. "I know that's not true, but thank you."

Blaine protested. "It is true Kurt," he said, his eyes shining. "You were breathtaking and you're only going to get better and better with more practice. You leave me in the dust."

Santana rolled her eyes, but she had to admit that Blaine was adorable, charming and good for Kurt's confidence. "Alright you two, I am out of here." She grabbed her bag and slung it over her shoulder. "Blaine, it was nice to finally meet you, don't kill yourself in Jazz class. Kurt, don't do anything I wouldn't do." Santana winked and bounded out the door.

Blaine laughed and turned to Kurt who was deep in thought. "What's the matter?" Blaine asked worried.

"I'm trying to think of something Santana wouldn't do but I'm drawing a blank," Kurt said.

"Oh my gosh, Kurt," he yelled, shoving him playfully onto the floor. "I thought something was really wrong!"

"Maybe I do have a shot on Broadway then," he quipped, laughing when Blaine wrestled him down. "Truce, truce!" he called just when Blaine started to tickle him. Blaine put his hands up and backed away with a grin. Kurt grabbed one of his hands and pulled. "Come on, if you want to go to another class we better get going."

They changed their shoes quickly and made their way to jazz and then to modern after that. Kurt sat on the sidelines as much as he could, just so he could watch Blaine. To watch the way his face glowed with happiness and his eyes shined with passion for something he loved to do but had never been allowed. He wished Blaine's father could see him, could see the complete joy that he was taking away from his son, and for what? Kurt still didn't understand. He didn't understand how a father could break his own child's heart.

He was lost in thought when Blaine flung himself at Kurt, arms wrapping around him tightly. "Kurt, this may be one of the best days of my life, thank you so much for making this happen!"

"You're welcome, but it's not over yet. We get to come back tomorrow." Kurt beamed, but he couldn't help the sadness that had settled in his skin. He would make sure that this week was perfect. But seven days wouldn't make up for a lifetime.

"It's really wonderful to see Kurt so happy." Burt and Cooper were sitting side by side in beach chairs, the sun above them warm and full with a slight breeze on the wind making it just the perfect summer day. Burt looked out at his son, laughing and playing with Blaine in the lake, not caring one bit when Blaine dumped wet sand on top of his head. If Burt had done that he'd be given the silent treatment the rest of the day, but Blaine apparently could do no wrong. A sweet melancholy washed over him. "It's been a really long time, since he's been that carefree."

"I'm not sure I've ever seen Blaine this happy," Cooper admitted.

Burt looked over at the handsome young man sitting in the chair next to him, dressed for the beach, his tan skin attracting the attention of many a young lady. Attention Cooper seemed to both enjoy and pretend to ignore. Burt imagined he was used to it. His youth was something Burt envied, but it also worried him. In fact, there was a lot about Blaine and Cooper that worried Burt.

Cooper glanced at the older man out of the corner of his eye and smirked. "You just gonna sit there staring at me like a disapproving father or you gonna tell me what's on your mind," he asked. Burt suddenly realized he'd been doing exactly that.

"I'm sorry," Burt said, looking away, back at the kids. Blaine and Kurt were freestyle racing to the buoy. Blaine was about two strokes ahead. "Don't get me wrong, I'm really glad that Blaine is here. I just...I have to be honest Cooper. I don't like one bit that you're lying to your parents about it."

Cooper looked at Burt. There was no judgment, only concern. That was the difference. "With all due respect, Mr. Hummel, you don't know my dad." Cooper's gaze turned back to Blaine. Kurt was dunking him, laughing. Blaine was sputtering and if he was his father he'd be ordering him back to shore instantly. But one look at the smile on his little brother's face and Coop didn't make a move. "If my father could wrap

Blaine up in a bubble so he would never be hurt, he would do it in a heartbeat. Everything Blaine wants to do and isn't allowed to is all an attempt to keep him safe. Safe from kids bullying, safe from adults taking advantage of him. He's overprotective to a fault. I honestly thought Blaine coming with me on this trip was a shot in the dark. Letting him come at all was a huge step for my Dad."

"What about your Mom?" Burt asked curiously. "Why couldn't you just tell her?"

Cooper sighed and glanced sideways at Burt. "If Dad's the executioner, Mom's the judge and jury. There is no telling one without the other. They talk about everything together. They're a united front, I honestly don't think they make a single decision when it comes to us without talking about it first."

Burt nodded. He understood. "That's how Elizabeth and I were, at least to a point. Though I'm certain that she and Kurt had their secrets, anything important we did together." Burt paused, longing pulling at him. "After having that, when you're on your own, you second guess everything you do."

"Well, I'd say you're doing everything right," Cooper said. "Kurt's a great kid. And I wish, for Blaine's sake, that our Dad was more like you."

"Was he the same way with you?" Burt asked curiously. He didn't want to pry, but Cooper didn't seem to mind talking. "Overprotective like that?"

"No, with Blaine he's different," Cooper smiled sadly out at his brother then down to his hands. "With Blaine he's been different for a long time now."

"Cooper and your Dad seem to be pretty deep in conversation," Blaine said once he'd stopped gasping for air. He and Kurt were resting on the buoy before swimming back to shore. "Do you think we should be worried?"

"Unless they're talking about the best ways to completely embarrass us in public, I'd say we're probably pretty safe," Kurt grinned.

"They could definitely be talking about that Kurt," Blaine mused in a faux panic. "What if they have plans to make us dance for our supper? Or dress us up in little sailor suits and parade us around town? Or worse, what if they smother us with kisses at your recital in front of Santana Lopez?"

Kurt laughed and splashed Blaine with water. "You are such a goof," he teased, giggling.

"Yeah well, I'm a goof who is going to beat you back to shore," Blaine challenged. "On your mark, get set, go!"

Kurt couldn't resist the urge to call "Colin Craven, not so fast!" before diving after him and sputtering in the water from laughing so hard.

Kurt sat up front with his class, eager to sing but also terrified to do so in front of Blaine. Blaine, who was sitting on a metal folding chair in the back of the room with his brother. Blaine who got up in front of thousands three times a week for a year and sang his heart out without a single nerve in his body. Blaine who would have beat him back to shore two days ago by an inch but slowed down so they could reach it together.

At the last memory Kurt realized he really shouldn't be afraid. He knew he was nowhere near as good as Blaine, but he also knew he *was* good and Blaine would do nothing but support him.

Blaine sat quietly in the back, not wanting to call attention to himself because this was Kurt's day to perform and Blaine could not wait. The moment backstage at *Les Mis* had been such a tease of the beautiful voice that Kurt hid deep inside of him. Blaine had heard it over and over again in his dreams but it had never been enough and now, finally, he would get to hear it again in person.

"Good afternoon everyone and welcome to our Voice Recital for our 8-11 year olds," greeted the head of the voice program. "We are really lucky this year to have an amazing bunch of performers for you, so we are going to begin right away. Please welcome our sassiest student, Ms. Santana Lopez."

Santana sang "I Sing the Body Electric" from *Fame* and Blaine was once again knocked back by the girl's stage presence. She belted her heart out and when she was done Blaine clapped loudly for her, flashing a proud smile that she returned with a wink before sitting down. A little later, Kurt's friend Mercedes completely blew him away with an amazing rendition of Cinderella's "In My Own Little Corner." There was little that could live up to that other than Kurt and he sat impatiently through the other performers until Kurt's name was finally called.

"Please welcome our extraordinary Kurt Hummel, who came to us not too long ago with the voice of an angel."

Kurt stood nervously in the front of the room, wringing his hands. He'd sung in shows before but never solos and never with someone other than his parents that he cared about in the audience. A voice in his head told him to sit back down but he didn't have time because the music started and without even thinking he began singing and all of his fear disappeared.

*Where is love?
Does it fall from skies above?
Is it underneath the willow tree
That I've been dreaming of?*

Kurt's voice, soft and breathy but supported, rose into the room and permeated Blaine's senses. But that wasn't what made him dizzy with emotion. No, what truly moved him was Kurt's honesty in the lyrics, the depth of sorrow in his tone, the memories of his mother but also the hope that was so vivid in his eyes that someday, somewhere, a love that special would find him again.

*Where is she?
Who I close my eyes to see?
Will I ever know the sweet "hello"
That's meant for only me?*

Cooper took Blaine's hand and it was only then that he realized he was trembling though he had no idea why. All he understood was that he wished that time would freeze and he could stay in this place and in this moment forever, with Kurt's voice forever playing in his head for real instead of hearing it only in memory from hundreds of miles away.

*Who can say where she may hide?
Must I travel far and wide?
'Til I am beside the someone who
I can mean something to ...*

*Where...?
Where is love?*

Blaine was on his feet in a flash, followed closely by Burt and Cooper, cheering for Kurt without abandon. Kurt blushed and grimaced, urging them with his eyes to sit down. Cooper and Burt took their seats, but Blaine ignored him, his grin too big to keep hidden. That was until the director rose from the piano to come center and her gaze landed on him. He immediately retreated to his seat.

"This week we had the wonderful chance to have a friend of one of our student's join us in some classes, and though he did not want to join our voice class, we would still love him to sing. Blaine?"

Blaine shook his head, but Cooper nudged him with a smile and Kurt turned around, gesturing for him to come up. He hadn't wanted to pull any focus from Kurt so when he got to the front he bent over and whispered in his ear. "Are you sure? I don't have to."

"I missed the chance to see you perform again on closing night, don't let me miss another chance today," Kurt told him sternly. Blaine obeyed and stood in front of the room.

The director placed her hand gently on Blaine's back and introduced him. "Blaine Anderson comes to us from New York where he just finished playing Gavroche on Broadway for the past year. We would be honored Blaine, if you would please sing for us."

"Well my friend has told me I have to, so I don't have a choice," he laughed as he walked over to the piano and sat down to address the audience. Kurt sat in absolute awe watching how comfortable and engaging he was in front of a crowd. His pride surged through him before Blaine even started to sing.

"So all the boys in theater know that the girls get the better songs. My voice teacher says it doesn't matter whether a song is meant for a boy or a girl, it just matters if it says what you want to say." Blaine looked to Kurt with something that looked like sadness in his eyes, and smiled softly. "This says what I want to say." He started playing an intro, fingering the keys and messing up slightly. "I just started piano lessons not too long ago, but I promise I sing better than I play." Kurt and the rest of the audience laughed but it died down quickly when Blaine started. He sang slowly. Slower than the song was written, with every word heavy with the weight of their meaning in Blaine's life. His voice was full of emotion and longing.

*I need a place
where I can go
where I can whisper what I know
where I can whisper who I like*

and where I go to see them.

Kurt could see the glistening tears in Blaine's eyes as they met from across the room. Kurt wanted to reach out, to take the pain away. To make sure that Blaine never cried again. He wanted more than anything to give Blaine that place where he could be with people who accepted him, who loved him, for everything that he was.

*I need a place where I can hide
Where no one sees my life inside
Where I can make my plans and write them down
So I can read them*

Then Blaine's sad eyes but small smile reached him and Kurt realized, he was that place. The letters and the words that they wrote one another were his hiding place, the place where Blaine could be completely honest about who he was, what he wanted, his hopes and dreams. Kurt was that place for Blaine and Blaine was that place for him as well. No matter what they wrote, or even what they said, there was no fear, no regret.

*A place where I can bid my heart be still
And it will mind me.
A place where I can go when I am lost
And there I'll find me.*

Kurt didn't know how but he knew that together they would learn who they truly were. There would be no secrets. They would be able to tell each other everything without judgment. They would become the boys, and the men, that they were meant to be.

*I need a place to spend the day
Where no one says to go or stay
Where I can take my pen and draw
The boy I mean to be.*

CHAPTER TWELVE:

Tomorrow You'll Be Worlds Away

August 18, 2002

"Oh come on, you can't keep him all to yourself Kurt," Santana complained on the other end of the phone. "Besides, he's super cute," she giggled.

Kurt was not ready for the pang in his chest that her words caused or the heat that rose to his cheeks. Blaine was his friend, not hers. He had waited months for this day and the dreams he'd had about how it would go if he somehow magically was given the chance to spend time with Blaine in person most certainly did not include Santana being a stupid girl around him.

"Boys only night Santana," Kurt told her. "You're not invited."

"Well fine," she huffed. "If that's the way you want it, me and Brittany will be more than happy to watch Barbie Rapunzel without you."

Kurt gasped, his anger seething. "You wouldn't! We've been waiting weeks to watch that together!"

"Well apparently you're too much of a *boy* to watch it, so enjoy your *boys'* night with Blaine!" she yelled and hung up the phone.

Kurt sighed and threw himself back on the bed. He wouldn't hear the end of this for weeks.

But to spend the entire day alone with Blaine, it was totally worth it.

"Go get some paper in my desk for a scorecard," Kurt asked, setting up the Scrabble board in his room. Going through Kurt's stack of games, they'd discovered that they had both started playing it as soon as they'd learned to read and it was one of their favorites. Kurt and his dad spent many nights playing with their noses in the dictionary learning new words. Blaine had a travel set that he had always brought with him backstage, plus it was one of the only games his parents were happy to play with him. Blaine went to the desk and rifled around a bit, looking for a notepad or something with no luck before opening the

center drawer. Instead of blank paper though, he found a stack of his letters, the one from May sitting on top. The one where he'd laid himself as bare as he could. The one he almost hadn't sent because of the things he'd said about Kurt.

The ink was smudged in small droplets.

"There are tear stains on this letter," he muttered, more to himself, but Kurt heard and immediately snapped his head up.

"No, there's not," Kurt protested. "I...I spilled some water on it that's all."

Blaine turned. Kurt looked to be in a small panic and Blaine frowned. "Please don't lie to me Kurt," he said. "The things I wrote hurt you." He'd been worried about that letter for months though Kurt had never said anything about it. He walked over and kneeled down in front of Kurt. "I made you sad enough to cry."

Kurt bowed his head and bit his lip. "I was sad Blaine. But not for me. For you. I just...I hate that you have to be afraid all the time just because you like things your father doesn't think you should like. And I know how it is because there are kids at school who say the same things about me but when I come home I know it's safe. I'm safe." Kurt looked up, his eyes meeting Blaine's and they both glistened with tears. "I can't imagine what it's like to not have that and it makes me so sad that you have to live that way. Afraid all the time."

Blaine blinked away. "It's not all the time," he said.

"But he hurts you," Kurt whispered. The words hung in the air and Kurt was not at all sure if he should be talking about this but the truth was he'd wanted to bring it up all week except they'd hardly ever been alone. And now that they were he wouldn't forgive himself if he let Blaine slip away without even trying to learn the truth and help if he could. "I can read it in your letters and hear it in your voice. He makes you keep secrets, pretend to be someone you're not. Sometimes..." Kurt looked to the floor, too afraid he was overstepping to look Blaine in the eye but he had to say it. He couldn't finally have Blaine here in front of him and not say what he'd been worried about since the very first letters. "Sometimes I'm scared for you."

"Oh Kurt." Blaine's voice was warm and he offered Kurt a small smile to coax his gaze back up. When it finally worked, Blaine tried to explain. "I promise you he doesn't hurt me like I think you mean." Cooper's words came back to him and as hard as it had been to believe his brother at the time, trying to ease Kurt's

fear made him realize how true the words were. "My dad, Kurt, he's strict but he loves me. As much as your dad loves you. He just doesn't know how to show it like your Dad does."

Kurt paused, not sure at all what to make of what Blaine said. But Blaine sounded sincere and most of all he didn't sound scared. And then he wondered. "You don't talk about your Mom much."

Blaine glanced down to his hand, still holding the tear-stained letter. "I don't want to say anything to hurt you. By talking about my Mom I mean."

But Kurt shook his head. "You won't Blaine. I miss her but it doesn't hurt me when other kids talk about their moms, not really."

Blaine nodded and took a breath. "My mom..." Blaine chewed on his cheek for a minute, trying to figure out how to explain a woman he often didn't understand himself. "Well, she's really hard to explain I guess. Usually she and my dad are totally on the same page but every once in a while her eyes sparkle and...I don't know. It's like...I know she has secrets, but I don't know what they are."

"Do you think Cooper knows?"

Blaine considered that. "Sometimes, maybe. And sometimes I think I know her better than he does."

Kurt took Blaine's free hand and squeezed it tight. "You're really lucky to have him. Cooper, I mean. I always imagined having a big brother but," he shrugged and smiled sadly. "Oh well."

"It's not always all it's cracked up to be," Blaine laughed. "There was this one time that he took me to Central Park but he got distracted by a girl he thought was cute. Somehow we got separated and I was so scared. It was probably only minutes, but it felt like hours until I found a policeman who found Cooper almost right away. As soon as the policeman was gone, Coop started yelling at me for wandering off and told me that if I told Dad what happened he'd blame it all on me."

"So what happened?" Kurt asked.

Blaine shrugged. "We kept it secret. He still doesn't know. If he did I'm sure I wouldn't be here now and I probably would never have been able to call you because my Dad wouldn't trust Cooper with me at all."

Kurt bit his lip and looked away. "That's what would happen now," he said hesitantly. "If he found out about you and me? Or why you two were really here? If he knew you were lying to him. Am I right?"

Blaine knew it was true, Cooper had warned him of that before they left and he had still made the choice to come. But hearing the words out loud, knowing what he was risking, not only losing Cooper but losing Kurt too hit him hard. Too hard for him to deal with. "Come on. Let's play Scrabble."

Their eyes met and Kurt saw the pain in them, the fear of losing this. Losing the one place that was safer than anywhere else. Kurt knew in the bright light of day, with the grownups still awake, it still wasn't time to really face this. But they had to. Before Blaine left the next day, they had to finish talking about this.

"So Kurt's dad lets them use the dictionary during the whole game, not just to challenge!" Blaine was telling Cooper at the dinner table. "Dad would have a fit!"

"Dad does not like to stray from the rules in any way," Cooper smirked. He couldn't help but smile watching his brother. The light in his sparkling golden eyes was intoxicating, but Cooper also feared it was fleeting and would disappear on the plane ride home.

"So school starts soon," Burt mused with a raised brow. "You boys excited?"

Kurt shrugged. Fourth grade didn't hold much promise to be any better than third grade in his opinion other than being one year closer to finally graduating and getting the heck out of Ohio. Blaine, on the other hand, had a lot to look forward to. "5th grade is the last year before we move on to the upper school. And it's the first year we get electives," Blaine explained, eyes wide with enthusiasm. Kurt knew he was also very nervous, so he was pleased to see this side too. "The chorus in the upper school is a huge deal and 5th grade chorus is kind of the beginning of all that. If you can get the leads in 5th grade then you're set for life." Cooper chuckled. He knew it wasn't quite that easy.

"Well I'm sure that won't be a problem," Kurt told him obviously. "You have the best voice in all of New York City."

Blaine blushed and ducked his head. "Well that's not true, but thank you Kurt."

Cooper ruffled his brother's curls. "It's pretty true," he smirked which made Blaine just blush brighter.

"There's also the Sadie Hawkins dance at the end of the year before graduation," Blaine said, changing the subject. "They have dances all the time in upper school but the night before 5th, 8th and 12th grade graduations they have Sadie Hawkins dances and they're a huge deal. Even in first grade you get to help out with decorating for them and every kid looks forward to it. Right Coop?"

"Right Squirt." Cooper smiled down at him and though Blaine missed the shadows that swam behind his usually bright blue eyes, Burt did not. But that was another worry for another day. "So what are you two boys going to do tonight?"

Kurt and Blaine's eyes met and they both swallowed the giggles in their throats. "Nothing!" they chimed in unison.

The boys could hear the rumbling of the television from Kurt's bedroom as well as the rumble of deep voices clearly ignoring whatever game was on the screen. They were sure they were the subject of conversation, but neither wanted to put much thought into it. They were too busy getting ready for their sleepover.

Both had rolled out their sleeping bags, Kurt insisting on sleeping in one on his bed while Blaine had one on a small air mattress on the floor. They sat between a bowl of popcorn and a box of questions for kids.

"Instead of fighting wars, what do you think would be a good, perhaps creative, way for countries to settle their differences with each other?" Kurt asked, reading from the card.

"A sing off," Blaine answered without hesitation. "Definitely. They should have to find or compose a song that explains their side of the story and then an audience gets to vote on who wins."

"That's awesome," Kurt agreed wholeheartedly. "Or a dance off. They could choreograph a number too."

"Maybe they should just write a whole musical," Blaine giggled while he took the next card. "Ok. What is the most exciting thing you've learned in the last 12 months?"

"What it's like to be backstage of a Broadway show," Kurt beamed. "That was easy. How about you?"

"Everything I learned this week in dance classes," Blaine said. "I'll remember those things forever."

Kurt smiled, a soft and sad turn of his lips that made Blaine's eyes dip to the floor with a blush. They had learned much more than that in the last 12 months of their friendship, but those lessons were so much harder to put into words. So instead of trying, Kurt pulled out another card and read it. He looked up at Blaine, and back down to the card and bit his lip. But he remembered they'd said no exceptions so he took a breath and read aloud. "If you could make one change – and one change only – to the place where you now live, what would it be?"

Blaine's eyes stayed down, picking at his fingers but not really seeing. "I'd make my father accept me for who I am," Blaine whispered quietly. "He wouldn't have to change anything else. But if he would just be okay with the things I wanted to do, maybe everything would just be easier." He sighed and looked up at Kurt. "What about you? What would you change?"

Kurt looked to the door longingly. "I'd make my Mom come back."

Blaine nodded, not saying a word. There wasn't much he could say. It wasn't something that could ever come true. Then he had an idea. He grabbed hold of Kurt's hand and got up, pulling Kurt with him. "Come on, introduce me to her."

"What?" Kurt asked.

"Show me everything in this house about your Mom. I want to know her a little bit like you do," Blaine said.

Kurt shook his head and laughed but agreed. "Okay."

Kurt took Blaine on a tour of the memories of his mother in the house. He shared with him the pictures on the walls, and her jewelry, and opened the drawer where that scent of her perfume still lingered. He brought Blaine downstairs to the chair she always curled up in at night to read to him and then outside to the garden in the backyard, lit softly by a lamp in the darkness.

Leaning on the lamppost as Blaine marveled at the beauty, Kurt admitted, "I used to pretend that I was Dickon out here, weaving magic spells to make that garden grow. My mom used to come out here at night sometimes." He walked over to his swingset and sat down, pushing off to swing gently. "I'm guessing you don't really have gardens in New York."

"Well there are public parks, like Central Park. The gardens there are beautiful. Some of the buildings have small ones on the roof," Blaine said and Kurt giggled. "It may be a little funny to see, but I think it might be nice to have a little rooftop garden." Kurt didn't say anything and Blaine went to join him in the swing next to him. They swung in silence for a while, Blaine's eyes trained on the sky, Kurt's watching Blaine. "I still can't believe the stars you can see here," Blaine said, swinging softly, staring at the sky. "Do you ever wish on them?"

"I used to." Kurt's eyes fell, his smile turning to a frown. "My mom and I used to wish all the time. And I wished every night while she was in the hospital." Kurt looked up to the stars that had betrayed him. "Wishes don't come true though."

Blaine's heart hurt with Kurt's words. He was way too young not to believe anymore. "Maybe there are just things that even the stars can't change."

Kurt didn't think that was it, but he wouldn't take Blaine's hope away from him. "So what would you wish for? If wishes did come true."

"I would wish that my parents would let me go back to theater," he said quietly without hesitation. In fact he had wished that, every single night since he'd arrived in Ohio. "What would you wish for?"

Kurt smiled softly, grateful to the darkness for covering the color that immediately flushed his cheeks. Kurt's hesitation only made Blaine giggle and he leaned over and nudged his shoulder. "Come on, I told you, not that it was really a surprise. What would you wish for? What would you want more than anything else in the world?"

Kurt knew. He knew exactly what he would wish for, and if he were sending Blaine a letter he wouldn't hesitate to write the words. But here, now, with Blaine beside him, it was scary to admit how much Blaine meant to him. Because even though they'd had an amazing week together, he still didn't entirely trust that he mattered as much to Blaine as Blaine mattered to him. But right now Blaine was looking at him with golden eyes that Kurt just never wanted to stop looking at him and he knew that this was his chance to find out because it maybe would never come again. So he closed his eyes and took a breath with a bashful smile on his lips. "I would wish that we would be friends forever."

"Well that's a given Kurt, come on, wish for something that may never come true any other way," Blaine said.

Kurt looked at him in wonder because them being friends forever *was a given* and he wasn't sure how he'd suddenly become the luckiest kid in Ohio that this amazing boy was choosing him as a forever friend. Blaine smiled at him and tilted his head, and Kurt realized he was not so patiently waiting for his answer. "Oh...okay, well then, I'd wish..." Kurt thought hard and there was only one thing that would be better than them being friends forever. "I'd wish that we could go to school together and spend every day together."

Blaine's smile faltered, but his eyes never left Kurt's. "I wish that too," he whispered. His skin tingled with the idea of it and he suddenly had an urge to hug Kurt, to hold him tight and to never leave. Instead he pumped his legs, swinging higher and higher letting the breeze and the exhilaration of almost flying fill the void. "Come on Kurt, swing with me!" he yelled.

Kurt laughed and pumped, getting higher and higher until they were as high as they could possibly go, swinging in unison, up and down as if they had no cares in the world. If only time could stand still and they could stay like this forever then everything would be perfect.

"Come on boys, it's time for bed," Burt yelled from the door.

But time couldn't stand still and the weight on both their shoulders returned as they slowly came back to the ground. They walked inside and readied for bed, changing into their pajamas and brushing their teeth. Blaine called his parents from Cooper's phone while Kurt was in the bathroom, wishing them a good night and everyone wishing for safe flights tomorrow. He handed the phone briefly over to Cooper who assured them everything was just fine, they had nothing to worry about, and yes he promised they'd be home by dinner tomorrow unless their flight got delayed for some reason. Finally he hung up.

"I'll be right down in the living room on the pull out couch if you need me," Cooper whispered to Blaine so as not to embarrass him in front of Kurt. "Make sure you actually go to sleep at some point, tomorrow's going to be a long day of travel."

Blaine rolled his eyes even as his heart filled with love for his brother. "You're the best brother in the whole world," he said hugging him tightly. He didn't know how he'd ever repay Coop for letting him have this week but he knew that some day he would. "I love you."

"I love you too Squirt," Cooper smiled, kissing his curls softly. "Now go have fun," he winked, urging him to Kurt's bedroom with a light swat.

"How long do you think it'll be before they go to sleep?" Burt asked with a smirk. He went to the refrigerator and grabbed a beer for himself, stopping to look over his shoulder before grabbing a second. "You old enough to drink?"

"Yes sir, turned 21 last month," Cooper said with a proud grin.

Burt chuckled and grabbed a bottle, handing it over as they made their way to the living room. "No need to call me sir, Cooper, or Mr. Hummel, name's just Burt." He turned the TV on and rifled through the DVDs, looking for one the two of them might like. The collection was sparse on grown up films, mostly filled instead with musicals, Disney and anything having to do with fairy tales. He reached for one he'd bought thinking it would be a good bonding movie for him and Kurt, though he was pretty sure Kurt was just humoring him in the end. "Sandlot okay with you?" he said, putting it in.

"Whatever you like, Burt," Cooper said, getting himself comfortable on the couch, taking a swig of the beer. "I'm pretty sure they'll be up for a while so we need to occupy ourselves somehow."

"Tomorrow's gonna be tough, them saying goodbye and all." Burt knew without a doubt he'd be left with a boy in tears. In the beginning of the week he wasn't sure it would be worth it, but now he had no doubt. "I have a feeling we're going to have two heartbroken kids. You gonna be able to handle it?"

Cooper took another drink before settling the bottle on his coaster and nodding. "Unfortunately I have an awful lot of experience handling a heartbroken Blaine."

"Everyone was huddled around and they handed me the last card. So, holding my breath, I ever so carefully dropped it on top of the house of cards, and the whole thing went tumbling right to the ground!" Kurt winced and gasped, a huge smile on his face as Blaine told his story. "I yelled so loud right in the middle of *Castle on a Cloud*, Greg clapped a hand over my mouth, but everyone else was hysterically laughing too. It was a disaster."

"Oh my gosh, Blaine, that's awful," Kurt said but he was giggling so hard he could barely stop. "Did Rachel hear? She probably would have killed you."

"Thank goodness she didn't hear, or I probably wouldn't be here right now," Blaine agreed.

They had been laughing so loud they didn't even hear the phone ring downstairs, but a small knock on the door was followed by Burt sticking his head in with the portable. "Phone call for you, it's Brittany. Not sure what she's doing up so late."

"She's having a sleepover with Santana," he explained, reaching for the phone.

Burt held it back for a second. "Lights out as soon as you're done and don't stay on long."

"Okay fine, just give it to me," Kurt urged beckoning the phone over with his fingers. Burt gave him a reprimanding look but handed the phone over and left them alone. Kurt grinned conspiratorially at Blaine and put the phone to his ear. "Hello?"

"Kurt, it's Britt!" Brittany yelled in his ear and he quickly realized it was because Santana had the music up so loud she had to yell over it. He heard her yelling again, not to him and the music turned down. "Hey, sorry. Santana's being crazy. And you didn't miss much with Barbie Repunzel, it's not that good."

"You're totally lying right now, but thanks Britt," he said, smiling softly. "What are you guys doing now?"

"Well actually..." Britt trailed off and he could hear her whispering to Santana, muffling the phone. Kurt shrugged his shoulders at Blaine who shrugged back with an amused grin. "Um, so, Santana wants to know if you think Blaine would want to talk to her."

Now it was Kurt who smirked in amusement, but there was also this feeling that rose in the pit of his stomach that he stuffed away so quickly he wasn't even sure it had been real. "I dunno, let me found out," he said and he covered the receiver on his end. "Santana wants to know if you want to talk to her."

Blaine let out a giddy breath and shrugged. "Sure," he said with a smile and took the phone when Kurt handed it to him. "Hello?"

Kurt watched and listened as Blaine smiled, and blushed and giggled furiously, almost ridiculously if Kurt did say so himself, and he said things like "oh you too" and "that would be so nice" and "well if you ever come to New York you should call me, Kurt has my number" and Kurt tried very hard to resist crossing his arms and scowling, and instead look like Santana weaseling her way into his friendship with Blaine didn't matter at all.

Blaine hung up and laughed, leaning back on his bed. "I think she likes me," he smirked to the ceiling. Now Kurt did scowl and he swiped the phone, leaving it outside his door on the banister for his Dad with a bang before turning off the light, shutting the door and climbing in his bed without a word. It didn't go unnoticed by Blaine. "Wait, are you mad at me?"

"No," Kurt said quickly, slipping under his covers. "Why would I be mad at you?" He took a deep breath then, realizing that even though he felt mad, he didn't really have a reason to be mad at Blaine, or even Santana really. He sighed and rolled over onto his side, perching his head on his hand. "So do you think she *likes* you?"

Blaine followed suit and watched Kurt. "Like, likes me likes me? Or just likes me?"

"Well what did you mean?" Kurt said, his eyes narrowing.

"Well what do *you* think, she's your friend?" Blaine raised a brow. "Do *you* think she likes me likes me?"

"I dunno," Kurt said. He'd never really had this kind of conversation with another boy before and he didn't at all know what he was supposed to do. "Do you want her to like you like you?"

Blaine thought about it. Santana was pretty and smart and an amazing dancer and singer. But she also lived here in Lima, not in New York and it would be pretty impossible to pass notes in class and whisper in the hallways and maybe go to the movies together with their parents when they lived so far apart. "I don't think I could date someone who lives so far away. So I guess not," he shrugged. "But I'm glad she likes me cause she's your friend and I really wanted your friends to like me."

Kurt understood that. He wanted Rachel to like him too. "I'm glad she does too," he said with a smile. And he was only a little surprised to find that he meant it.

Blaine smiled as well and they both laid down on their beds, staring at the ceiling. Kurt had a nightlight which made the room much more similar to his room at home with the lights of the city shining in the window. His room. In New York. Hundreds of miles away from Kurt and back to writing letters and talking on the phone whenever he could steal some time at Cooper's. The thought made his chest ache.

"You know we should talk about that thing we're not talking about." Blaine's voice was soft and grim.

"You mean the fact that you leave tomorrow and we're never gonna see each other again?" Kurt asked, his heart breaking.

"Well, not never. But probably not for a while. Even if you guys did come to New York I could only manage a day or two at most with Cooper," he said. "And the chances of my father buying another reason for us to come back to Ohio are pretty much zero."

"I'm going to miss you so much." Kurt could already feel the tears welling up in his eyes and he didn't really have the heart to stop them.

"I'll still write to you Kurt," Blaine promised and he couldn't stop his own tears from falling. "Every day. And call whenever I can."

"I'm sorry," Kurt whispered and if the house wasn't so quiet, Blaine wouldn't have heard it.

But he did and it made him sit up straight. "What are you sorry for?"

Kurt tried to wipe the tears away but they just came harder as he sat up himself, curling as small as possible on the bed. "I just feel like it's my fault," Kurt confessed, his voice cracking. "If I was different, if I was more normal, then you would be able to tell your father about me and you wouldn't have to lie and sneak around and risk getting in tons of trouble which would all be my fault."

Blaine was out of bed and by Kurt's side as quick as a flash. "It's not your fault," Blaine assured him. Kurt wrapped his arms around Blaine and rested his head on Blaine's chest. Blaine squeezed him tight. "If you were different I wouldn't have to hide you because we wouldn't be friends. There are tons of so-called normal boys at school I can be friends with Kurt, but you're my best friend because you *are* different and I can tell you things I can't tell anyone else. It's those things I hide from him," he added sadly. "Not you. Not really."

Snuggled close to Blaine, feeling his heart beating beneath his temple, Kurt admitted something he'd been too afraid to say for so long. "Sometimes I'm scared you'll decide it's easier to be who he wants you to be and you'll stop writing just for him."

Blaine pulled away so Kurt could look him in the eyes. Eyes that were suddenly extremely determined. "I want him to love *me*, Kurt. Me. Not some other version of me. I'm proud of who I am and I'm not gonna change that for him. Believe me, if what he thought was more important than who I am I wouldn't risk so

much to write to you and I wouldn't be here. But it's not. The only thing I'm afraid of is that he'll take you away."

"You know he can't take me away," Kurt promised. "We'll find a way, no matter what happens."

"I know we will." Blaine hugged him again. "But it would be a lot easier if we didn't have to."

"Especially for you," Kurt said softly into his arms.

Blaine laughed bitterly in agreement. The amount of trouble he'd be in if his father found out how much lying he'd been doing was staggering and then he'd just be forced to lie and sneak even more. He was exhausted just thinking about it. "Yes, especially for me." He ran a hand through his curls and yawned, his eyes dropping. "I think it's time for bed."

Kurt's fingers found Blaine's and he touched them faintly. "Stay with me? At least until I fall asleep?"

Happiness rushed through Blaine's veins and forced a smile to his lips. "Of course."

Blaine grabbed his pillow and added it to Kurt's bed, laying his head on top. They were full of giggles and whispers but finally Kurt drifted off in the comfort of his own bed and Blaine's warmth. Blaine found it hard to sleep, unable to let go of the night, to let go of the beauty that Kurt was, even more angelic asleep than awake. He watched him for a while until he was fighting his drooping eyes just to stay awake. He slipped out of Kurt's bed and on to his own, rolling over to face the door, and he let sleep finally overcome him.

Kurt woke to the sun shining down on Blaine sleeping. His dark curls had messed and were falling in his closed eyes, eyes that had lashes so long that Kurt knew girls would be jealous. And in that moment Kurt suddenly knew that he liked Blaine; liked him liked him like he guessed Santana liked Blaine, and though he was nowhere ready to admit it to anyone else, a small part of him was ready to admit it to himself.

Blaine stirred and rubbed his eyes, rolling over away from the bright sun that penetrated his lids. Kurt quickly looked away with a blush and stretched as if he were just waking himself.

"What time is it?" Blaine muttered, sitting up slowly.

Kurt looked over to his clock and sat up himself. "It's 9." Suddenly he perked up and his head twisted to the door with a smile. "And I smell pancakes!"

"And bacon!" Blaine exclaimed.

The boys rushed downstairs to find Burt and Cooper in the kitchen cooking up breakfast. Cooper laughed. "Told you bacon would get him running," he told Burt.

"And I knew pancakes would get Kurt." He looked to the boys and nodded to the fridge. "Get yourself some drinks boys and go sit down, breakfast is almost ready."

They both got milk and sat down, wolfing down two pancakes and three slices of bacon each, chattering away about everything and nothing. Then it was time to brush teeth and shower and all too soon for everyone, Shana was honking in the driveway and it was time for goodbye.

Cooper hugged Kurt and Burt then eyed the boys knowingly. "I'll go pack the stuff in the car," he said, grabbing their suitcases and bringing them out.

"He's really going to make out with his girlfriend," Blaine let Burt know. Burt chuckled and wandered into the kitchen to give the boys some privacy.

The moment he was gone Kurt took Blaine's hand. "I don't want you to go," he said, his eyes to the floor as he wiped away a tear.

"I'd stay if I could, you know I would. But we'll see each other again Kurt, I promise." His own tears were forming just behind his lids, but he fought them. He was older, he had to hold it together. "This was the best week of my life." He flashed Kurt a devilish glance. "And I've been on Broadway, so that's saying something."

Kurt didn't laugh though. "Did you know that one year ago today was the day that we met?" Kurt asked shyly. "August 19."

"Our anniversary," Blaine beamed, a sparkle in his eye. "I didn't realize."

"Well it was just another day to you." Kurt shrugged. "I had that date in my head for months while I waited to go."

"It wasn't just another day Kurt," Blaine said and without a thought he kissed him on the cheek. "The day I met you will never be just another day."

Kurt's throat closed tight and he couldn't say another word so instead he threw his arms around Blaine and squeezed him tight.

"I'll talk to you soon Kurt," Blaine whispered brokenly. "Okay? I promise."

"I'll write to you sooner," Kurt choked out. He pulled away and wiped his eyes and Blaine couldn't help but do the same.

"Bye Mr. Hummel," Blaine yelled and Burt immediately came out and ruffled Blaine's hair.

"It was nice to meet you Blaine," Burt said and patted his back warmly. "Be good."

Blaine nodded and looked back to Kurt, waving sadly as he went out the door.

Burt closed the door behind him and turned with open arms as Kurt fell into them. "I'm going to miss him so much," Kurt cried and the tears did not stop for a long time.

Burt just held him all day, trying to distract him with movies and even offering a trip to the mall. But finally Burt accepted he would just have to let Kurt's grief take its course. He knew all about that after all.

Blaine's tears started about five minutes from Kurt's house, sitting in the backseat while Shana and Cooper sang together in the front. He was glad for the semblance of privacy they were affording him as he rolled over in his fingers the friendship bracelet Kurt had made for him. He wanted to wear it but he was afraid he'd forget to take it off and he didn't have the heart to lie about one more thing.

He was quiet through the airport, eating lunch without an appetite and Cooper didn't push him. Cooper knew how Blaine got when he was sad and scared and tired, which he was pretty sure was not even everything his little brother was feeling right now.

Blaine slept on the plane and said little as they navigated the subways to uptown. Hand in hand they walked up the street to Blaine's apartment building. About a block away, Cooper stopped and took him in

his arms, hugging him close and whispering assurances until the tears stopped falling again. "You ready to go home?" Cooper asked. "Mom and Dad are waiting for you."

Home. After everything he'd talked about with Kurt, he really, really was. He hoped that maybe at least some of their wishes would come true. "Yeah," he said. "Let's go home."

ACT 3:

CHAPTER THIRTEEN:

Turning Through the Years

September 17, 2002

Dear Blaine,

I'm sorry you're still having a hard time at school, but there is so much about you to like, you just have to show them that you aren't who they think you are. Everyone knows you're the best singer in the school, you don't have to prove it. You're not Rachel. Don't fight for the solo. Let someone else shine.

Blaine kept that letter tucked away in his desk at school where no one could find it.

And two weeks later, Jake Puckerman and Marley Rose got the solos at the 5th grade Holiday concert and Blaine was paired with Sam Evans for a rousing rendition of Jingle Bell Rock that truly did rock the house. But the applause meant next to nothing to him. What truly mattered were the three new friends that crowded him backstage, laughing and hugging him and planning how they were going to celebrate. The four new friends became nearly inseparable.

And months later, Marley Rose would ask him to the 5th grade Sadie Hawkins dance.

December 10, 2002

Merry Christmas Kurt!

I know I'm early, but my parents surprised me with a trip to the West End over winter break to see Rachel in Ragtime and I couldn't be more excited, I might just have screamed when they told me! I am fairly certain my mother and Cooper are behind it and it doesn't hurt that Dad has a London office he can work from while we're there but I'm going to LONDON!

I hope your Christmas is wonderful and you get everything you want!

Your Friend,
Blaine

Kurt had the best time dancing in The Nutcracker for the Christmas of 4th grade. But in January he realized that it may have been the biggest mistake of his life.

"Oh look, it's the pretty ballerina! Where's your tutu Kurt?"

"Did you forget your fairy wings this morning Kurt?"

"What are you, gay or something?"

The words alone hurt but all the more so because he thought that maybe, kinda, sorta they were true. After all, his heart had fluttered that day that Blaine had kissed him on the cheek, and sometimes he dreamt about it. Sometimes Blaine was all he could think about even though he tried really hard not to in between letters and phone calls. But Brittany and Santana weren't in his class this year to distract him and they weren't always there to protect him even though they still had lunch and recess together. It wasn't enough to ward off the attacks during free choice and group activities by the boys that were nothing like him and Blaine. Daily he cursed whatever decidedly evil school official had done classroom assignments this year.

He didn't tell Blaine. He picked up a pencil to write him and tell him what was going on at least once a day, but he was afraid. He was afraid that Blaine would start asking questions he wasn't ready to answer and he was afraid that Blaine would tell Cooper about the bullying and Cooper would tell his Dad and his Dad would go to the school and just make everything a thousand times worse. So he resolved to handle it alone, as tough and tall as he could be and to let his words bite back as much as their words hurt.

But it wasn't long before he found out he didn't have to handle it alone if he didn't want to.

January 4, 2003

Dear Kurt,

I've been lonely here in London and when Blaine came to visit he told me that maybe I should write to you because you always made him feel less lonely. Which is adorable. But that's not the point. So I hope you don't mind that he gave me your address.

This is Rachel by the way. Though I'm sure you figured that out by now. I mean, how many friends exactly does Blaine have in London?

He seems like he's doing so well. All he could talk about during the trip were his new friends Sam and Jake and Marley and I just wonder when I go back if there will be room for me.

Do you ever wonder that? I hope you don't. Because he still thinks the world of you. Which I guess is probably true for me too so I probably shouldn't worry but I know how easy it is to have that doubt inside when the person who matters most to you finds other people who matter just as much.

Wow, that became very philosophical. That's a new word my Dads taught me. They say I'm being philosophical all the time now and they made me learn how to spell it. It means thinking about things a lot. I don't know why they can't just say that but they like big words. But I guess spending a lot of time alone means becoming philosophical. They are pretty sure that someday I will play Lucy in You're a Good Man Charlie Brown.

Ragtime is amazing. I'm learning so much and I'm getting so good at an English accent. But I'm going to school some days and being tutored some days and the kids here aren't really any better than the ones at home. They don't understand what being a Star is all about. They call me names and just can't understand how hard this job is or how fabulous I am. I guess it's their own problem, but it still is pretty lonely sometimes.

So I hope you don't mind if I write to you. Blaine says you understand these things.

*Shine on,
Rachel*

January 14, 2003

Dear Kurt,

I'm so sorry I haven't written you in so long. Cooper went to California after London for a bunch of meetings and the only places I've been are school and home. Today is Cooper's first day back so we brought him over Chinese food. I would have called you but my parents are out on the living room with Cooper while I snuck away to "do homework." Honestly my heart is racing that my Mom or Dad might walk in but I'm trusting that Cooper will stop them.

I wish I had been able to see you in Nutcracker. I hope you got the flowers that Cooper helped me send. I hope you liked them even more.

So my Dad says that if I don't get in any more trouble before February vacation that I can go back to my acting class three days a week. So I am on my absolute bestest behavior for the next month. I don't know what it will take but I'll do almost anything he wants to get back on stage. Seeing Rachel in Ragtime was even worse than seeing Lion King. Writing you is the only thing I refuse to give up.

A knock came on the door and Cooper peaked his head in. "Time to go Squirt," he said.

Blaine raised a hopeful eye to his brother. "Will you...?" and he cocked his head to the letter.

Cooper smiled softly. "I'll take care of it," he promised.

Have to go Kurt. Parents are ready. Talk or write soon!

Your Friend,

Blaine

Santana and Brittany walked up to Kurt hand in hand until they reached him in a nestle of trees on the outer most perimeter of the playground. Curled in on himself, a paper in his hand, Santana assumed it was something from Blaine and had no qualms about coming up behind Kurt and grabbing it away.

"Hey!" Kurt called, jumping to his feet to grab for it, but it was only one sentence and Santana and Brittany had plenty of time to read the words.

Where's your prince, fairy boy?

Kurt snatched it back, tears in his eyes and he collapsed back onto the ground. The girls exchanged a sad glance before sitting cross-legged next to them.

"Maybe you could just tell them he's in New York?" Brittany suggested, her innocence the best and worst thing about her.

Kurt's eyes widened, his hands suddenly sweating, his heart jumping to his throat. "I'm not...I mean Blaine's not...I mean...just because I dance doesn't mean anything!" Kurt fumbled. He hated them. He hated them for being mean and he hated them for laughing behind his back and most of all he hated them because they were right. "Besides, there's no way Blaine is...I mean, he was practically dating Rachel when she was there and now he's hanging around that girl Marley all the time." Kurt tried to take a breath. He was never at this much of a loss for words, he needed to get himself together. He couldn't let them all phase him like this.

"Blaine and Marley sittin' in a tree," Santana sang.

"Stop it Santana," Kurt snapped. "I know you like him, aren't you jealous at all?" He was. He would never admit it aloud, but he was more jealous of Blaine's friends in NY than he had ever been of anyone.

Santana huffed, incredulous. "I am not jealous! Even if I do like him, he can date a girl he goes to school with when I'm in a completely different state. Just because I've talked to him on the phone a couple of times-"

"*Every* time we have a sleepover," Kurt corrected with a roll of his eyes.

"Well that's only because you make sure we only have sleepovers when he's at Cooper's house," she retorted, sticking her tongue out at him. "Just because we talk doesn't mean I'm jealous." She picked up the paper that Kurt had let fall to the ground. "You really need to tell someone about this Kurt. Your Dad or a teacher. How long has this been going on?"

"A while," he admitted softly with a shrug. "It doesn't matter though." He knew he was being stubborn but he didn't care. "They're just words, they don't mean anything. I can't let them hurt me."

"Have you at least told Blaine?" Santana asked.

"No, I can't. And you better not either," Kurt warned, his eyes narrowing. "He'll tell Cooper who will tell my Dad and that will just make everything worse. No one can find out. Not my Dad, not Blaine, not the teachers, no one!"

The recess bell rang and they all got up. Kurt grabbed the note back and crumpled it into a ball, shoving it in his pocket. "I'll see you two later at dance class," he said before stalking away back to his class.

Santana grabbed Brittany's hand and they walked slowly back together. "If this thing gets worse then we need to do something to make it better."

"But what can we do if he won't let us tell?" Brittany asked.

Santana frowned. "I don't know. But we'll think of something."

March 26, 2003

Dear Rachel,

How do you keep going through the day when the words hurt so much. Especially when the words have a little bit of truth to them?

Tell me about your dads. How did they meet? Are you happy you have them or do you wish you had a Mom too?

Your Friend,

Kurt

May 26, 2003

"Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birthday dear Kurt. Happy Birthday to you!"

Being serenaded by two Broadway stars would be something Kurt never could have imagined, but it possibly beat any birthday present any one else had ever given him.

"Thanks guys," he laughed, relaxing on his couch. "You're a day early, but thanks."

"Well it was the closest we could do," Cooper said into the speaker phone. "It's back to school for both of you tomorrow."

"And back home for me," Blaine grumbled, but he couldn't wipe the grin from his face. "But we couldn't miss the big two digit 1-0 birthday now could we?"

"No, you most definitely couldn't," Kurt said in as firm a voice as he could muster.

"Ok, I'll let you kids talk." Cooper ruffled Blaine's hair and winked at him. "You two have fun. Have a great day Kurt!"

"Bye Coop," Kurt yelled before the phone clicked back from speaker.

"Hi," Blaine's softer voice greeted and Kurt's heart melted inside his chest. Okay maybe that was an even better birthday present. "So how was your party this weekend."

"It was good, I think everyone had fun." Kurt was the only 10 year old kid to plan his own surprise party, but it had been hilarious to see Brittany, Santana, Mercedes and some of the other kids from dance think they were coming over to rehearse only to find a basement full of food and games. "Brittany started to cry when Santana beat my Justin Timberlake piñata in half though."

"I bet she wasn't the only one," Blaine teased and Kurt's breath hitched in panic before Blaine continued. "I know you worked really hard on it."

Kurt let out a breath of relief, covering it with a laugh. "I did, but it was made to be broken." Still, seeing that gorgeous face smashed in two broke his heart a little too. "I wish you had been there. It would have been more fun."

"Me too," Blaine agreed. "But I had the best time this weekend with Sam and Jake and Marley! My dad and Cooper took us to the Yankees game and we ate so much food and it sucked that the Yankees lost to Toronto, but it was still so much fun," Blaine chattered excitedly. "Sam kept doing all these impressions of

the baseball players and Jake was really serious about the game, he knows so much, and Marley didn't know anything and it was just adorable and when we were done you'll never guess what happened Kurt! Guess!"

Kurt listened with a sad smile on his face and a heavy heart. He was glad Blaine had friends and that they were having a good time but just like Rachel, he was afraid that Blaine wouldn't need him anymore now that he had them. After all, he saw best friendships come and go every day at school. "I don't know Blaine, tell me," he said, trying to sound excited.

"She asked me to the Sadie Hawkins dance," Blaine almost shouted. "I thought for sure she was gonna ask Jake, but nope. She asked me," he said proudly.

"Wow." Kurt swallowed, not allowing his heart to break or tears to shed. It's exactly what he'd told Brittany and Santana. Blaine wasn't his prince. "That's great Blaine. I hope you two have a good time."

"I'm sure we will," Blaine said. "Marley's awesome."

"Yeah..." Kurt needed to get off the phone. He needed to have a minute to himself. "I think I hear my dad calling Blaine. I'll talk to you soon."

"Okay Kurt." Blaine's voice was wary though and Kurt knew he hadn't hidden anything well. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah I'm fine," Kurt assured him. "I just have to go. I'll talk to you soon."

"Write to you sooner," Blaine quipped. "Bye."

"Bye," Kurt answered and hung up the phone. He didn't want to cry. It was silly to cry about a boy going to a Sadie Hawkins dance with a girl hundreds of miles away. As silly as it was to cry over a Justin Timberlake piñata being broken in two.

And yet, he couldn't stop the tears from falling.

Blaine liked everything there was about Marley Rose. From her big brown eyes to the incredible voice she had when she was singing to her adorably sweet personality. So when she'd asked him to the 5th grade graduation Sadie Hawkins dance at the popcorn concession stand at Yankee Stadium, he hadn't even had to think about it. So he wasn't at all surprised that they had a wonderful time with all their friends and he was so glad that they had gone.

But dancing in each other's arms, his hands resting gently around her waist, hers draped over his shoulders, he hadn't felt the magic he'd expected. The magic he saw on the television or in the movies. The magic he'd always been told would be there when he danced with a girl he liked.

And now as they stood on the doorstep of his apartment complex, her mother waiting in the car by the curb hidden just slightly by the big oak tree on the sidewalk, his stomach flipped at what he knew he was supposed to do. After all, he and Sam and Jake had talked about it and practiced on their arms the entire last weekend.

"I had a really nice time," she said with a slight blush to her cheekbones. The porch light shined down on her and Blaine couldn't ignore the fact that he thought she was very pretty.

"Me too," he said and he lowered his eyes, his own face flushing.

She bit her lip.

He shuffled his shoes.

She tucked her hair behind her ears.

He clasped his hands together in front of him and glanced up, his stomach tying in a nervous knot.

In the end all that practice hadn't been necessary. She leaned in slowly and he closed his eyes, but when the kiss fell on his cheek instead of his lips his stomach relaxed in relief. He opened his eyes with a smile. She smiled back. "Thank you for asking me to be your date," Blaine said softly, his eyes warm. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Of course silly," she giggled. "It's graduation." She flitted off to her car, nearly skipping down the stairs. She stopped at the car and turned to wave. He waved back then went inside. He didn't have a chance to try and think about what it all meant.

His mom and dad were waiting for him in the living room as expected.

His mom was nestled into his father's arms, the flicker of the television screen lighting their faces in the darkened room as they waited up for him to return from his first dance. He put his coat away and slipped off his shoes, peeking in the room to watch them a minute before interrupting. No matter what else was wrong in his world, he lived in a home where his parents truly loved one another and he could only hope that someday his children would be able to say the same thing.

His smile was soft when he leaned against the living room wall. "Hey guys."

John paused the movie and Teresa sat up, both of their attention immediately turned to him. "Hey sweetheart." His mother looked at him with enthusiasm. "How was the dance?"

"It was nice," Blaine said. And it had been, even though as the night went on it started to feel like something was missing. "We all had a really good time."

"Marley looked very pretty tonight," his father pointed out.

"Yeah, she did." He couldn't disagree but his gaze fell to his fingers, a look that could have been taken for shyness or embarrassment. Blaine wasn't even sure why it was hard to look at his father in that moment, he just knew that though he'd said the right words he somehow didn't mean the same thing his father did.

"Have a seat son," John told him. Blaine's heart jumped. It was only a beat but it was enough to send his mind into a tailspin while he did as he was told and curled up in the arm chair beside them. His father laughed softly. "Don't look so scared kid."

"Sorry," he whispered, letting a small uneasy smile slip. Trying to put his fear aside, he looked up at his mom to find an excited glimmer in her eye, and he allowed himself to relax.

"Blaine, your mom and I are really proud of everything you've done this year. Straight A's plus the friends you've made, soccer." Blaine internally rolled his eyes at that. He hadn't really had much interest in soccer but Cooper convinced him it would be good for his dance skills to keep his body moving so he reluctantly agreed. "You've done everything we've asked, and we're very proud of you."

"Thanks," he said, so taken by his father's words he nearly stammered. His heart swelled with pride and joy and the grin on his face grew suddenly bright. "I tried really hard."

"We know you did," his mom smiled. "And so that's why we wanted to give you your graduation present a little bit early." She reached behind her and grabbed a large white envelope from the sofa table. He watched her with curiosity while she handed it over. He was so surprised that all he could do was stare and it made his mom laugh. "Go on, take it."

Slowly he reached a hand out and took it, opening it carefully. He had absolutely no idea what it could be. He thought maybe it was savings bonds or stock certificates or maybe tickets to Disneyland if he really let himself dream. But it was none of those things and looking at the papers in his hand he realized that he hadn't allowed himself to dream big enough. His eyes opened wide, his mouth dropped and he couldn't believe it. Not without... "Is this...?"

"We called your agent and had him start submitting you again," his mother confirmed with a smile, nodding for him to look. "You have three auditions booked."

The papers were appointment confirmations and audition scenes and his blood started to hum with excitement and nerves as he looked through. He had an audition to understudy for Tom in *Big River*, which was set to open on Broadway in July. He had one for Young Peter in the new Broadway show *The Boy From Oz*, scheduled to start previews in September. And the third was for a swing spot as a Newsboy in *Gypsy* which was already running at the Imperial.

"I can't believe it," he breathed, slowly staring up at his parents. They both watched him, grinning from ear to ear. Tears came to his eyes and he bolted out of his chair to wrap his arms around his mother. "Thank you," he whispered.

"You earned it Blaine," she told him.

"Now I know Rachel's home next week but I don't want the two of you getting lost again in nothing but auditions and performances," John warned him. "You've made great friends and you need to make time for them over the summer and if you're cast into the fall I don't want to see you backing away from them."

"I promise Sir," Blaine said holding his hand out to shake. He had no intention of ever losing any of his friends.

John chuckled and shook his hand then pulled him in for a quick hug before Blaine pulled away, too excited to sit still. Besides, he had someone else he needed to tell immediately.

"Can I go to Cooper's?" He bounced on his feet, practically begging. "Please?"

Teresa laughed at his enthusiasm and draped an arm around him protectively. "It's late Blaine and you have graduation in the morning. You can tell Coop there."

Telling Coop was all well and good but Kurt was the one he needed. "Can I go to Coop's after graduation then? Please?" He thought very quickly and his eyes fell on the envelope left on his chair. "He can rehearse these scenes with me and help me with my audition songs."

"Blaine, we have lunch after-" His father's stern voice nearly snapped his good mood but his mother cut him off with a gentle hand. He looked up at her. She was watching him, her eyes searching his, looking deep within him. It made him pause and sent a chill down his spine.

"As long as it's okay with Cooper, you can go over after lunch. I know you how much you need him." Her voice was calm but to Blaine it felt like the words carried the weight of the world. He wanted to ask her why but then as if nothing was strange she kissed him on the head and squeezed him hard. "Now up to bed. Tomorrow's gonna be a long and exciting day."

Blaine's fingers shook with excitement as he dialed the number. His heart raced and though he had tried to settle on his bed his energy was too high to sit still for even a moment. Cooper passed by the door and chuckled at the adorable sight of his brother.

"Hello?" came the deep voice on the other end of the phone.

"Hey Mr. Hummel," Blaine greeted. "Is Kurt there?"

"He sure is. Congratulations on your graduation. Big kid in Middle School now," Burt teased as he brought the phone to Kurt's room.

"Thanks sir, I'm just glad it's summer," Blaine smiled.

"Give me the phone dad," Blaine heard Kurt whisper and Burt laughed.

"I think Kurt wants to talk to you," Burt mused. "Be good kid."

Blaine heard a shuffle and was pretty sure it was Kurt grabbing the phone because then he heard Kurt jump back onto his bed, breathlessly saying, "Hi! How was the dance?"

Blaine paused for a second because he had completely forgotten about the dance in all the excitement. His mind was so focused on one thing alone. "It was fun. But that's not why I'm calling. Guess what my graduation present was!" He bounced, literally bounced, with the anticipation of telling Kurt.

"Um...a trip? Money? A new car?" Kurt was joking on the last guess. At least he hoped he was.

"Nope! Better!" Blaine threw his chest out and his chin in the air and with a huge grin he announced, "I have three auditions next week."

Years down the road they would nickname it *the scream heard 'round the world*, but all Blaine knew then was that even with the phone down at his waist to save his hearing he could still hear Kurt's shrieks of delight. Only once he thought it was safe did he bring the phone back up.

"Oh my god Blaine! That's amazing!" Kurt was yelling. "How did that happen?"

"My dad said it was because I did so well this year," Blaine shrugged, finally able to sit and relax now that the words were out. He curled up on his bed and fiddled with the blanket. "He said they were proud of me. I still can't really believe it."

"You'll believe it once you're in the audition room," Kurt told him then squealed softly again. "Oh my gosh, I am so excited for you! Now tell me all about them. What are they for? What are you singing? Are they all on Broadway?"

The boys talked for two hours, laughing and teasing, Blaine singing his song choices to Kurt for his opinion. Cooper listened from the living room, a smile never leaving his lips. His brother made two things clear as he belted out song after song. Blaine cared far more about Kurt's opinion than his own. And Cooper would need to get his ass back out pounding the pavement if he wanted any chance of beating his little brother in the game of stardom.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN:

Does He See What I See?

September 10, 2003

"Kurt Hummel."

His heart pounded and his hands were sweating and he was pretty certain he would have passed out if Brittany's screech and Santana's squeeze of his hand hadn't kept him from drifting into the comfortable silence of oblivion. But they had, and so instead Kurt clutched his sheet music to his chest and took a deep breath.

"Break a leg," the girls whispered together and he walked the last ten feet into the audition room.

It was no different than any other time except that it was very different because this time it was the adult show and this time he was auditioning for a real part and this time he was ten years old and was going in by himself instead of with a group.

He smiled at the auditioners, his teachers, though that fact didn't make the butterflies in his stomach settle any quieter. They smiled back, the director greeting him warmly. "Hi Kurt. What will you be singing for us today?"

"I'll be singing *Where is Love* from Oliver." Despite his nerves, he was glad to hear his voice come out strong and clear.

He sang as he had at the recital, only this time the song had even deeper meaning for him. Now that he knew, truly knew, where love was. Now that he longed to just be in the same room with Blaine again. To feel the warmth of Blaine's arms around him. To feel the tickle of Blaine's lips against his skin.

Taking the sides and thanking the grownups in the room, he chided himself as he escaped out the door. He was only ten years old. What the heck did he know about love? It was just a silly crush, on a boy no less, a boy hundreds of miles away that wasn't even really allowed to talk to him much less date him even if Kurt were old enough to date which he was positively certain he wasn't. His father may have been accepting of other people's differences, but Kurt was sure he wouldn't like the thoughts running through his son's head right then. He quickly vowed never to sing that song again.

"How did it go?" Santana asked in the hallway, linking her arm in his. She'd heard him sing. She'd watched the others in the hallway listen. And she wanted everyone to know that he was her friend.

"I don't know," he shrugged. "They want me to read for Winthrop so it couldn't have been too bad."

"It wasn't bad at all Kurt, it was perfect," Brittany assured him, grabbing his hand.

"Brittany Pierce!" the runner called.

"Wish me luck!" she squealed and bounced while Kurt squeezed her hand.

"You know you two are gonna get it," Santana told Kurt, watching Brittany go. "You'll be the perfect Winthrop to her Amaryllis."

"I don't know, it's an alto role and I'm not an alto." Kurt slumped against the wall, his confidence fading. "Blaine would be perfect."

Santana took him by the arms and held him firmly. "Now you listen to me, Kurt Hummel. Blaine is good but so are you. And you are here and he is not. And you can sing alto and if it's too low they'll make it higher for you because you are perfect for Winthrop. Do you understand me?"

"Yes Ma'am," he giggled, ducking his head.

"And Blaine would tell you exactly the same thing," Santana told him.

"He actually already has," Kurt admitted shyly.

Santana crossed her arms across her chest and smirked. "Well, there ya go then."

Brittany flew out of the room with a scene in her grasp and she quickly grabbed Kurt's hand. "Come on, let's go practice."

Walking into the Shubert Theater was like coming home for Blaine despite having never been there before. But there was nowhere he ever felt he belonged more than every theater, every backstage and

every dressing room. The hustle and bustle of sound checks and light checks finishing up before the house opened mixed with the running around of props and costumes backstage was as familiar as his mom preparing breakfast in the morning before school. The smell of wood and paint and Febreeze filled the air. And the sounds; the sounds of vocal warm-ups and chattering about last night's television shows, and who was performing at what cabaret when, and plans for after show gatherings he felt like he would never be old enough for were amongst his favorite sounds in the world.

"Hey Blaine," Mrs. Major, the boys' guardian patted him softly on the back at the entrance. "Come on, let's get you situated in the dressing room."

At Les Mis he'd had his own space but this time he was going to share a dressing room with six of the Newsboys and he was the newest addition. He knew what that would mean; the worst space, the teasing and pranks. But it was all part of the business and truth was, he missed it all.

"Guys, listen up!" Five sets of eyes belonging to boys ranging in age from ten to fourteen looked up at him. "I think all of you have met Blaine Anderson. He's our newest swing on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday nights. Everyone give him a warm welcome please," she said eyeing them knowingly. The boys just laughed and nudged one another.

"Hey guys," Blaine said with a smile. He knew them all. He'd rehearsed with them all in rotation over the last few weeks as well as with the understudies for Rose and Baby June. He'd watched the show from the audience last night and nearly died of excitement when he truly realized for the first time that he'd be on the same stage as Bernadette Peters. And though he would never share a stage with the incredible new talent playing Tulsa, who danced with the grace of a ballerina and sung like a dream, Blaine held a glimmer of hope that just maybe the young man would be nice enough to befriend a kid like him and maybe share with him some moves.

"Ok Blaine, the rules are that you clean your space entirely at night. We have 15 kids in and out rotating in this cast and I have ten a night to manage between you 6 and the girls. So no getting in trouble, no bothering the leads, no crazy shenanigans," she said pointing at two of the boys who simply offered her an innocent look, "and absolutely no leaving the building without an adult. I have your emergency card so I know your pick ups. Got it?"

"Yes Ma'am," Blaine responded formally and the other boys snickered. Blaine waited for her reprimand, but she said nothing more, just glaring at them once again before leaving them to get dressed.

"Your space is over there," a boy named Michael pointed to the corner seat. "And costumes are on the rack. You're Newsboy #4, right?"

"Yeah," Blaine said, pulling out his makeup, hair brush, gel and of course, his notebook. Then he went to the rack for his clothes.

"So you starred in Les Mis a few years ago?" a redheaded kid with freckles aptly named Sean asked.

"Yeah I did." He quickly got changed and sat down to start putting his makeup on. He'd met with the stage manager the day before to go over what he needed. "It was great, best job I've ever had so far."

"I heard you took time off afterward." The voice was accusing and it was one of the older boys, Jared, who he'd frequently seen around town at auditions. Blaine was certain Jared had been one of the kids who'd benefited from his forced hiatus. "Heard you ran away one night from the theater and Daddy put an end to you working."

Blaine's blood boiled though there wasn't anything Jared said that wasn't true. Still the fact that the information was out and around burned his cheeks visibly even beneath his concealer. "Well obviously I'm back now so it wasn't that big a deal," he snapped.

"You go out for Young Peter? Bet you didn't get that because they couldn't trust you." Jared stood half a head taller than Blaine with his arms crossed. Blaine stood to meet him.

"Actually, you're wrong," Blaine retorted with as much calm as he could muster but his fists were clenched with fury. "I was called back for *Oz* and was in the final three, but my Dad pulled me out of the running because he didn't want me playing a f..." Blaine stopped. His father's word had almost escaped his mouth but he bit it back as quickly as he could, hoping, praying, that no one knew what he'd been about to say. "He didn't want me playing a full 8 shows a week." He sat down and returned to his makeup. Jared was about to start up again but Sean changed the subject to whatever ball game they were missing that night and Blaine smiled at him gratefully before pulling out his notebook.

September 10, 2003

Dear Kurt,

Well, I think I just messed it all up with my castmates. This kid Jared started in on me about being in Les Mis and being kicked out of the business because I ran away and he said that that's why I didn't get the role in Boy From Oz. And I almost said it was because my Dad didn't want me to play a fag and thank god I stopped myself because can you image what kind of jerk I'd be if I said that?

Sometimes I hate myself. I feel like I'm floating in a world made up of puzzle pieces that make no sense to me and if I could just find that tiny hint, type in the cheat code, then suddenly it would all make sense.

No matter what though, it's nice to be back in the theater. To be able to write to you again without having to wait for Cooper to have free time which is happening less and less now that he's working and dating all the time. I miss having time for you so I'm so grateful to be back here. Now I just have to find the mailbox! If you get this letter, you'll know that I have.

Curtain's up, gotta go.

*Your Friend,
Blaine*

"Dad please!" Kurt was begging. He wasn't above begging. And if that didn't work he'd already decided he wasn't above groveling, bargaining or outright running away. Okay, maybe he was above running away but only because he and Blaine both knew how horribly that would work out in the end. "It's not just Blaine. I mean, I really want to see Blaine of course and I know he wants to see me but we also know we won't get to spend that much time together, but Dad it's Bernadette Peters and I may actually get a chance to *meet* her, or at least be within 10 feet of her and-"

"Okay," Burt said.

Kurt stopped talking. And moving. And breathing. "What?" he managed to squeak.

Burt laughed and wiped his hands on the rag in his pocket, twisting the fluid caps back on beneath the hood of a Chevy. "I said, okay. We'll go to New York to see *Gypsy*."

"Why?" It was a stupid question, he knew he shouldn't press his luck, but he was dumbfounded. He didn't for a second believe his father would actually say yes.

But Burt just shrugged. "Your mother loved Bernadette Peters," he said. "She'd never forgive me for keeping you from meeting her if you had the chance."

November 29, 2003

"Hey Mom, I'm going to Blaine's show this afternoon with a date so I'll walk him home. You go do some Mom's day out thing."

Teresa switched the phone to her other ear while she opened the oven to pull out a tray of cupcakes. "You don't have to do that Coop," she said, trying to manage both objects at once without dropping either. "If you're on a date, I can get him."

"No, really Mom, it's alright," Cooper quickly assured her. "Blaine's like a babe magnet, the girls love when I take care of him."

Teresa rolled her eyes. Someday her oldest would stop being a playboy and settle down but at 22 it was not likely to happen anytime soon no matter how good it sounded to have a daughter-in-law around to talk to. "Well if she's good enough to meet Blaine then you better bring her to dinner at the house after so all of us can meet her," she teased.

"Oh, um..." Cooper fell over his words, something very unlike him. "I had actually planned on taking Blaine out to dinner with her. We have reservations and everything. But we could definitely stay for coffee when I drop him off," he offered in consolation.

Teresa took the dirty dishes over to the sink and squirted dish soap on them. "Why do I feel like there's something you're not telling me young man?" she accused.

"Because you're paranoid," Cooper teased. "Seriously. Me, Blaine, date, dinner, then the three of us will be over after."

Teresa raised a questioning brow but decided to let it go with a smile. She had her suspicions, but whatever it was she probably didn't want to know anyway. "Well it's nice you want to include your brother so much. I hope that means this date is special."

She could hear the smile in his voice when he said, "Oh it definitely is."

"Oh my god I can't believe I touched her," Kurt was gushing, holding his fingers as if they were made of gold. "I actually touched Bernadette Peters."

"And she actually touched you," Blaine reminded him with a grin. Then he lifted a haughty chin. "She touches me every night though," he bragged with a giggle. Touching was an understatement; it was more like 'manhandling' as she moved him into position on stage beside Baby June. It was the best part of his nights on stage.

"And that guy that plays Tulsa? What's his name?" Kurt asked a bit breathless.

Blaine smiled. "David," he said, knowing that Kurt would love him as much as he did. "David Burtka. Isn't he amazing Kurt? And he's really nice and some nights after both our scenes are over he teaches me some dance steps. He says I'm really getting good," Blaine beamed.

Kurt smiled at him proudly. "I'm sure you are. I can see it in your dancing on stage and I'm sure it will just keep getting better over time."

"Kurt's right. You stole the whole show up there," Burt winked at him across the table. "And the whole show was pretty amazing." Elizabeth would have loved it.

"It really was," said Suzi, the pretty blonde Barbie Doll that Cooper had brought out tonight. Just like his mother, Blaine had been hoping that this was one Cooper might think of settling in with for a spell, but he could tell she wasn't. The brunettes were long-term, the blondes were never around for long. When she reached over and ruffled his curls though, he didn't mind too much that she'd be gone before he knew it. He just hoped his mom wouldn't get attached.

"Thanks you guys," Blaine said with a smile. "I'm so glad you all could make it." His eyes shifted to Kurt's and his smile grew softer, warmer. "Especially you," he said and the grownups seemed to drift away into their own conversation.

"Did you get my last letter?" Kurt asked, trying to ignore the sensation racing through his body with Blaine looking at him like that. "The one with your birthday present in it?"

"Yes, of course!" Blaine said, his voice a little frantic at completely having forgotten about thanking Kurt. "I just got it the other day and I knew you were coming, and then I totally forgot, but I love it Kurt. Thank you."

"As soon as I saw the journal at Barnes and Noble I knew it was perfect for you." Kurt grinned. It was a journal with a New York City skyline and an image of two kids playing on a swingset in Central Park below and most importantly it had a combination lock to safely hide away Blaine's secrets. "I hope you get to use it a lot. You know..." Kurt blushed and looked down shyly. "For the things you can't even tell me."

"There's nothing I can't tell you," Blaine whispered.

"Well," Kurt shrugged sheepishly. "Just in case. And you can always use it for song lyrics or something. I know you've written me some in your letters, maybe this will give you a place to really start writing."

Blaine could not understand how this boy could possibly know him better than he knew himself but Kurt continually amazed him. "I think that's a wonderful idea. My friends and I have been working on some stuff together, though of course Rachel always tries to take over which makes everyone else mad." Blaine laughed. "But they're getting used to her. And Marley's a really great writer too."

Kurt's lips pursed and his heart sank just a little bit, jealousy pulling at him. "Must be nice..." he started softly, turning his gaze from Blaine. The grownups were chatting between themselves, keeping an ear on the boys but not really listening. "...being able to do stuff like that with your girlfriend."

"Yeah I guess." Blaine ducked his head and bit his lip. It was awkward, talking about this in person. He could have written about it. He *should* have written about it all summer. But even with Kurt, he'd been embarrassed. "I don't really know if she's my girlfriend though."

"What do you mean?" Kurt ignored the sudden tingling sensation in his stomach because Blaine looked positively pained.

"I don't know," Blaine shrugged. He really didn't know anything about being a boyfriend or having a girlfriend or what he was supposed to do or feel. He realized early on he was in way over his head, but he hadn't wanted to admit it to anyone, especially himself. But he could trust Kurt with this. He had to swallow his pride and trust his best friend, because things with Marley were just getting more and more confusing and he had no idea what to do. "It doesn't feel like anything." He nervously whispered his

confession so the others couldn't hear, but just admitting it out loud to Kurt made him feel a little bit better. "I mean, when we hold hands, or kiss on the cheek, it's nice and all. But there's no..."

"Sparks?" Kurt suggested, doing his best to hide both his blush and disappointment. Because now he knew for sure that the sparks Kurt had felt back in Ohio had not been mutual

"Yeah." Blaine exhaled, so grateful that Kurt understood. "Jake and Sam would probably tell me I need to kiss her on the lips. For it to feel like that I mean."

"Maybe," Kurt agreed reluctantly, hating just the idea of Blaine kissing her on the lips. "Or maybe she's just not the right girl?"

"I know," Blaine whispered, feeling horrible about it. "She's such a nice girl and it feels good to walk down the hallway holding hands and we have fun and why wouldn't I want all that in a girlfriend?" He ducked his head in his hands. "Gosh Kurt, I'm a terrible person."

Kurt chuckled and playfully shoved his best friend. "You are not a terrible person. You're just a boy," he teased. "Besides, seriously Blaine, don't you think it's a little silly to be hoping to find your true love at 11?"

"I'm 12, remember?" Blaine retorted, sticking his tongue out at Kurt. "But I suppose you're right. And she is a nice girl. I should just enjoy it for now, shouldn't I?"

"Sure," Kurt said noncommittally. "And maybe the next one that comes along will be *the one*."

January 5, 2004

Happy New Year Kurt! I'm really hoping you got a letter from Blaine before you get mine because I was trying really hard to let him be the first letter of the year that you got. Though he probably just found some way to talk to you on New Year's Eve. Especially now that his parents got him a cell phone though I know he still can't call or text you without them finding out. You should have gotten your own cell phone with a NY number when you were here for Gypsy. Then you guys could talk whenever you wanted ;)

So I know you wanted gossip, so here it is. I think Marley has this huge crush on Jake. I know, crazy, right? I mean who would choose Jake over Blaine? But Blaine hasn't been around too much with Gypsy and auditions and classes. Even I haven't seen him too much but that's what happens when we're both performing in different shows. Fiddler on the Roof is going well, by the way. Thanks for asking! But anyway, I think Blaine will be okay. I don't think he's really that into Marley anyway. But I've told you that before.

I'm pretty sure he has his eye on someone else anyway ;)

I hope 2004 is the year that all your wishes come true. I hope it's the year that your classmates stop being jerks and realize how truly amazing you really are. If I can figure it out, they should be able to also.

Shine on!

Rachel

January 19, 2004

"Hey dude!" Jake called, jogging up to Blaine in the school hallway. Blaine was swapping out his books at his locker Monday morning. He wasn't finding the work in 6th grade any harder than he had in 5th, but he hated having to carry his books around with him all day. He liked having a locker though. Pictures of him with his friends papered the inside and made it feel like home. A picture of him and Marley and his friends at the Sadie Hawkins dance and pictures of them all singing in choir were hung right inside. On his door were his Broadway pictures; an old one of him and Rachel as Little Cosette and Gavroche, new ones with Baby June and Louise and the other Newsboys in Gypsy, and one of his favorites, him and Tulsa. But taped to the back where only he could easily see them were photos he and Kurt had taken together on his trip to Ohio as well as his newest addition, Kurt, Bernadette Peters and himself. Those were the ones that made him smile every time he opened his locker. "Dude! Hey," Jake said breathlessly. He'd probably run straight from the bus which meant that something either horrible or wonderful was happening or had happened.

"What's up?" Blaine smiled at his friend and closed his locker, clutching his books in his arms. He hated backpacks, he needed to convince his Mom to get him a messenger bag. They started walking to the 6th grade wing for homeroom. They had about ten minutes before the bell for Jake to catch him up.

Blaine was doing the best he could at making time for his friends, but he'd picked up a fourth show most weeks which meant he missed out on a lot. Luckily, his friends understood. And with the show closing end of February he thought it possible he might have a little more time before his next one.

"First, I just wanted to let you know that my parents said I could have one friend come to Puck's Bar Mitzvah and I decided to invite you," Jake said.

Blaine stopped dead in his tracks and turned to Jake a curious look on his face. "Why me?" It wasn't that he and Jake weren't close because they were, but being away all the time he'd always thought that Jake was closer to Sam.

"I miss hanging with you," Jake said, but Blaine could tell there was more than that. Jake's brow was furrowed, his lips pursed and he was shuffling nervously.

"I miss hanging with you too Jake, but come on," Blaine urged. "Out with it."

"I kissed Marley," Jake suddenly blurted out.

Blaine blinked. And blinked again. "Okay..."

"I'm so sorry dude, I know you two were sort of...but it just happened this weekend and...she kissed me back and..." Jake flustered over his words as stared at the floor.

"It's okay," Blaine said. And he meant it. In fact a wave of relief suddenly washed over him as if he was finally off the hook. He smiled, a real smile, and he patted Jake on the arm. "Really Jake, it's okay. I'm happy for you. Both of you."

Jake's eyes widened in surprise. "Really?"

Blaine laughed and nodded. "Really. So is that why you invited me? Because you feel guilty? Because you don't have to."

"No," Jake assured him. "I mean, not really. It's just...well you know how girls are. If I ask Marley then she'll think things are serious and it's way too soon for that. And I get to see Sam all the time and I don't get to hang out with you enough anymore and you don't get to do fun stuff anymore and your show is

closing just a week before so I thought why not? I can invite Sam instead if you have to work or have an audition or something-"

"No," Blaine said quickly. "I mean, I'll try. I should be able to. And I want to go. It'll be fun."

"Puck says there will be lots of older girls there," Jake nudged him with a sparkle in his eye. "Teenage girls. Girls with boobs and bras." Jake leaned over and whispered, "I hear they let boys touch them."

"Ugh, shut up Jake," Blaine said, his face scrunching in playful disgust as he pushed Jake away. That's the real reason Jake didn't want to go with Marley, she would cramp his style. Blaine thought he should probably be the nice guy and warn her, but she knew exactly what Jake was like and the last thing he wanted to do was seem jealous. "I'm going to class. I'll see you later."

"Monday dinner tonight! It's Sam's turn I think!"

"Is Rachel coming?" Blaine asked.

Jake rolled his eyes, but he nodded. "Pretty sure she is. Which means an entire night of not letting rock n' roll turn into Broadway ballads."

Blaine chuckled. "I'll be over at 5 as long as my dad doesn't change his mind," he promised, slipping into his classroom. Yeah, life was pretty much perfect right now. He sat down at his desk and opened his notebook. A doodle of Kurt's name stared back at him.

There was only one thing missing.

"I think you should let me kiss you," Brittany said, matter of factly.

Kurt stared up at her. As if she had grown two heads. Because the only thing more surprising to Kurt than the idea of Brittany wanting to kiss him would literally be if she had grown two heads. "I...what?"

They sat outside the rehearsal room on the carpeted floor of the hallway, Brittany resting against the wall with her knees pulled up, Kurt sitting across from her crosslegged. They both had scripts in their hands running lines before they were called back inside. They were 3 days from tech week and both kids were

determined to be perfect. Kurt looked back down at his script, wondering if maybe, somehow, he'd missed that there was a line in the show that said *I think you should let me kiss you*. But of course there wasn't. Brittany was serious.

"I said, I think you should let me kiss you," she repeated with just a hint of exasperation that he hadn't understood her the first time. "Not now of course, but at school. On the playground. In front of everyone."

Kurt scrunched his nose in confusion. "And why would I let you do that?"

"Don't you want to kiss me?" Brittany said airily. It was almost as if she believed every boy in the world should want to kiss her. Which she probably did. She was the prettiest girl in school after all, though Kurt would never admit that in front of Santana. He liked his nose exactly where it was.

"Of c-course I want to kiss you," Kurt stammered. His nerves twisted uncomfortably, trying to sound as convincing as possible. "Why wouldn't I?"

Brittany shrugged. "I don't know. That's why I asked."

"I guess...I mean...I just don't understand why you would want to kiss me?" Kurt pulled his own knees in protectively, wrapping his arms around them.

"Well, you're cute," Brittany told him and Kurt's eyes opened wide. No one but Blaine had ever said anything like that to him before and Blaine was his best friend so he had to say those things. "And I just think if we kissed then maybe the boys in class would stop saying mean things about you and leave you alone."

Ah. That made much more sense to Kurt than Brittany actually liking him. She was very sensitive and hated any time Kurt was picked on in class. Which was slowly becoming a daily occurrence. "That's very sweet Britt to want to help me, but...I dunno. I think they'd just find something else to pick on me about. It won't change how I dress or how high my voice is or how smart I am."

"Well we'll never know until we try," Brittany said as if the matter was final. She picked up her script again to read as if nothing had happened.

Kurt sighed and went back to running lines. He knew by now that once Brittany had something in her head there was no changing her mind. And, he thought to himself, maybe it wasn't such a bad idea to kiss a

girl at least once. Just so he knew for sure. After all, it would be pretty pathetic to pine away for Blaine if he wasn't really what all the kids said he was.

"Oh Blaine, I don't know how I feel about you going to a Bar Mitzvah after party." His mother was indecisive but Blaine could tell when she was leaning toward no. "I mean, you're only 12 and it's at the Puckerman's..."

"I think it's a great idea," John said, strolling through the living room, overhearing the conversation.

Blaine beamed but Teresa scowled. "John," she hissed under her breath, trying and failing to prevent Blaine from hearing. "You know what goes on at those parties." Visions of her own friends' Bat Mitzvah parties flashed before her eyes, worrying about boys touching her, kissing in bathrooms, having way too many first times that she really wasn't ready for.

"Yes I do," John said with a satisfied smile. "And I think it will be good for Blaine." His Dad threw an arm around him, a buddy arm like he always did with Cooper, and Blaine just stood there, a confused but proud smile on his face, though he wasn't sure why exactly he was supposed to be proud. "Just no alcohol," his Dad warned, with an almost conspiratory finger point.

"I promise," Blaine agreed and looked to his Mom. She pursed her lips but nodded in defeat. And with that it was decided. Blaine squealed and ran off to call Jake and tell him.

She picked a beautiful late winter day. The sun was shining overhead without a cloud in the sky and the brisk air was just cold enough to keep their faces flushed while they all ran around the playground they were almost too old for. The field was still too frozen over to safely play kickball so instead the boys were playing some sort of spy game on the jungle gym while the girls were jumping rope and clapping their hands in silly songs on the wood chips all around them. Kurt was involved with none of that but stood on the highest part of the jungle gym looking down on them all. He was so filled with a heartbreaking mix of loneliness and disdain that he didn't even notice Brittany come up behind him until she tapped him on the shoulder.

He turned and his face lit up seeing her. "Hey Britt-" he started but he couldn't finish because suddenly her lips were on his and they didn't move. Time stopped for a minute, Kurt standing there awkwardly blinking at the girl attached to his face. He had completely forgotten about their conversation a month earlier and though they stayed close after Music Man had closed they were never without Santana and Brittany's plans to fix Kurt's reputation had never come up again. But Santana hadn't done her homework today and had to stay inside.

Brittany leaned back and Kurt gasped, catching his breath while she said as loudly as she could, "Kurt you are such a good kisser," and before he could do anything to stop her she was back again, her lips on his and this time she was moving them around.

Just passed the rush of blood in his ears, Kurt could hear the murmur of their classmates begin, the hoots and hollers, the clapping of some of the girls, the laughing of pretty much all of the boys. Before the teachers were forced to put an end to it, Brittany pulled away and grabbed Kurt's hand, leading him down the stairs whispering in his ear. "Now we're going to be girlfriend and boyfriend."

Kurt had no idea how to respond. He knew for sure now that he definitely did not want this, did not want girls at all. But watching the faces of both the boys and the girls as Brittany whispered jokes in his ear that he couldn't help but smile at, made him realize that maybe Brittany was right. Maybe pretending to be like everyone else would save himself more heartache than it would cause.

"Kiss me," she whispered to him as they got to the wall of the school. "Lean me up against the wall and kiss me. That way they know it's not just me kissing you." Kurt looked around one more time at the boys watching him, waiting to see what he was going to do next. "They all want me Kurt. Right now they all wish they were you." He looked back at her with surprise and the idea of having them look at him with a jealousy and not like he was prey was remarkably appealing.

He placed his hands on her shoulders, not really sure how he was supposed to do this, and he backed her up against the wall. She smiled at him and he leaned in, just a moment pressing his lips to hers. He raised a brow at her while she pulled away and she looked over his shoulder at their classmates for him.

"Good job Kurt," she said softly, proudly. "Mission accomplished."

February 26, 2004

Dear Blaine,

Brittany kissed me today. I guess we're boyfriend and girlfriend now. At least that's what she says. Santana is pissed. She's not talking to either of us though I don't know why.

I hope you're not mad too. I don't know why you would be. I don't think you would be. But I just hope you're not.

I hope you have fun at Puck's Bar Mitzvah. It sounds like it's going to be crazy and that Jake has big plans for you.

Have a wonderful closing night for Gypsy. I'm so glad you got to be a part of that show and to meet such amazing people. And that you let me have the chance to see you and meet them too. I can't wait to see what's next for you.

I miss you. I hope I get to see you soon.

Your Friend,

Kurt

Blaine stopped at the bottom of the basement stairs, completely uncomfortable. Puck and his friends sat in a circle, a bottle center and he knew exactly what that meant. "Jake I don't know if I can do this," he whispered but Jake would hear nothing of it.

Grabbing Blaine by the shirt Jake pulled him across the room and down into the circle where boys and girls sat every other one. "Of course you can Dude, come on, these girls know what they're doing."

Blaine sat down and tried to look invisible.

"Alright everyone here are the rules!" Puck yelled. Blaine wondered exactly where his friends' parents were, but he supposed that with the adults having their own party upstairs, they probably couldn't hear a thing. And once everyone quieted down, Puck did too. "First time you land on someone you kiss them, or

the girl or guy next to them if you land on your own sex." Everyone snickered and Blaine joined in halfheartedly, his palms sweating. He took a deep breath, giving himself a quick pep talk. He could do this. Kurt had kissed Brittany on the lips, and he was younger than Blaine. This was no big deal. "You land on the same person again and it's 7 Minutes in Heaven, in the closet right over there. Inside are two shot glasses and a bottle of my dad's finest scotch. Ok, well not really 'cause he'd miss that, but it's one of the bottles he had in there. Anyway," Puck continued on, "I pour the shots before you go in and they better be gone when we open the door back up. Whatever else you do in there is your own business but boys I hope you have your bra snap fingers ready!"

Blaine was so nervous he thought he might be sick but he just prayed that no one landed on him, especially not twice. Every time a girl spun the bottle he imagined himself in the cloak of invisibility, staring at the ground to avoid their gazes. Things became raucous pretty quickly and Jake was getting very into it, kissing each girl who landed on him with enthusiasm. Then suddenly the bottle, and all eyes, were on Blaine. He looked up slowly.

Kitty Wilde stared back at him, a 7th grade cheerleader who already had quite a bit of a reputation in school, most especially with Noah Puckerman himself. Blaine's heart dropped to the floor and he looked over at Puck, hoping beyond hope that Puck would nix his girl kissing his little brother's friend. But Blaine had no such luck.

"Get it Anderson," Puck grinned and when Blaine looked at Kitty she was staring back at him like he was candy. He wondered if he could just melt into the floor and avoid all of this. He had no idea what he had been thinking asking to come to the after party. His mom had been right, he was way too young for this. This wasn't a kiss on the cheek from sweet, innocent Marley, this was a real honest to goodness kiss from a girl who knew what she was doing. And he wasn't ready.

"Come here Blaine, I won't bite," Kitty urged him and he giggled, horribly uncomfortable and red in the face but not wanting to make a complete fool of himself in front of all of these older kids. He leaned into the center like everyone else had and he closed his eyes and let Kitty do the work. Her lips pressed into his, harder than he liked and he opened his eyes, just as she sat back with a grin. "Good boy," she teased with a grin. Or was she serious? He couldn't tell.

Jake slapped him on the back with pride that Blaine was pretty sure he hadn't at all earned and he went back to staring at the ground until it was his turn to spin. His heart racing in his chest, he gave the bottle of short twist. Panic filled him when the bottle stopped and Kitty Wilde was staring at him once again.

The room erupted in cheers as they had each time a couple had been sent to the closet. Puck stood up, reaching a hand out for Blaine and he had no choice but to take it and follow him and Kitty into the closet.

"Bottoms up kids," Puck said, pouring the scotch, smiling and closing the door behind him.

Blaine's head was spinning. The closet was small, just the stool with the two glasses and a rod full of coats and he was pretty sure the walls were closing in on him. His eyes fell to the shots filled with scotch. Kitty picked hers up and held it to clink with his. "Down the hatch Blaine," she prodded.

Blaine stared at it. He knew he shouldn't. He knew he couldn't without risking his skin when he went home. As much as his father had wanted him to go to the party, there was a stern reminder to call immediately if there was alcohol. And yet, he couldn't do that either. He couldn't be that little kid who told on his friends. So he just looked up at Kitty with desperation. "I can't drink that," he said quietly, his cheeks blushing. "My parents would kill me if I did."

Kitty appraised him and put it down with a shrug. "That's okay. I'll drink it for you. I'll do it after we kiss so it's not on your breath."

Blaine was grateful for that. But then Blaine swallowed hard. That meant she was going to...

Kitty leaned in close, her eyes staying firmly on his as she smiled. He knew what he was supposed to do. 7 Minutes in Heaven didn't mean a peck on the lips. He knew he was supposed to make it to second base at least. She closed her eyes and leaned in, her lips touching his. She was softer than last time with the ability to take her time now, and he tried to kiss back until her tongue reached out. He immediately snapped back, unconsciously wiping his mouth. She pulled back and glared at him.

"Sorry," he whispered embarrassed, rubbing his hand on the back of his neck. "I just...I've never done this before."

Her gaze softened, considering him. "How old are you?"

His face burned. "12."

She looked at him as if he was the most adorable puppy in the world. She gently took his hand and took a step toward him. "Well, let me teach you how it's done."

He tried to tell her *no thank you* but his voice was caught in his throat and soon he didn't have the use of his mouth anyway because her lips were back and he thought he should be enjoying it far more than he was but really he just wanted to run away and hide. She licked her tongue along his lips and he opened his mouth slightly, his heart pounding. He barely got to process that because suddenly his hand was in hers and she was bringing it under her shirt up to her chest and he panicked and....

"Well look at little Anderson gettin' some!" Puck yelled as the door swung open. Blaine panicked again, his pulse wild because the shots were still there and Puck was going to make him drink it and his parents were going to kill him and he would never see Kurt again, but when he turned around both shots were empty.

He staggered out of the closet to hoots and hollers but Blaine just grabbed Jake's hand and pulled him out of the basement and up the stairs.

"Dude, that was awesome-" Jake cheered but Blaine interrupted him.

"I need to get out of here," Blaine said. He felt like he was going to cry and he needed to not be in this house when that happened. "I need to go home. Where's my phone?" he said, searching his pockets frantically until Jake found it in his coat.

"Blaine, you okay man? What happened? Did Kitty do something?" Jake's concern was genuine but Blaine couldn't handle it right now.

"I just need to go, okay?" Blaine looked at his friend begging. "Please?"

"Yeah, of course," Jake said handing him his phone. "It's alright, I'll stay with you 'till you go."

Blaine called his mom and he and Jake went outside to the front stoop to wait. They sat side by side, Blaine lost in his thoughts. With Marley it maybe hadn't felt good or anything but it hadn't felt bad like that. But Kitty. She was an older, experienced girl and he should have loved kissing her. Shouldn't he have?

"Blaine, if she hurt you-"

"She didn't. She didn't do anything wrong, I just..." he looked at Jake. How did he explain that kissing Kitty had felt the complete opposite of how he thought it should have felt. How did he explain that touching her had made his stomach turn. "It was just weird," he said instead. "Kissing your brother's girl."

It was explanation enough because Jake just nodded seeming to accept it and then his Mom showed up and he slid into the passenger seat of the car and put his seat belt on.

"How was the party?" she asked looking over at him.

"It was fine," he muttered and hoped she wouldn't ask any more.

She must have known though because she just shifted the car into drive and he stared out the window up at the sky wishing there were stars to wish on. Wishing that he knew if Kurt was looking up and wishing too. What he wouldn't give right now to be able to call him, talk to him, tell him what happened. If anyone could help him make sense of it, Kurt could.

Teresa watched him out of the corner of her eye, her lip worried in her teeth. She'd been afraid that this would happen, that he wasn't ready yet to deal with a party like this. She knew why John had let him go, had wanted him to go. All too often he let the past cloud his judgment. And now Blaine was paying the price.

She made a quick decision and turned left instead of right. It snapped Blaine from his daydreams and he looked at his mom. "Where are we going?" he asked.

"I just remembered, I need to make a quick stop at Cooper's before we go home."

March 6, 2004

Dear Kurt,

I wish I could call you right now but my Mom's in the living room with Cooper. I think I have five minutes to write so I'm just going to say this and maybe just writing it will make me understand. I kissed a girl tonight. Or she kissed me. Not like on the cheek like Marley. On the lips. With tongue. She was older. Puck's friend. It was at his after party. And I didn't like it. I don't know why. I think I was supposed to like it. I mean, she wasn't sweet like Marley, she was one of those girls that knows how to kiss and more and tried to...you know...but it just felt totally wrong. I don't know. I told Jake it was because she's Puck's girl but I don't think that's really why. But maybe it's just like you said. Maybe it's just that she's the wrong girl.

Anyway, sorry to unload all this on you. But best friends are for talking about girl trouble, right? At least that's what Sam and Jake talk about all the time.

"Blaine, are you ready?" his mother called from the living room.

Mom's calling. Gotta go. Talk and write soon.

Your Friend,

Blaine

CHAPTER FIFTEEN:

Time for Us All to Decide Who We Are

With a song in our hearts

We invite you to share in our simcha

As our daughter

Rachel Barbra

Is called to the Torah

As a Bat Mitzvah

Saturday, the eighteenth of December

Two thousand and four

At ten-thirty in the morning

Temple Emanu-El

One East 65th Street, New York, NY

Leroy and Hiram Berry

"Dad. Dad!"

Kurt ran into the house from the mailbox, nearly tripping over his backpack in the entry way and almost colliding with his Dad, who'd come to see what was wrong.

"Oof, sorry," Kurt giggled, then held up the envelope that had been addressed to him. Burt took it and read it but he didn't really need to because Kurt didn't stop talking. "It's an invitation. To Rachel Berry's Bat

Mitzvah. In New York. December 18. I have to go. You have to let me go, Dad, please! I'd be able to spend the whole day with Blaine."

Burt looked down at him sharply, then smiled. "Well that's a very special invitation Kurt, of course I'll let you go. I'll figure out something to do with the shop." Burt flipped up the calendar in the hall. "It's the weekend before winter vacation, so we don't even have to worry about when to come back. Maybe we can take a few days in the city, all lit up for Christmas."

"And Blaine told me all about his friend's brother's Bar Mitzvah. There's usually a party for just the kids at the house after the party with all the grownups." He was nearly certain that Rachel's party would be nothing like Puck's. "Can I go to that too? Please!"

Burt looked down at his son's pleading face, eyes wide, hands folded beneath his chin, and he knew there was absolutely no way he could say no. "Yes, you can go to that too as long Rachel's parents will be there and as long as you remember you're 11 and not 13," Burt added pointedly.

Kurt screamed and jumped up and down and grabbed the phone. "I have to tell Blaine!" he shouted, happily running up the stairs to his room.

Blaine had known it would be a long shot but he wasn't above begging. He nearly dropped to his knees.

"Dad, please, please let me go to her after party, she's my best friend," Blaine begged.

"No." John turned back to his paperwork, the matter closed.

But Blaine wouldn't let it go and he turned to his mother. "Mom, please you have to-"

Blaine jumped at the sound of his father's hand slamming the desk. His father rose from his seat and Blaine shrank back. "Enough! One more word and you're not going to the Bat Mitzvah either!"

There were plenty of words teetering precariously on the tip of his tongue so he ran out of the room and up the stairs, taking care not to slam his bedroom door at the very last second. He fumed. He paced. He punched his pillow and threw it across the room. But he refused to scream and he refused to cry.

Because no matter what, he had the change to spend an entire day with Kurt, and that was something he couldn't let his father take away from him.

"So what is this I hear about you going to my Bat Mitzvah with Tina Cohen-Chang?"

"What? I don't...I mean...How did you...?"

The way Rachel could just swoop in, link elbows, and drag him away from whatever it was he might have been doing, important or not, would always unnerve Blaine. He glanced back apologetically at Sam who merely rolled his eyes and closed Blaine's locker for him with a smirk.

Blaine stopped mid-hallway and pulled himself together with a breath. "That just happened five minutes ago!"

Now it was Rachel's turn to roll her eyes. "It's a small school Blaine, news travels fast. But that's beside the point," she said, grabbing his arm again and pulling him around the corner to a more secluded hallway. "What about Kurt?" she asked softly through her teeth.

Blaine scrunched his brow and his nose wrinkled in a way that Rachel would think was endearing if she wasn't completely annoyed with him right now. "I don't understand what me going to your Bat Mitzvah with Tina has to do with Kurt."

"Of course you don't," Rachel muttered under her breath. Well if Blaine didn't understand she was not going to be the one to explain it to him. Her fathers had made her promise to just give them both time to figure things out for themselves. "I just mean," she said slowly, "that I invited Kurt for you as much as me and he is coming all this way just to spend time with you and I know how clingy Tina can be with her boyfriends."

"Well I'm not her boyfriend," Blaine protested, frowning. "It's just a date."

"I just..." Rachel stopped, frustrated, realizing that she wouldn't change his mind. "Don't be a jerk Blaine. Tina cries easily and it's my party and I don't need her messing it up."

"Rachel I-" Blaine started but she just turned around and flounced away in dramatic fashion.

Blaine sighed. He knew he shouldn't have asked Tina. But his Dad had wanted to know who he was going with and with the image of Kurt in his mind he panicked. He had no choice now.

And besides...maybe Tina would finally be the one.

Kurt had never been in a synagogue before, but then again he'd refused to step foot inside a church as well since his mother's funeral. It wasn't that he didn't believe, because he still kind of did. It was just that the memories were too vivid.

"You didn't need to walk me in," Kurt told his father, scanning the crowd for Blaine.

"Yes I did," Burt said, also scanning the crowd, but not for Kurt's friend. "Rachel's dads may have been nice on the phone, but I'm not leaving you in their hands overnight without meeting them first. Especially since I know Blaine won't be there with you."

When Blaine had confirmed what they both already knew, that his father had absolutely forbidden him from going to Rachel's after party, Kurt had considered not going as well. They'd talked about going back to Cooper's house instead but Coop had rehearsal with a cast gathering afterwards that he absolutely could not miss. So his dad had told Kurt it would be a good time to get to know Rachel better. And as much as he wished he could spend more time with Blaine, he had to admit he was kind of looking forward to spending the night with Rachel and her girlfriends.

"We'll just drop off your stuff with Rachel's dads, I'll say a quick hello and then I'll be out of your hair," Burt said, knowing all too well that Kurt did not want to seem the little kid in a gathering of teenagers. "Look, there they are."

Though they'd never met, Rachel's parents were easy to spot, dressed to the nines with just a touch of flare and beaming like the proud parents they were. Kurt followed his Dad who introduced himself and they were both led to the office where they could leave Kurt's things. He'd take the limo to the reception with Rachel and Blaine and then back to her house afterwards.

"I'll pick you up first thing in the morning, okay?" Burt told him. "We'll go out to breakfast then tour the town."

"Okay," Kurt agreed.

"Kurt!"

The sound of Blaine's voice rose over the crowd straight to Kurt's ears and to the smile on his face that grew huge. Blaine was jogging over and before Kurt could say a word he had his arms around him. "I'm so glad you came!"

"Me too," Kurt answered, a little breathless.

Burt smirked and ruffled his son's hair. "I think this is my cue to leave. Nice to see you Blaine. Kurt I'll see you tomorrow."

Kurt waved absentmindedly barely even seeing his father go.

"We should go inside and get seats," Blaine said. He couldn't wipe the grin from his face. But a throat clearing behind him made him turn to find Tina's piercing gaze on him. "Oh my goodness, where are my manners. Kurt, this is Tina. Tina, this is my friend Kurt. He lives in Ohio."

Kurt felt the sting of a thousand daggers as the girl stared at him. "I'm Blaine's *date*," she emphasized haughtily and Kurt's head tilted with curiosity, both with the fact that this girl seemed to not be very nice and with the fact that Blaine had a date. He hadn't mentioned it in his letters or phone calls.

"It's nice to meet you Tina," Kurt said carefully, trying hard to discretely raise a brow at Blaine without being rude.

Blaine gave a sheepish shrug that was interrupted by hands on his shoulders as Sam jumped on him from behind. "Let's go Blaine, good seats are going fast."

The four of them walked inside the Sanctuary, Tina grabbing Blaine's hand, and Kurt following behind. They sat in a pew with two other kids their age. Kurt was quickly introduced to Sam, Jake and Marley who were pretty much exactly how Blaine had been describing them for years now. They had little time to talk though because services began.

For Puck's Bar Mitzvah, Puck had done as little of the service as possible. But Rachel Barbra Berry never gave up the chance to shine in the spotlight. And neither did her fathers. They owned the congregation as

if they were on Broadway. Rachel's voice rang out over the diverse crowd of friends and family, as the Rabbi and Cantor were pushed aside by Rachel and Hiram. Jake quietly explained to his friends and Kurt what was going on, especially when Rachel read from the Torah.

From the sidelines, Leroy watched the loves of his life with pride. He wouldn't let them upstage him though. Rachel's Bat Mitzvah speech was heartfelt enough to get Blaine crying but Leroy's left no eyes in the congregation dry. Kurt wiped his eyes too, so grateful to have been allowed to be a part of Rachel's most special day. And to just be able to spend this time with Blaine, sitting so close they were almost touching.

Blaine's hand in Tina's was the only thing distracting Kurt from the joy that swelled inside him. He wished more than anything that it was his hand in Blaine's. Their arms that were touching.

He shook his head at himself, focusing his attention on the end of the service. It was just a crush. On a boy who loved him but would never feel *that* same way about him. He'd grown to accept that Blaine might be the first, but he wouldn't be the last.

When the final prayers were said and the final Mazel Tovs were given, Blaine and his friends went to the front to congratulate Rachel themselves. Kurt waited for the rest to hug her or high five her until finally it was his turn.

Her back was to him and he tapped her gently on the shoulder until she turned. "Rachel, you were wonderful," Kurt said a bit shyly. Though they'd been writing back and forth now for almost two years it was the first time they were meeting in person since that brief visit backstage of Les Mis.

"Kurt!" Rachel squealed, all decorum thrown out the window as she hugged him. Kurt thought she might try to twirl him around if she could. "I am so excited that you could come! I can't wait for the party tonight we're going to have such a good time! Did you sit with Blaine?"

Kurt laughed and ducked his head. Only one person had an inkling of how he felt about his best friend and she was staring at him with a brow raised and a smirk on her lips. "Yes I did," he told her. "And he held Tina's hand the entire time so you can stop trying to play matchmaker Yente. It's not going to happen."

Rachel bopped him on the nose. "Never say never," she giggled. He was rolling his eyes fondly when her fathers came over to tell them it was time to go. "I'll meet you at the limo," she whispered.

Kurt weaved his way through the huge crowd of family and friends catching up, making plans and getting directions to the reception. He saw Jake and Marley in the corner, laughing with one another, checking their phones no doubt to see if Jake's parents were there to drive them over. Marley caught Kurt's eye and waved with a sweet smile and he waved back. Now that he knew her he felt bad that he'd ever been jealous of her friendship with Blaine. He was smiling as he opened the door to the office where his things for the overnight had been stashed.

And then he froze.

Tina and Blaine had been out of view of the door's window but stepping inside he could see them plain as day. Her hands were draped over his shoulders. His arms were linked around her waist. And their mouths were pressed against one another in a kiss.

His stomach lurched and his heart hurt in his chest when the door clicked shut behind him. Blaine and Tina nervously jumped apart at the interruption. Kurt stammered. "I'm sorry...sorry...I just..." he pointed to his things and stared at them dumbly. "My things...for the after party."

Blaine's face flushed and for some reason he felt like he'd made the hugest mistake in the world. "Kurt it isn't... I mean it wasn't..."

The offended glare on Tina's face snapped Kurt out of his stupor and he grabbed his things. "No, hey it's okay. I'll just get out of your way. Limo's leaving soon."

Kurt raced out of the room and outside where the air helped him calm himself. He was being ridiculous. Tina was Blaine's date and they were allowed to kiss. He had no right to be jealous. He should be happy if Blaine had finally found a girl with whom it felt right. He *would* be happy. That's what best friends were for after all.

Blaine had neglected to mention to his father the small fact that he'd be riding in the limo with Rachel and her friends, letting him think instead that one of his friends' parents was giving him a ride. He didn't know if his father would have said no, but he most certainly hadn't wanted to give him the chance. Besides, Kurt had never been in a limousine before and Blaine wanted to be with his best friend the first time he did. What was one more lie in a string of deception far longer than Blaine would ever have desired.

But Kurt had seemed so upset when he left the room and Tina just seemed angry at him now and he'd been trying so hard to make the kiss feel good but it hadn't and he just wanted to talk to his best friend. "I'm sorry Tina, I have to go," he fumbled before racing out of the room, not even seeing Tina gaping behind him.

He saw Kurt ducking into the limo and Blaine sped up, jogging down the sidewalk to climb in after him. He sat down next to Kurt but the minute he was there, alone in the large car now, things grew into an awkward silence.

At the same time for both boys the silence had grown too long. "I'm sorry," they said together.

The both giggled and it broke the tension, Kurt teasing, "Jinx." Blaine huffed and folded his arms on his chest but Kurt just winked. "Circle, circle, dot, dot, now you have the jinx shot."

"Phew," Blaine said. "That was close."

Kurt side-eyed him with a smirk. "Can't stay silent for even a minute Anderson?"

"Can't waste a minute with you," Blaine said.

Kurt blushed and turned his head to hide his rosy cheeks. "Well at least it seemed like you finally had a good kiss."

Now it was Blaine's turn to blush, not because the kiss was good but because it wasn't. Blaine shrugged and looked at him with his nose scrunched. "Nah. I don't think Tina's the one."

Kurt bit back a smile and tried to look sympathetic. "Well, you're still young. You've got a few good years left to find the right girl," he joked.

The door opened and Rachel came in, two of her girlfriends from dance class laughing and trailing behind.

"Hey you too, have you met Rebecca and Jane?"

Kurt looked at the girls and back at Blaine and raised a suggestive brow.

Blaine laughed and shook his head, shoving Kurt playfully down onto the seat.

Rachel just stared at the two askance. "Alright guys, let's get this show on the road!"

Puck's reception had been kicked off by girl dancers Blaine was certain were far too scantily clad for a 13 year old's birthday party. He'd joined in dancing, trying to grasp just what everyone else seemed to be so worked up about. This time, he fit right in. From the moment they entered the room to Broadway classics, he and Kurt started singing along with nearly every other guest and they barely stopped whenever the music was playing. They sang and laughed. They danced the Hora and helped raise Rachel up in a chair, and as Rachel's best friend, Blaine was called to the front to light a birthday candle for her.

"That is the biggest cake I have ever seen," Jake said, nearly drooling at the near perfect replica of the Imperial Theater stage.

"And the most gorgeous," Kurt added wistfully.

"Not as gorgeous as the theater itself," Blaine reminded him and Kurt couldn't agree more.

"Who cares how big or pretty it is, I just want to eat it," Sam said.

Glasses clinked and the room quieted, all the lights glowing to illuminate Leroy, Hiram and Rachel who was smiling so large that Blaine wondered if she might break into song right then and there. Her dads looked down at her, pride shining on their faces.

"We said much of what we wanted to say about Rachel before, but seeing all of you here, come from as far away as Florida and Ohio to join us today, we just wanted to say a little bit about what you all mean to us, to our family," Hiram started, looking out over the crowd. "When we looked down at the scrunched up face of a screaming little girl 13 years ago and committed to making her a part of our lives, we had no idea how many wonderful people she would bring to us as well. Sure, many of you are related to us and have to be here," he chuckled and the crowd laughed with him, "but as I look out at how many friends Rachel has here, how many of you have supported her and loved her and come to London to see her perform," he said winking at Blaine. Blaine's face glowed with the acknowledgement. "We are just so grateful that Leroy and I were able to have the family that we always dreamed of, and that each of you, in your own way, are so much a part of that family. And Rachel, we hope that in the coming years as you forge your path into adulthood, that you will continue to add more and more to our lives and our family."

"Oh my god, just give us the cake already," Sam muttered under his breath.

"Your stomach is a million times bigger than your heart," Marley disapproved, rolling her eyes.

Jake joined in the bickering, their attention completely diverted now from Rachel and her fathers, but Blaine paid no attention to his friends. Rachel was beautiful, her family was beautiful, and there was something itching at him, something nearly déjà vu like and yet so unfamiliar he couldn't even put a name to it.

"We just want to wish our little girl..." Hiram looked at LeRoy and Rachel and smiled proudly. "I mean our young lady, a very happy birthday, and Mazel Tov on her beautiful chanting of the Torah. Let's raise a glass and cheer, L'Chaim!"

Blaine lifted his glass to his best friend, laughing as she crinkled her nose at the sip of wine her fathers gave her. While Rachel picked up the knife and began the first cut into the cake before staff took it away, LeRoy and Hiram laughed as well, drank their wine, wrapped their arms around one another, and celebrated their family's milestone with a tender kiss.

And in that moment Blaine's world snapped into sharp focus as if all the pieces of a broken puzzle suddenly slid into place.

His heart skipped a beat.

His head went light and he nearly dropped his glass his hand was shaking so much. Sweat beaded on his forehead.

"Are you okay?" Kurt asked, but his voice sounded far away, and Blaine wondered if he had imagined it. He felt both sick and alive for the first time and he slipped away as best he could and raced out, searching for an empty room nearby. A hotel this big had to have an empty ballroom.

Finding a conference room he fell to the floor, the cold of the hardwood beneath his knees helping to ground him. Blaine didn't know a lot of things. But the one thing he understood more clearly than ever before was that he could not go home. Not now. Not tonight. Sitting in the middle of the room, back to the door, he reached for his phone and dialed.

"Mom?" His voice was breathless. Panicked. And yet he continued on as if his entire world had not just been flipped on its axis where everything wrong was right and everything right was wrong. "I just talked to Cooper. He said he would pick me up at the hotel."

The quiver in Blaine's voice was clear as day and Teresa knew her son too well. "Blaine what's wrong? Don't lie to me."

Tears flooded his eyes and he closed them against the raging tide, his heart aching with the pain of once more having to hide everything he felt and everything he was. "I'm not lying, please, Mom, his rehearsal was cancelled, you have to let me go. Please."

"And if I called Cooper?" she challenged. "He'd tell me he's coming to get you?"

"Yes, yes, he'd tell you he's picking me up," Blaine told her, cursing himself for not texting Cooper before he'd called. "Please."

He held his breath against the silence on the other end of the phone and prayed that she would just let him go, let him be, let him deal with this somewhere safe. "Let me make myself very clear Blaine," she finally told him, her voice heavy with warning. "I am giving you permission to go home with Cooper tonight. Not to go to Rachel's house."

"I understand," Blaine said solemnly, but it changed nothing. He was resolute. He didn't care about the consequences. Not going carried consequences far greater.

Her response was laced with tension but also a gentleness that only could come from a mother who loved her son. "I hope you know what you're doing," she said, not fooled in the slightest. She knew exactly where he was going that night. And Blaine knew that she knew.

But it didn't matter. It may have been Rachel's Bat Mitzvah, but that night Blaine became a man. "I think I understand what I'm doing now more than I ever have before."

Kurt waited outside the room, overhearing the last bit of conversation, and Blaine's goodbye. He watched Blaine hang up and quickly text his brother in warning. Finally his friend put the phone down and tried to catch his breath. Kurt took one tentative step inside. "Blaine?" he called softly.

Blaine turned with a startle, looking up at Kurt with eyes that widened, narrowed, then settled with a tenderness as if truly seeing him for the first time. Seeing the world for the first time. And it took Kurt's breath away.

"Hi," Blaine whispered.

Crossing the room, Kurt knelt down with Blaine and took his hand. It was shaking. "You okay? You ran out of the room pretty quick, I wasn't sure if you were sick or if something was wrong."

"Nothing's wrong Kurt." His face and his voice was full of wonder and Kurt longed to understand. "I think finally everything is right. Terrifyingly right."

Kurt shook his head and frowned. "I don't understand."

"But I do now. All those girls I've kissed. Marley. Kitty. Tina." Blaine looked at him, so grateful he was there because Kurt was the only person in the world that he would ever admit this to right now and he couldn't imagine going through this alone. "Kurt, I don't think it's that they were the wrong girls. I think...I think it's that they *were* girls."

Kurt's skin tingled with hope, but he willed it to stop, needing first to make sure he truly understood. "Blaine, what are you saying?"

Blaine's golden eyes gazed into Kurt's, the most magical and beautiful eyes he had ever seen and they offered him love and understanding and a safe place to fall no matter what and he didn't know how he knew that this 11 year old boy could make everything okay for him but somehow he did. "Kurt." Blaine took a breath and swallowed, knowing that nothing would be the same after saying four of the hardest words in the world but he had to say them, he had to tell someone. "I think I'm gay."

The words were barely above a whisper but they hung in the air like static electricity ready to start a fire of either warmth or destruction, Blaine wasn't sure which one. Kurt was still in front of him. Watching. Searching. But for what Blaine didn't know.

Kurt's breath hitched at the words. His stomach fluttered. And the memory of Blaine's lips brushing his cheek years ago flooded his senses. His mind tried to decide if it was worth the risk, but his heart knew it was. He swallowed hard, and took a chance. "Well how can you be sure if you've never kissed a boy?" Kurt finally asked, shakily.

"I don't know," Blaine admitted quietly. "But seeing Rachel's fathers kiss was like..." Blaine bowed his head, unable to explain.

"Would it..." Blaine looked up at Kurt biting his lower lip bashfully. He had to admit it was adorable. "Would it be okay..." Kurt's voice broke, his nerves frayed because he knew this moment was it. The moment that he'd dreamt about for more than two years now and that for better or for worse would change everything. His voice grew stuck in his throat but he forced it out anyway. "Would it be okay if I kissed you?"

Kurt's face, his words, stole Blaine's breath away and he could do nothing more than nod his consent.

Kurt leaned in. Blaine closed his eyes. His heart beat quickly in his chest, a rhythm of excited anticipation that made his cheeks flush. Then suddenly he felt lips, Kurt's lips, brush against his own and his heart skipped a beat, his skin grew warm and he felt the spark that had always been missing before. He knew without a doubt in his mind that this time it was right.

Kurt wondered if he was doing this right, if he was kissing too much or not enough. He started with a quick brush of his lips, letting Blaine pull away if he wanted, but the gasp that escaped Blaine's mouth encouraged him and he pressed just a little bit harder before leaning back. He watched as Blaine's eyes slowly fluttered open and only then did his cheeks glow with embarrassment.

"So?" Kurt asked. He wrung his hands together then played with the end of his tie. "How did it feel?"

With wonder in his voice, Blaine whispered, "Like coffee."

Kurt scrunched his face in amused confusion. "What?"

"Like coffee," Blaine repeated. With a soft smile he tried to explain. "I've always thought that coffee smelled delicious but my mom would always say I was too young and I wouldn't like it. A few weeks ago after my 13th birthday, I asked my mom again if I could try it. And when she let me have a sip it was like...it was like I knew that when I was grown up enough, coffee would be one of my favorite things in the whole world. That I would want to wake up to it every morning." Blaine blushed as he looked at his fingers. "I guess that sounds silly."

Kurt shook his head and reached for Blaine's hand. "It's not silly. I think I completely understand."

Leaning back, Blaine's resolve was never greater. "I'm going to Rachel's party Kurt."

"No, Blaine, you can't," Kurt protested. "Your parents will kill you."

"I don't care," Blaine told him, standing up from the floor. "I can't go home Kurt. I can't look my Dad in the eye and know that I'm everything that he hates. Not tonight. Tonight is too perfect to ruin like that." He closed his eyes tight. He wouldn't cry because of this. "Besides, whatever happens is worth it if I get to kiss you again." Now it was Kurt's turn to blush, but he couldn't look away because Blaine reached a hand down for him. "I just need some time. With you and no one else. Will you please be here for me?"

Of course he would. Kurt would do anything for Blaine. "I am always here for you."

"How long have you known?"

Blaine's voice was a whisper but Kurt could hear him effortlessly. They were lying side by side, each in their own cocoon of a sleeping bag in a darkened room in Rachel's house. The girls were huddled in her bedroom. They could hear them giggling about boys and makeup and though both Kurt and Blaine could easily join in the conversation, they were content right where they were. Together and alone, heads resting on their pillows unable to take their eyes from each other.

"I've known since you kissed me on the cheek in Ohio," Kurt admitted shyly.

"Oh my god, Kurt, you were like nine, how did you know then?"

Kurt shrugged in the darkness. "I guess it felt like coffee," he mused.

"So you knew when Brittany was trying to get you to be her boyfriend?" Blaine realized.

Kurt nodded softly. "I guess I was just trying to make sure. You were dating girls and I thought maybe I should try it too."

"Does your dad know?" Blaine asked carefully.

"No," Kurt said, his voice sad.

"Why not?" Blaine wondered. "If anyone would understand he would."

Kurt sighed. "I don't know. I know he'd understand but I still think he'd be disappointed. I'm sure his dream for a son is the Quarterback, not the cheerleader."

"You'd be a cute cheerleader," Blaine giggled.

Kurt reached beneath him and grabbed his pillow, hitting Blaine square in the head with it. "Shut up," he laughed with a blush and he sat up and crossed his legs. He hugged the pillow into his lap and bit his lip. "What about you?" Kurt asked softly. "Are you going to tell anyone?"

Blaine shook his head. "I can't. My dad would never be okay with it."

"But what about Cooper?" Kurt knew that Cooper would understand and would be fine. Cooper was the best brother in the whole world.

But though it filled his heart with heaviness, Blaine wouldn't even consider it. "I've made him cover up enough for me as it is. I can't add this also, it's too much."

A silence fell over them. Kurt laid back down and tucked the pillow back beneath his head. Staring into the darkness, eyes on the ceiling, the question and answer lingered in the air between them before either of them could say it out loud. But it was Kurt who found the courage first.

"So what happens now?"

"I don't know," Blaine admitted without sadness and fear because in *that* moment, he was the happiest he had ever been in his life. "If you were here..." he started then trailed off.

"But I'm not." Kurt wasn't kidding himself. Sure if they lived in the same state, went to school together as he once wished upon on a star, it might be different. Though he didn't even really know what different would look like since they were so young. Holding hands down the school hallway? "You'll write me? About all the cute boys you date?"

Blaine's brows raised. "You wouldn't mind?"

"You're my best friend Blaine. That's what best friends are for. Of course that is if you don't mind when I write about all the straight boys at my school I can never date," Kurt teased.

"It would be an honor," Blaine giggled. They both fell silent again, their gaze never straying from the other. They both knew what stayed hidden inside them. It was the same thing they'd been feeling for years only this time it was magnified ten-fold. Longing. Wishing. Missing each other even when they were in the same room because they knew that it was only a matter of hours before once again they were light years apart.

But they did still have hours.

And wasting them would do no good.

"So," Kurt said, his heart racing in his chest, "I think you said something earlier about kissing me again?"

Blaine blushed and ducked his head, his eyelashes falling across his face in a way that made butterflies come alive in Kurt's stomach. "Well, I suppose if we're going to be meeting cute boys, we ought to practice kissing them," he said coyly. "But only if you want to," he added quickly, looking up, hopefully.

Kurt nodded slightly against his pillow then realized Blaine might not have seen him. "I want to," he whispered breathlessly.

Blaine smiled and leaned in.

Maybe they didn't have forever. But for now they both agreed that practicing with one another was far more fun than using the crook of their own elbows.

Rachel stood at the door of the guest room, peeking in through the small crack she'd learned long ago could offer a glimpse of the secrets kept behind closed doors.

She watched for a few minutes. Kurt would lean in and peck Blaine's lips then lean back and giggle. But before they could lose it, Blaine would lean in and kiss Kurt softly. Over and over they repeated the pattern, never trying more but just enjoying the simple delight of another boy's lips against their own.

Rachel smiled, stepping back and making her way back to the girls in her bedroom.

She'd known when she'd invited Kurt that her plan had potential.

She was just glad the boys were cooperating.

The minute Burt dropped Blaine off at Cooper's apartment he rushed inside to get changed. His mother was due any minute and he needed to be in jeans and a t-shirt, not his suit when she arrived. He took a quick shower, washing the gel out of his hair, and scrunched it back into curls when he was done. The doorbell rang just as he finished. His heart raced and a lump was sitting squarely in his throat hearing her and Cooper's murmured voices, but at the sound of her calling his name he made his way out into the living room.

Teresa was handing Cooper forty dollars from her purse. "Go to the Carnegie Deli three blocks down and bring back my favorite blintzes plus whatever you and Blaine want for breakfast. We'll eat here before we go home."

Cooper bit his lip, trying to avoid Blaine's gaze, but their eyes met briefly before Cooper pocketed the money and headed out. Blaine's heart sunk seeing the apology in them.

The door clicked shut and his mother turned to him. Blaine shoved his hands in his pockets and scuffed the floor with his shoe. "So when did you get here?" she asked sternly.

"I told you, Coop was picking me up last night-"

"Stop before you tell another lie Blaine," she ordered. He lifted his face to hers but his heart beat wildly in his chest and he was too scared to see the warmth in her eyes. "Cooper didn't pick you up did he?" she asked softly.

His head dropped again. "No ma'am," he muttered.

"So when did you get back here?" she asked again.

"This morning," he whispered. He looked up at her silence and she was clearly waiting for more. "My friend's Dad dropped me off."

"You went to Rachel's house." It wasn't a question and he didn't try any more to pretend it was.

"Yes ma'am."

"Even though I explicitly told you not to," she said.

"Yes Ma'am."

"Even though your father has expressly forbidden you from going over there time and time again," she continued.

"Yes Ma'am."

"And you knew what would happen if you went?"

That one was a question. But as he'd told Kurt the night before, it was worth whatever happened to spend hours through the night talking to him. Kissing him. He lifted his chin and looked her squarely in the eye.

"Yes ma'am," he admitted, then asked his own question. "Did Cooper tell you?"

"No, not at first," she answered, gentler than he would have expected. "Rachel's dads called me. You know, they and I go way back, long before you or Rachel were born, and they know you're not allowed over there. They knew you never would have gotten permission to go. Honestly Blaine, I don't know what you were thinking."

Blaine lowered his eyes to the floor. He couldn't tell her what he'd been thinking so he said the only thing he could. "I'm sorry."

"No you're not and it's time for the lies to stop," she snapped. He looked back up at her nervously. It caused her heart to break just a little bit, but she had to do what she had to do. "Okay then. Let's go."

Blaine watched his mother walk past him toward his bedroom and he didn't move, trying to wrap his head around exactly what was happening right then. But it made no sense to him. "You're not going to take me home to Dad?"

His mom stopped. With her back turned to him he was unable to see her eyes close as regret and sadness washed over her face. He couldn't see understanding settle into her features and he didn't see her come to

a decision she'd been fighting for years. A decision to show her son exactly what courage was. All he saw was her turning around to really look at him. And then she said the last thing he would have ever expected. "Do you remember a few years ago when you took that boy backstage at Les Mis?"

"Kurt." Blaine let the name slip before he even had time to think and he ducked his head, red flooding to his cheeks.

Teresa chuckled to herself at his quickness. "Yes. Kurt. Do you remember what you told me that night?"

Blaine closed his eyes and sighed. He would never forget. "I told you he was beautiful. The most beautiful boy I've ever seen."

She took a step toward him, sitting gently on the arm of the couch just beyond his reach. "And do you remember what I told you?"

His eyes lifted, meeting hers, and they hardened slightly against his will with resentment. "You said, *don't let your father hear you say that.*"

"And do you think that I told him? What happened that night? Or what you said?"

Blaine had never thought about it before. He imagined that had his father known he would have been in trouble for sure. He might have lost Les Mis months earlier. He might have lost everything. And back so many years ago he wouldn't have even really understood why. But now he understood all too well. "No," Blaine answered.

She reached out a hand to him and he took it, tentatively stepping closer, curiosity taking over whatever fear he'd had of what was to come. "I know that Cooper thinks that I tell your father everything. And with him, I did, there was no reason not to. But you're different Blaine. You've always been different." She brushed her fingers through his hair, something he'd always loved as a little boy, then placed a hand beneath his chin and held it firmly. "Your number one job, Blaine, is to always tell me the truth. And my number one job is to always keep you safe. Do you know what that means?"

Blaine bit his lip. If she'd asked him five minutes ago what that meant he was pretty sure he could have answered, but now he was just confused. "No," he whispered softly.

She studied him. Teresa knew that every mother thought their child was the most special one in the world, but she was the luckiest because she knew that Blaine truly was. "It means, my beautiful boy, that your *truth* is safe with me. Will *always* be safe with me." She took his other hand in hers and the warmth and safety in that touch threatened to loosen the grip on Blaine's heart that had been constricting him for far too long. "Even if that means not sharing your truth with your father until he's ready to hear it. Because I promise, sweetheart, someday he will be."

Blaine's breath caught and tears escaped before he could blink them back. Maybe, just maybe, if he could find it within himself to trust her, she could carry the burden of his secrets instead of him. Because tonight they had become far too heavy for him to carry alone.

She pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and dried his tears, smiling softly. "So after I talked to Rachel's dad, your brother opened up a little bit and told me there was someone special at the party. And that's why you disobeyed me?"

Blaine held his breath and nodded, his eyes falling to the floor as he choked out a whispered, "Yes."

"Now, I know it wasn't Tina," she smiled softly and he let out a brittle laugh and shook his head. Tina wasn't special, she hadn't been invited and her parents were unlikely to let her go even if she had been. "Was it Kurt?"

Blaine's eyes snapped up, fear gripping him. But he saw his mother smiling and the fear left as quickly as it had come. "How did you know?" he breathed.

Her eyes sparkled. "You forget that when parents go to teacher conferences at school we get to look through your things." The shock on her son's face was so adorable she started laughing. "In 5th grade you had a letter from him in your desk. I probably shouldn't have read it, but I knew you kept so many secrets from your dad and me that I couldn't stop myself." Blaine's eyes shut, embarrassed at what she must have read, not to mention ashamed of all the lies he now knew she knew he'd told. But if she minded, she didn't show it right then. "Last year they let us in to your lockers. I saw the pictures of you two. The trip to Ohio suddenly made a lot more sense." He waited for the yelling or the reprimands but they didn't come. "So how was the party?"

"It was wonderful," he admitted shyly. "He..." Memories of brushing Kurt's soft lips reddened his cheeks and a smile grew without warning and suddenly he couldn't hold it in even if he'd wanted to. "He kissed me," he whispered.

Teresa did not bat an eyelash. She simply smiled her encouragement. "And what did you do?"

His eyes filled with wonder, still not fully believing everything that had happened in the last day. "I kissed him back."

"And what do you think about that?" she asked gently.

"I think..." The words had been hard enough to say to Kurt, but now they were terrifying. And yet, holding them in was no longer an option. "I think I'm gay." Suddenly he was trembling and the dam broke, years of fear and shame bursting from him, tears streaming down his face. "I'm sorry," he sobbed. He was sorry for the lies and he was sorry for disobeying and he was sorry for crying and he was sorry for being the one thing that he knew his father didn't want him to be. "Dad's going to hate me."

"No, sweetheart, no," Teresa said, gathering Blaine in her arms. "Your father loves you more than anything. I know you don't understand it now, how could you? But I promise you that whatever he feels about this has everything to do with him and wanting to protect you and has absolutely nothing to do with what you feel inside of you."

"I don't want him to know," Blaine cried, his whole body shaking at the thought. "Please, please don't tell him."

"You'll tell him when you're ready and not a minute sooner." Teresa held him until his body settled then kissed him on his head and held him back so she could see his face. She pulled her handkerchief out once more and dried his tears. "I promise. Now why don't you and I go set the table for breakfast. Cooper should be home any minute."

Cooper. The whole reason his brother was gone came flooding back. "Am I...still in trouble?" he asked hesitantly.

Teresa took a minute. She knew what his father would expect, but honestly nothing had ever prepared her for this moment and she truly did not know what was right to do. But she knew what she felt in her heart. "It is completely unacceptable," she said sternly, "for you to tell me that one adult is caring for you in one

place while you're with another somewhere completely different. Especially somewhere that you have been absolutely forbidden to go." Blaine lowered his head and his skin tingled in anticipation of what was to come. "But," she continued and his eyes cautiously raised up again. "I should have made it clear a very long time ago that you could trust me. And Cooper should have come to me like an adult and talked to me instead of hiding your secrets." She grasped his hands and squeezed them tight. She looked at him with gentle regret. She'd known all along that keeping him from Rachel's parents was only delaying the inevitable. And that had made everything over the past few years worse for him. "This was not just your mistake. We've all made mistakes. And it doesn't quite seem fair that you're the only one who pays for it."

"I won't do it again," Blaine promised quietly. "I've hated lying to you all this time and I don't want to do it again. I just..." He looked at her through wet lashes and she saw the worry still in his eyes. She wished she could just kiss it away like the pain of a skinned knee. "Please don't take Kurt from me. Being able to write to him and talk to him means more to me than anything, especially now."

"I would never take him from you," she vowed without a second thought. "And I would never let anyone else take him either." Blaine let out a sigh of relief. "How long are Kurt and his Dad in the city for?"

"Um, I think Kurt said something about spending a few days. Wanting to see the city at Christmas time."

"Do you have his Dad's number?" Blaine nodded. "Give it to me. Your Dad's working late tomorrow night. Maybe we can all meet for dinner."

Blaine opened his mouth in shock. "You'd do that? Really?"

"Well I think the least I could do is really meet the boy that's turned my son's world upside down, don't you think?"

Blaine didn't answer. He just threw his arms around her and hugged her tight. "I love you Mom."

"I love you too Blaine," she said back. "So much."

ACT 4:

CHAPTER SIXTEEN:

Stand Up and Take Your Chance

Blaine hung upside down on his bed, the sound of his heart beating in his ears. He stared up at the window beside him. Soft snow fell from the Manhattan sky, coating the ground and revitalizing the dirty mush left over from the just after Christmas storm. It wasn't nearly enough to cancel the first day back to school after Winter Break. But it was pretty nonetheless.

The door opened but he didn't move. "Rise and shine sweetheart," he heard his mother sing. "Time to get up for school."

"Can't I just lie here in bed all day? Tell them I'm sick," he whined.

"I would tell them you're sick if you were sick, Blaine," she said and he felt her sit on the bed next to her. He sighed and scooted just a bit forward to lean up on his elbows. "Now what's this about?"

Blaine frowned, looking across his body at his toes instead of at his mom. "I don't want everyone to know. Not yet."

She chuckled just a little, not enough to make him think she was making fun. "It's not like you have a sign on your forehead Blaine. You're the same kid you were before Kurt visited."

"No I'm not," he said seriously. He sat up and curled his legs beneath him, leaning back against the window sill. Cold air escaped out the glass and it sent a foreboding chill down his spine. "I feel completely different. Alive for the first time. And that part of me wants to stand up tall and shout from the rooftops who I am. But the other part wants to close myself away and be as small as possible so I can hide."

"What are you hiding from?" she asked, placing a gentle hand on his knee.

Blaine dipped his eyes. "Dad. The kids at school. The teachers. Everyone who may not think its okay for me to like boys instead of girls." He looked up, his eyes searching for answers that she wished she had but didn't. "I'm not stupid Mom, I know what the kids at school say. What their parents believe. Most of them are just like Dad. But that's not all." He bit his lip and eyes returned to examine the cuticles on his nails. "How do I go in the boys' bathroom now? Or the locker room? Or the dressing room of my next show?"

"Ok first of all," she smiled softly, her eyes dancing with warmth, "half the other boys and men in the dressing rooms of your next show feel exactly the same way that you do. You'll never find more acceptance than you will there. You've always known that in your heart." Blaine nodded. His mom was right, he had always known that theater was his safe haven. "As for school?" She knew her advice came from a place of ignorance but so did half the things she'd told him growing up. Part of being a parent was faking it until you knew the right answers. "I think you just do it the same way you always have," she shrugged. "You just be the gentleman we taught you to be; respect other people, respect yourself. The stuff you're afraid of? Those are just the things you've heard from your Dad or other people who are afraid of things they don't understand. I think you'll be nervous, but then you'll do it the first time and realize you had nothing to be nervous about at all. Like your first audition," she smiled.

"I hope so," he muttered.

"Well you won't find out until you go," she declared, putting an end to the conversation. She tapped his leg and got up, crossing to the door. "Breakfast will be ready in ten minutes, so you better get your butt downstairs while it's warm, understand?"

"Yes Ma'am," he complied with resignation, pulling himself out of bed. He went to the bathroom and brushed his teeth, running some water through his hair before he gently scrunched in the gel the costume designers had introduced him to.

"I love your hair Blaine, it's one of my favorite things about you," Kurt whispered. "The way your curls just kinda fall over your face."

"That's your favorite thing about me?" Blaine raised a brow. "Years of writing letters and my curls have you charmed?"

"Your charm has me charmed Blaine," Kurt corrected, before glancing over at the grownups at the table. His father and Blaine's mother were intent in their own conversation though not paying any attention. Kurt leaned in closer and his eyes gleamed. "Your curls make me want to kiss you," he whispered.

Blaine smiled at the memory as he wolfed down his eggs and grabbed his coat and backpack for school. He reached up to the shelf in the front hallway and pulled down the Lion King scarf that he and Kurt had bought back in Ohio. Wrapping it around his neck, he thought that if he imagined really hard he could almost believe it was Kurt hugging him.

He pulled the scarf tight around himself on his walk to school, the scarf he shared with the boy he loved. *No*, Kurt thought shaking the words from his head. *He couldn't love Blaine. At least not in that way.*

Getting through dinner with Blaine and his mom in New York had been one of the hardest meals of his life, not because Blaine's mother knew about him but because his father didn't. Sure his dad and Blaine's mom hit it off immediately and he was thrilled that Blaine could now be open at least with his her and his brother. He hoped it would make things easier for him now. But he couldn't say the things he wanted to say or do the things he wanted to do because he still didn't want his father to know that he was gay.

He was all his Dad had left. The idea of disappointing him, even a little bit, was too much to bear.

But loving Blaine, and who was he kidding, of course he loved him, was both too hard and the most exhilarating thing in his entire life. Too hard because Blaine was so far away. But exhilarating because as he walked into school that morning he was able to hold his head high, stand proud and feel strong because he had kissed a boy. And not just any boy. Blaine Anderson. Broadway star. And his very best friend.

"What are you smirking about Lion Queen," one of the boys asked and every other boy around him laughed. "Dreaming of dancing the ballet again?"

"Did you forget your tutu with your outfit today?" another cackled.

Kurt's stomach clenched and his heart sped up. But he would not let them get to him.

"No, David," Kurt smiled sweetly. "I think you just left it at your house when you borrowed it."

David lunged forward and Kurt ran. He ran down the hall and past the Principal's office and into Guidance. Behind him he could hear footsteps until he reached the doorway to the counselor's office, and then they slowed. He heard swears as they disappeared down the hallway.

"You need something Kurt?" the guidance secretary asked kindly.

"Oh, Mrs. MacMac," he said with a breath. "I just wanted to see if you or Ms. Bolt had any work you needed done before the bell?" He opened his coat and unwrapped the scarf around his neck, trying to appear as casual as possible.

"Oh that's so sweet of you dear, but I think we're okay," she said. She looked up and glanced out the door. "Besides," she whispered with a grin. "I think there's someone waiting for you."

Kurt had no idea who it could be but when he turned to where she was glancing he saw Brittany, leaning against the doorway with the sweetest smile on her face. "Hey Kurt," she said a bit shyly.

Kurt walked over to her and she immediately took his hand. It felt weird, like it was comfortable but a size too small in his grasp. "Hey Britt, how was your Christmas?"

"It was good," she grinned excitedly. "Can I walk you to class?"

Kurt looked around to see if he spied Santana anywhere, but the brunette was nowhere to be found. "Sure," he answered warily and she squeezed his hand.

"I'm not gonna let them hurt you Kurt, that's the whole point of me being your girlfriend." Kurt closed his eyes for just a second and sighed. He had hoped she would have forgotten about that girlfriend stuff over break but apparently she hadn't. And now, did he have to tell her the truth? "I was thinking I could come to your house after school today. Maybe watch a movie or something? We both walk home and my mom already said it was okay if you said yes."

They turned the corner to find David and his friends, more now than before, staring angrily at them. But Brittany just held his hand strong and her head high, pulling him against the wall right outside his classroom. Before he knew it her lips were on his and they felt nothing like Blaine's but he knew enough to act in front of his audience. "So I'll see you after school then?" she asked with a wink.

"Yeah, sure," he stammered and slipped into his classroom door before anyone could bother him.

January 3, 2005

Dear Kurt,

I really thought this day would never end. Why do we have to go to school at all? Why can't I just do 8 shows a week and be tutored.

It wasn't bad. I was just so stressed out that someone would KNOW. That somehow I had this giant flashing light on my chest that blinked KISSED A BOY, KISSED A BOY!

Of course I didn't. And no one knew at all. And everything I was afraid of was for nothing except that I listened today Kurt. I listened to the other kids at school. Do you know how often they say "that's so gay" or "what are you queer?" Of course you do.

And I hate that I'm hiding. I mean, I've been hiding my whole life and I keep hiding from my Dad and I know that. I accept that for now because I'm just not ready to deal with the consequences of him knowing. And maybe that makes me a coward, but I also know I don't want to hide forever, you know?

I never really realized before today how cute Sam is. How could I have been so deep in denial that I didn't see that?

I always knew you were beautiful.

*Your Friend,
Blaine*

January 3, 2005

Dear Blaine,

I get back to school to find out that apparently Brittany and I are still dating. It's the most awkward thing in the world! She came home with me today and my Dad caught us kissing. Well her kissing and me just kind of lying there, and I wanted to just curl up in a ball and hide.

And I felt guilty. Not really for lying to Brittany, although I do a little, but mostly for lying to you. Like somehow by kissing her I was hiding myself from you. So I need to tell you the truth about something.

*Brittany kissed me and started dating me so the other boys would leave me alone. See there's this group of kids, the popular kids, who have been making fun of me for years. They call me names. You know, *those* names. And Brittany just thought that if me and her were together that they would leave me alone. And they do when she's around, but when she's not...*

I've been talking to Rachel about it for a while now. Cause she's understood all along. She hears the things the kids at your school say about her and her Dads. And I know you would have too but I was so afraid you would tell Cooper and Cooper would tell my Dad and then not only would I have to deal with him barreling into the Principal's office and making things worse but I would also have to tell him why they were bullying me.

And that they were right.

And I know you think I should, I know it's what you want me to do but honestly I am just so scared that I'll be a disappointment to him and that would kill me Blaine and I feel bad saying that to you when the threat of that is so really real for you but we promised to always tell the truth.

So yeah.

Please don't hate me.

I wish you were here.

I miss you.

*Your Friend,
Kurt*

"How could you not tell me Kurt was being bullied!" Blaine gripped the letter in his hand and held it right in front of Rachel's face.

Rachel glanced around as if to see who was watching and gently lowered the letter away from her. "Ok, first of all you need to calm down. And second, this isn't really a conversation for the middle of the school hallway."

"How long have you known?" he snapped, ignoring her warning, but instead of answering she grabbed his hand and pulled him through the crowd of kids into the empty auditorium. "You better answer me Rachel Berry!"

She took the letter and placed it down gently on a chair beside them then took his hands in hers. They were trembling. "I've known pretty much since we started writing two years ago and he asked me very specifically not to tell you," she explained gently. "Telling you would have been admitting things about himself that he wasn't ready to admit especially to you and I agreed because I knew it would also maybe push you into things you weren't ready to face."

Blaine let out a breath and looked at the floor, his cheeks reddening slightly. "What do you mean?" he asked, nervously biting his lip.

"You know exactly what I mean," she answered.

"So how long have you known? About...that?" he muttered, unable to quite say the words out loud to her yet.

"Honestly?" Her hands flew to her hips and her lips pulled up into a sly smile. "I told you that you were in love with him 3 years ago backstage of Les Mis. You just refused to believe me then."

Blaine gave a slight nod, pointedly avoiding her gaze. "I was scared to believe you."

"And now?"

Blaine's golden eyes were heartbreakingly beautiful, swirling with the emotions inside him when they slowly rose to meet hers. "I'm still scared," he admitted in a hushed voice. "Terrified actually. But I guess as hard as I tried, it wasn't something I could keep in forever."

"Nor should you," Rachel told him. He let out a quiet huff and ran his fingers over his face, leaning back against the auditorium chairs. "There's nothing wrong with being gay Blaine, no matter what anyone says. My dads are beautiful."

"I know they are," Blaine agreed. "They were the ones that made me see myself for who I am."

"You and Kurt are beautiful too," she smiled, her eyes twinkling. "I know I shouldn't have but I saw you two kissing at my house. I've never seen you so happy."

Blaine bit his lip, the moment memorized in his mind, the sensation always tingling in his skin. "I've never been so happy." He remembered again the feel of Kurt's lips and the way he adored running his fingers

through Kurt's hair. And then he remembered what had brought him and Rachel here in the first place. "I don't want anyone hurting him. He's the kindest, most gentle person I know and he doesn't deserve for anyone to hurt him."

Rachel took a breath and linked her fingers with his. "I know it's hard. But you have to let Kurt handle this his way. He wouldn't be happy if you told, trust me."

"I know," Blaine frowned. "I just wish I could be there for him. To protect him."

"You are there for him," she told him. "If he needs you, he'll find you."

January 12, 2005

Dear Kurt,

I'm sorry I dodged your phone call the other day. And that I haven't written you back yet. I'm sure you probably think I'm a horrible friend. It's just...I didn't know what to say. The idea that someone might be hurting you is killing me but I know you don't want me to tell anyone and that is killing me too.

Is that how you've felt sometimes? When you thought my dad was hurting me? Because it's kind of an awful feeling. And I'm sorry if you did.

I'm not mad by the way. That you didn't tell me. I understand. I mean, if anyone knows about keeping secrets it's me, right?

I just wish that neither of us had to. I wish that we could just be honest with the people we love about who we love. I mean, that shouldn't really be such a terrifying thing, should it?

I miss you. Probably more than I should.

And I could never hate you.

*Love,
Blaine*

"Dad?"

His voice was so small and scared that Burt barely heard him, but when he looked up from his bed he saw Kurt standing in the doorway, clutching a paper. A paper that looked like it had been handled more times than Kurt could count. "What's up Bud?"

"Can I come in?"

Burt pushed over, knowing Kurt didn't always like lying on his mother's side of the bed and he patted the mattress. "Of course." Burt could tell this was a serious conversation. Kurt had that look in his eye that said the answers were so far away from him he couldn't even remotely catch them.

Kurt climbed up but he didn't cuddle like he usually did, even at the ripe old age of 11 and a half. He sat toward the foot of the bed, his legs curled beneath him, staring at the paper still clutched in his hand.

Kurt chewed his lip for a while gathering his courage and Burt just waited. Finally, Kurt spoke without looking up. "Do you remember when you fell in love with Mom?"

Burt smiled. "Sure. We were 16, and she stared across the room at me and without a single word asked me for a pencil. I passed it along to her, she blew me a kiss, and that was it." Kurt though didn't move, instead opening the paper and reading it to himself, silently tracing over the words with his finger. Burt's brow furrowed, growing more unsure what this conversation was about. "That from Blaine?" he guessed.

Kurt nodded, closing his fist on it but leaving it open. "He thinks I should be honest with you," Kurt whispered, his eyes tearing up against his will.

"He's a smart boy. You can always be honest with me Kurt," Burt told him. "About anything. There's nothing you could tell me that would make me love you less."

Kurt finally looked up as a tear rolled down his cheek. "Do you mean that? Do you promise?"

Burt shifted lower on the bed to grab one of Kurt's hands. "I definitely mean it and I promise with all my heart."

Kurt blinked and nodded and turned back to the letter. "The other day...with Brittany...after she left you told me I was too young to be kissing like that. But I'm not Dad." Kurt didn't know how to say this and it was probably coming out all wrong but all he could do was say the words that were coming into his head. "I'm not too young. To know what I want. Who I love."

Burt raised a brow. "And you think you love Brittany?"

Kurt shook his head. "No," he breathed then cleared his throat to get the words out. "I don't love Brittany." He took a deep breath and looked up at his Dad, his eyes full of both fear and tremendous courage. They reminded Burt of his mother. "I love Blaine."

Burt was quiet. For a second he wished Elizabeth would come upstairs so she could handle this, then he remembered she wasn't coming upstairs. And he didn't want to mess this up. "Kurt," he said as gently as he could. "I know Blaine's your best friend-

"He is dad. But I also love him."

"Kurt you're 11-

"When I kissed him it felt like coffee," Kurt blurted out.

Silence filled the room. Burt tried to wrap his head around everything. It wasn't that he was surprised, he'd pretty much suspected Kurt was gay since he was 3. But he didn't expect him to come out this soon. To have kissed a boy already. To love so young. Burt wasn't ready. "I don't understand what that means."

"Blaine says it's like knowing you want to wake up to it every morning." Burt let out a breath as he chuckled. The kid had a way with words, that was for sure. "He also said it shouldn't be a terrifying idea to tell the people we love *who* we love."

Burt's gaze hardened on Kurt's, then melted. He pulled in his little boy who was no longer a little boy and cuddled him whether he wanted to or not. "No," he said. "No it should not be terrifying at all." He held him close, his own thoughts racing with worries. "But Blaine's 13 years old Kurt and you're only 11. I know it may seem like it's not a big difference, but it is."

"I kissed him," Kurt clarified quickly. "He never pushed me I promise."

"I still say you're too young to be kissing," Burt told him firmly and Kurt's face was hidden when he rolled his eyes at his Dad. Burt kept him close for what seemed like hours but was probably only a minute then let him sit back, keeping a firm grip on his chin. "I love you. No matter who you love, I love you and I always will. I promise you that. I always will."

February 14, 2005

Dear Blaine,

Yes, I actually did notice Sam is cute. Do I get an "I saw him first" gold star? ;) Jake is too, by the way.

But I knew you were beautiful long before I ever saw them.

You're not a coward. Not by a long shot. You're one of the bravest people I know. Any courage I have I get from you.

I told my Dad. I told him I loved you. I told him your kisses are like coffee.

He told me he still loved me and he always will.

And that I was too young to be kissing anyone.

Happy Valentine's Day Blaine.

Love,

Kurt

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN:

There's a River on the Run

"He's not going and that's final!"

Blaine cringed at the sound of his father yelling downstairs but his mother's response made him want to stand up and applaud.

"That's not final, John, we are going to discuss this like two rational people."

They'd been fighting a lot more, since Blaine came out to his mother. He hated knowing that it was his fault. Hated knowing that if he were straight their family would be happy.

"If he wants to do a show this summer there are hundreds of theaters in New York, he doesn't need to go to Boston."

"They aren't doing Oliver in New York though John, they're doing it in Boston, it pays well and he and Cooper will finally have a chance to do a show together." Her voice grew softer then, he heard shifting in the room and then, "It would mean we'd have 6 weeks of the summer to ourselves. No children John, for the first time in 24 years."

"I can't protect him if I'm not around, Teresa."

"He's almost 14 years old. You can't protect him forever."

Blaine pulled his headphones on and started the music on his Ipod. He had songs to learn, if his father let him go, and even if he didn't, he loved listening to "Where Is Love." Ever since Kurt sang it at the recital it had always reminded him of the boy who loved him. The boy he loved.

May 3, 2005

Dear Kurt,

My parents are fighting downstairs. About me. I hate that they always fight about me, especially since I told my mom about me and you.

I got the part of the Artful Dodger for a summer stock production of Oliver in Boston and I know it's not Broadway but I desperately want to get out of the city for a while. Away from my Dad. Where I can just...be myself and I know it's safe. But I don't think he's going to let me go.

I feel like I'm suffocating. I think maybe I've said that before but it was like before I was choking on some invisible gas that I didn't understand but now I know exactly what's holding me down and how to get out and yet I keep choosing not to. I CHOOSE not to Kurt, even after you chose to be so courageous. And even though I know it sometimes sucks I also know how proud you are of being out and I'm beginning to wonder what exactly I'm so afraid of. Would losing the love of a man who doesn't like me for who I am really be a loss?

Every time I go to Cooper's I imagine what it would be like to live with him all the time. Be able to call you whenever I want or have you over if you came to visit. Or even find a boyfriend here and date. Like we talked about. I wouldn't have to worry about saying the wrong thing when my Dad asks me if a girl is cute or worry that I just might drool a little too much anytime Ben McKenzie is on screen during the OC.

And if I get to go to Boston with Cooper I won't have to imagine anymore. At least not for a little while.

It's been four months at school in the closet and god Kurt I'm a wreck. I don't have any idea how you've done this for so long. The days when I can talk to you are so much better

"Blaine?"

It was the opening of his door, not his name, that startled Blaine and with a sharp intake of breath at his father's sudden appearance he quickly pulled his science textbook over the letter. He pulled the earbuds out of his ears and looked up. "Dad? I didn't know you were home," he lied.

"I wanted to talk to you about Boston." John sat on Blaine's bed and Blaine swiveled in his desk chair.

"You're not going to let me go, are you?" Blaine accused.

His father's nostrils flared but his voice was steady. "Don't go putting words in my mouth Blaine unless you want them to come out," he warned. Blaine lowered his head but he said nothing further. He heard his father take a breath. "I'm just not sure how I feel about you spending so long away from home."

"It's not like I'll be by myself Dad. I'll have Cooper with me." Blaine tried hard to pull himself up and put forth a mature front. "I'm not a little kid anymore, I'm almost fourteen-"

"You're thirteen and a half Blaine, don't go growing up faster than you need to." Blaine frowned. He couldn't wait to grow up. Be able to be whoever he wanted, make his own decisions. "I just don't like you being where I can't keep an eye on you."

There were a hundred things that Blaine wanted to say like *you mean where you can't control me and but that's exactly why I want to go* but he kept those thoughts hidden so deep inside he hoped they didn't show on his face. Instead he looked as earnest as he could and promised, "I'll be okay. I won't get into any trouble. The cast will be full of other kids so it's not like I'll be spending all my time with the grownups. My report card has all A's, I've done well in soccer, I haven't gotten in trouble in a really long time, please," he begged.

His father sighed and Blaine held his breath. "You're lucky that your mother agrees with you." Blaine looked up at him, eyes and mouth opened wide with surprise. "It's a good opportunity for you," his Dad acknowledged. "And you have done everything we've asked of you. You deserve a reward I think."

Before he even knew what he was doing, Blaine jumped up and wrapped his arms around his Dad, hugging him tightly. "Thank you," he screeched, his eyes watering with tears of relief and happiness. "I love you."

"I love you too son," John said softly. "Don't make me regret my decision."

"I won't Dad, I promise."

"Dad I don't know how I feel about going to sleep away camp," Kurt said. The pamphlets he'd gotten at his performing arts school sat out in front of him on the table. On the one hand he loved the idea of being able to perform all summer and learn more than he ever could at home. The camp had stage combat and circus and magic and so many shows he could do. On the other hand, he really didn't want to leave his dad.

"Look bud, I know it's a little bit scary but you can't just hang around the garage all summer and I know you think you're old enough but I'm not totally comfortable with you sitting home all day by yourself. With Santana and Brittany going off to cheerleading camp you aren't going to be able to grab rides from them to classes. I really think it'll be the best thing for you," Burt said.

"I won't be able to go see Blaine's show in Boston," Kurt frowned.

Which suddenly made everything clear to Burt. "So that's what this is about. I should have known," Burt muttered.

Kurt looked up at him pitifully. "It's not just about that," he assured him, but he didn't know how convincing he was. Then he didn't know how convincing it needed to be because his father had already picked up the phone and dialed.

"Hey Teresa, it's Burt Hummel. Is Blaine there?" Kurt was at his side in an instant reaching for the phone but silently Burt pointed for him to sit back in the chair. "Thanks." Kurt bit his lip and wrung his hands, his knees bouncing nervously curled underneath him. There was a disadvantage now to their parents knowing about him and Blaine and this was a prime example. "Hello Blaine? Yes this is Burt. I have a favor to ask. My son is saying he doesn't want to go to a performing arts camp this summer because he'll miss your show in Boston. Now he won't listen to me but I know he'll listen to you so would you please talk some sense into him?" Kurt hid his face in his hands, his cheeks reddening with embarrassment. He felt his father nudge him and he looked up to see the phone being held out to him. His father had an exasperated and expectant look on his face.

Kurt sighed and took the phone, pressing it to his ear in humiliation. "Hey," he said softly and he heard Blaine giggle kindly on the other line. It made him relax just a little.

"So your dad just totally took advantage of our friendship," Blaine teased, a smile evident through the phone.

"I know, I'm so sorry," Kurt apologized and again he could hear Blaine laughing. "What are you laughing at?" he asked.

"I have to beg my father to go and you're kicking and screaming to stay," Blaine marveled. "We are quite the pair you and I."

Kurt was silent for a minute then laughed himself, which just made Blaine laugh harder until they both could barely breathe. Coming down from the high Kurt went upstairs to his room and curled up on the bed. "Yes we are," he said.

"Yes we are what?" Blaine asked.

"Quite the pair," Kurt answered.

A silence filled the line. A silence that had a thousand words thought and none spoken because speaking them was too hard or too scary or too real. Kurt swung his legs over his bed and pushed the curtains to his window aside. The stars were shining brightly, the moon just a sliver in the darkness. The cool night air blowing in through the screen smelled full of possibility. "So you think I should go?" Kurt asked softly. His breath on the window created a fog. Kurt doodled a heart. K+B.

In his room Blaine gazed out into the night sky. It was filled with the lights of the city bouncing off the clouds. The promise of more was out there. He wished it was time to go now. "I think you should go only if you want to," he answered guardedly. "But if I were you I would definitely go." Kurt was silent so he continued his encouragement. "I think you'll meet a ton of other kids just like you, who don't care what other people think, who just want to be the best. They'll know who Bernadette Peters and Tyne Daly and Michael Crawford are. You'll learn so much, you'll get to perform all summer and build your resume. And you'll get to be yourself Kurt. All summer. Just imagine it!" Blaine's voice grew with excitement, sharing with Kurt the vision of what he hoped his summer would be like. "I'm sure that you won't be the only out kid, and no one will care. Maybe you'll meet someone, kiss someone new, even have a boyfriend. You'll never know unless you go."

"What if I don't want someone new?" Kurt whispered sadly.

Blaine took a deep breath and closed his eyes. "I love you Kurt, you know I do." Kurt's heart clenched in his chest because though they'd written the words he'd never heard them before in the voice that made his heart flutter. Now he thought it might fly. "And maybe someday when we're older and you come to New York, if it's what we still want maybe..." Blaine swallowed, not wanting to make any promises, to himself or to Kurt. "But we both know that can't happen now. And we can't just go through life pretending that it can."

"I don't know Blaine, I'm pretty good at pretending," Kurt smirked, but the sound of Blaine's laughter loosened the tightness in his chest. "I suppose it would be nice to get away from here. Meet other people like us. And I can write to you from there as easily as I can write from here."

"Yes you can," Blaine smiled then asked hopefully. "So your mind's made up then?"

Kurt pressed his lips together. He was still ridiculously nervous but knowing that Blaine wanted him to go gave him the courage he needed. "Yeah, okay."

"Yes!" Blaine shouted. "Now go tell your Dad. He'll love me forever," he teased.

He won't be the only one, Kurt thought as he hung up and went downstairs to tell his dad.

Cooper nudged his brother as they sat in the theater seats, waiting for the first read through to begin. Blaine looked up from his script and then followed where his brother's jerking head was indicating. "Boy on the left. Brown shirt, tight jeans," Cooper said out of the corner of his mouth. "He's cute. And he's been looking at you. Like, *looking looking*."

"What are you my matchmaker?" Blaine whispered, rolling his eyes, but he had to admit that his brother had good taste. The boy, blonde, maybe slightly older than Blaine, looked up just then to glance in his direction, then quickly looked away with a smile and a blush. Blaine grinned shyly. "You think he's interested?" Blaine asked excitedly.

"Well duh," Cooper responded, rolling *his* eyes now. Cooper nudged him again, this time quite annoyingly. "Go get 'em tiger," he beamed.

Blaine sighed but this was what he was here for. Making friends. Meeting boys like him. Maybe finding a boy who would like to be a little more than friends with him. He grabbed his things and made his way onto the stage taking a seat beside the boy at the read thru table. Cooper followed him, sitting on the opposite end of the table but staring at him in a way that was almost creepy. Blaine ignored him.

"Hey," he said introducing himself to his cute and well-dressed castmate with mousy blonde hair far lighter than Kurt's and hazel eyes just as mesmerizing. "My name's Blaine."

The boy smiled with a goofiness and easy warmth that Blaine already adored. "Andy. You play Dodger right?" Blaine nodded. "I play Charley." Blaine remembered in the book that Dodger and Charley were best friends. Andy smirked, his eyes sparkling. "So I guess we're kinda meant to be friends then."

Blaine glanced quickly at his brother who gave him a ridiculous thumbs up. He laughed and shook his head, turning back to Andy. "Yeah I guess we are."

From: banderbro at Hotmail . com

To: KurtHummel at RosewoodFestival . com

Date: July 14, 2005

Subject: Rehearsals

Dear Kurt,

I met a boy.

Ok, so maybe I shouldn't have started out with that. Maybe I should have started with Hi. I miss you. I hope camp is really good and you're having a wonderful time.

I met a boy.

He reminds me a bit of you, though he's older. 14. But he's got that cute goofiness you sometimes have when you're feeling really free and he's as talented as you are. I wish you were playing Oliver because I bet you're better than the boy we have although he's good too but then it would mean you were here.

Did I mention that I met a boy?

If you were here though I'd worry that he'd sweep you off your feet which I guess is my way of saying that if you were here I wouldn't really be looking at him but you're not so I am. Looking I mean.

Oh my god I'm acting like an idiot. I should just throw out this whole letter and start again except for this stupid deal that we made that we wouldn't do that especially if the letter was about a boy we met this summer because we knew that neither one of us would like anything we wrote about it to each other except we both agreed that we should write each other and Kurt I am ranting this is ridiculous.

I met a boy. And he's cute. And nice. And talented. And 14.

And I'm scared to death.

And Cooper said I shouldn't be, that I should just kiss him like I kissed you but I'm sure you remember correctly that it was the other way around and there was a very good reason for that Kurt because I am not a first move kinda guy.

So I guess I'm scared he'll make a move. And scared he won't.

I'm being so dumb it's just a kiss, right? It's not like he's going to tackle me backstage and want to get to third base.

OH MY GOD KURT WHAT IF HE TACKLES ME BACKSTAGE AND WANTS TO GET TO THIRD BASE I'M NOT READY FOR THIS!

It's so not fair that the moment I'm in a place where I can easily call you whenever I want you're in a place where you aren't allowed to get phone calls!

Please get this soon and write me back and talk me off this ledge otherwise I might fall off and smash my face on the rocks below into a million pieces...

Ok. Breathing. I'm breathing.

Write me soon.

*Love,
Blaine*

Kurt printed the email out and took it back to his cabin. He was grateful that he no longer had the delay of a letter's journey, but there was something he loved about feeling a piece of paper in his hands when he read Blaine's words. He'd tried that first week or two to just read on the computer and he had no issues when his Dad or Santana or Brittany emailed him. But with Blaine it just seemed wrong. So he printed his emails now without reading them and brought them back with him, waiting until lights out to curl up with it and his flashlight beneath the covers.

Besides, then no one could see him cry when he read that Blaine had found another boy.

He didn't mean the tears to come. He'd prepared himself for this as soon as he knew that Blaine was doing the show. Heck them meeting other boys was half the purpose of their summer. But knowing all that didn't stop the heartbreak.

He put it away that night, curling up with his pillow and going to sleep. And he went to breakfast the next morning chattering away with the friends he had made, choosing his activities for the day before rehearsal and eyeing the boy at the table across the room with the mousy brown hair and sweet smile that had caught his eye.

If he was going to be giving Blaine advice, after all, he should at least know a little bit of what he was doing. Right?

Problem was mousy brown hair with a sweet smile had no idea who he was. But Kurt Hummel wasn't a boy to sit back, not when he had something to prove to the first boy he'd kissed, Broadway star Blaine Anderson!

The morning bell rang and Kurt gathered his things. He followed mousy brown hair with a sweet smile out of the cafeteria and checked the contents of his pockets. He had Blaine's letter, a dollar bill and a silk scarf that he must have forgotten to take out of his pants pocket from circus class. It would be perfect.

He pulled it out and jogged up to the boy, tapping him lightly on the shoulder. He was taller than Blaine, his hair was straighter and his eyes were as green as emeralds. He had freckles similar to his own smattered around his nose and then there was that smile that just lit up a room. Kurt ignored his racing heart and smiled when he turned.

"Excuse me, did you drop this?" he asked holding the scarf out to him.

The boy shook his head and wrinkled his nose adorably. Kurt tried hard not to squeak. "Nope, not me. I've seen you around here, what's your name?"

"Kurt," he beamed, excited that he'd been noticed.

"I'm Logan. You going to the cookout tonight?"

Kurt had not been planning on going to the cookout that night, he had planned on going back to his cabin and studying his lines. "Yeah, of course! Wouldn't miss it!"

"Great," Logan beamed. "See you there!"

"Yeah, see you there," Kurt smiled as Logan walked off.

Well there ya go, Blaine Anderson. That's how it's done.

From: KurtHummel at RosewoodFestival . com

To: banderbro at Hotmail . com

Date: July 16, 2005

Subject: Re: Rehearsals

Dear Blaine,

You're a liar, or at least your subject header is, because there is not a single word about rehearsals in that email. Unless you're rehearsing freaking out. In which case I think you don't need any more rehearsal, you've got it down pat.

So...ledge.

I kissed a boy last night. It was just a little kiss. I really don't know why you're freaking out so much it's fun. His name is Logan. He's 12, like me. He's cute. Not like you, but cute.

Seriously though Blaine. I'm not going to say it didn't make me sad, knowing there was another boy you liked. And definitely if you're jealous of Logan that might make me a little secretly happy. But I also hope it gives you the courage to kiss this other boy whose name you haven't even told me yet which you better tell me so I can put it on the dart board.

Remember what we said. The more practice we get the better ;P

And isn't it nice to know that we can just do this where we are right now? Kiss a boy without being afraid of fathers or bullies? When we get home it won't be like that. And it wouldn't be like that for us for a very long time. So don't feel bad about doing it now. Ok? Make me jealous ;P

I hope your rehearsals are going well. They're doing Oliver last session. Do you think I'll get the part?

Love,

Kurt

From: banderbro at Hotmail . com

To: KurtHummel at RosewoodFestival . com

Date: July 14, 2005

Subject: Re: Rehearsals

Alright Hummel BE jealous! Be very jealous because this was not a "little kiss" like yours with what's his name. This was EPIC. This was mind blowing. This was the best kiss in the history of kisses. This was a FRENCH KISS.

Next time we are together we HAVE to try this Kurt because I know it will be so much better with you. It wasn't really epic or mind blowing with Andy (that's his name) but it was fun. And it would be epic and mind blowing with you I think and now I'm just imagining it and Cooper is coming over and oh my god, I seriously need my own computer in my room.

It's been really fun living with Cooper by the way. We joke all the time and he's a pain in the ass but he's super fun and laid back with everything but being responsible at rehearsal. Which is why when he caught me and Andy kissing backstage I thought I was really in for it but he couldn't stop laughing and then I started hitting him and we both interrupted rehearsal and gosh I'm going to get such a horrible reputation I'm never going to work again.

"You're exaggerating just a little bit Blaine," Cooper said reading over his shoulder and rolling his eyes.

Blaine threw his hands over his screen. "Coop! Stop reading my emails they're personal," he complained.

"Well I don't know how personal they can be when they're about me, but whatever," Cooper smirked, then shoved Blaine's hands out of the way and stole the wireless keyboard.

Blaine is such a drama king there's not a chance this industry would stop hiring him. And I was laughing because honestly neither one of those boys knows a thing about French Kissing.

"Coop get the hell away from the keyboard," Blaine yelled, reaching up to get it. Cooper held it above his head out of Blaine's reach until Blaine stood on the chair and snatched it. "Now go away and let me finish in peace, I have to delete this."

"You're not allowed to delete it," Cooper teased. Blaine scowled but Cooper laughed as he disappeared into his bedroom. "Rules are rules!" he yelled behind him.

I rest my case on the pain in the ass statement. And don't ever tell him but maybe he's right about the French kissing thing. That is why we MUST practice.

Anyway I should probably go, I have call at 9am tomorrow. And I don't just think you'll get the part Kurt, I KNOW you'll get the part.

*Love,
Blaine*

Kurt paced backstage, a nervous wreck knowing his father was in the audience as were probably 500 other parents and grandparents. The shows the previous weeks had been easier. He'd been featured but not the star. Now he was Oliver, the title character, the one who would make the show or break the show.

He desperately did not want to break it.

He held Blaine's letter in his hand, reading it over and over again as he tried to get the nerves to disappear.

You were born to play this role, Kurt, it was written for you. It doesn't matter who has done it before or who will do it since, anyone that sees you will forever remember you as Oliver.

Believe in yourself. Don't forget yourself. And just breathe.

Just breathe. He closed his eyes, letting the cool night air and the noisy energy in the pavilion fill him with peace and confidence. Somewhere out in the world Blaine was believing in him. And well, he couldn't ever let Blaine outdo him.

And when the curtain rose he felt it. He felt the rush of adrenaline but also the calm and he just felt completely and perfectly in his skin in a way that was strange and different and ridiculously exciting. And he knew why Blaine went back again and again, because the feeling when the audience applauded all for him was just the best feeling in the world. And he could imagine wanting to chase it forever.

After the show he changed into his clothes and ran out to find his Dad. But as soon as he found him Kurt didn't even care because standing next to his Dad was a large bouquet of flowers and behind that bouquet of flowers was gorgeous curly black hair attached to the boy that made his heart fly.

"Blaine!" Kurt squealed and he may have squashed the flowers but he didn't care about that either as he flung himself into Blaine's arms. Cooper pulled the mix of roses out of Blaine's arms to rescue them and smiled down at them. Kurt though barely noticed. "I can't believe you are here! How? Weren't you going back home this weekend?"

"We made a little bit of a detour," Cooper smirked and ruffled Kurt's hair. "Beautiful job up there kid. You were born for the stage."

Kurt looked at Blaine, hazel eyes shining on him. It just dawned on him that Blaine had seen his performance and he suddenly was filled with nerves. "Well say something," Kurt urged.

"Can't," Blaine said. "You left me speechless."

Kurt blushed and bit his lip. He looked up at his dad. "Can I show Blaine around camp? We have a little time before curfew."

"What are you gonna show him in the dark?" Burt asked but Cooper nudged him in the shoulder. Burt sighed. "Fine. We'll meet you back at the cabin in 30 minutes."

"Thanks!" Kurt yelled and grabbed Blaine's hand, pulling him quickly away from the crowd.

Blaine couldn't help but laugh as they passed a large soccer field and a bunch of buildings where other crowds were gathered after shows in those theaters. "Where are you taking me?" he asked but Kurt just kept pulling him.

They made it to the lake in record time and Kurt led Blaine to a small alcove of trees overlooking the water. They sat down across from one another. The clicks and croaks of insects and frogs and the distant rumble of noise in camp were the only sounds around them.

"It's beautiful here Kurt," Blaine whispered, not wanting to disturb the sounds of nature.

"You're beautiful here," Kurt smiled.

Blaine laughed. "Well I walked right into that one didn't I?" Kurt giggled and nodded but Blaine just looked at him as if staring into his soul. "You were incredible on that stage today. And I'm not just saying that Kurt, I mean it. You belong in New York with me. You belong on Broadway with me."

Kurt wanted to believe that with all his heart. "Maybe someday."

"No maybe," Blaine corrected, taking Kurt's hand. "Someday." Kurt smiled but said nothing. He wasn't sure there was anything to say to that. He'd felt the same way when he'd performed. After this summer he knew for certain that was his goal and knowing that Blaine felt the same just made his heart soar with happiness. But it also made him sad because he wanted it so much now. He didn't want to wait.

Kurt was absolutely beautiful in the light of the moon and the afterglow of a theater full of applause. And Blaine couldn't let the moment pass. "May I kiss you?"

Kurt's thoughts snapped and he teased his best friend. "Oh look at that, Blaine Anderson making the first move."

"Shut up," Blaine quipped.

"Yes," Kurt said. At Blaine's confused look Kurt clarified with a smile. "Yes, you can kiss me."

"Did you French kiss with what's his name?" Blaine probed.

"No."

Blaine's grin widened. "Oh so you were saving it for me?"

Kurt rolled his eyes. "I didn't know you were coming or when I'd see you again so no I wasn't saving it for you," he answered with playful haughtiness. Then he shrugged. "I guess he was just too young."

"Well I'm not too young," Blaine whispered. He leaned in and kissed Kurt with none of the hesitation they'd felt at Rachel's Bat Mitzvah. Kurt smiled at Blaine's enthusiasm and Blaine took advantage, teasing out his tongue. Kurt's breath caught, his heart suddenly racing nervously for all his bravado but Blaine moved closer, holding him in his arms and soothing him. And when he relaxed and let Blaine in it was the most terrifying and amazing feeling in the world. His head told him he wasn't old enough for this, it was too much, too intense, but his heart told him to hold on and never let go.

It was Blaine who pulled back first, wanting to see him, needing to know Kurt was okay. But the sight of Kurt when he opened his eyes took his breath away. Breathless himself, eyes closed, lips pink and slightly open, Kurt was beyond any words that Blaine had in his vocabulary.

"Wow," Kurt sighed.

Blaine didn't say anything. He just wrapped Kurt in his arms, leaning back against the nearest tree trunk, and let Kurt rest his head on his chest. He softly brushed his fingers through Kurt's hair. The moonlight was twinkling on the water and the star filled sky seemed to go on forever. And this, Kurt in his arms, the kiss still in his skin, this was the most perfect thing in the world and he never wanted to lose it.

"I think I'm gonna come out," he said.

Kurt sat up, staring at him, searching his face for something. "Like, *out* out?" he squeaked.

"Yeah." He'd known in Boston that he wanted to. Now he knew he had no choice.

"But what about your Dad?" Kurt asked, his brow furrowed with worry.

"I talked about it a bit with Cooper. He said I could come live with him if I needed to. We did fine living together all summer."

"That's crazy Blaine," Kurt argued. "What if Cooper gets a job somewhere other than New York? You can't live by yourself! I know you're older than me Blaine but you're still just a kid."

"Mom's not gonna let me be homeless Kurt," Blaine promised him, pulling him back in again. He needed Kurt in his arms to be sure about this. "I'm not saying I'm gonna do it right away the minute I get home. But this summer was amazing Kurt. Being able to be out the closet and proud and unafraid? I don't know if I can go back in," he frowned.

Kurt wanted that for Blaine, he wanted it so much. But he was afraid. "Just be careful," he said softly. "I don't ever want to see you hurt."

"I will," Blaine promised. "Same goes for you."

Kurt settled back into his chest, listening to his heartbeat and wishing that this could just be their life forever. "I love you Blaine," he whispered.

Blaine leaned down and kissed his head. "I love you too."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN:

Fighting For A New World

Blaine was antsy from the moment he stepped back through his apartment doors. He felt as though he'd been let out of a prison just long enough to experience what freedom felt like, only to be locked back inside. He understood that he held the key. But he also knew that freedom came with a cost, especially in his small little world.

Still, had it just been the love of his father he would lose he probably would have risked it immediately. The taste of freedom was intoxicating and he wanted it more than almost anything else in the world. But there was so much his father held in his hands; his schooling, his right to work, his contact with Kurt even though he didn't know it. And his father was only half the worry. He may have lived in New York City, he may have spent many hours inside the safe walls of Broadway, but school was an entirely different story. Kids could be cruel. Privileged prep school kids who were children of social conservative legislators who opposed gay rights could be invincible. And a powerful minority like that could make a mighty loud roar.

It was too much to think about. Because right now he was just Blaine Anderson, 8th grader, buying school supplies with his mom because she always bought the wrong things. He looked at his list and back at the shelf.

"I need two five subject notebooks," he muttered, pulling red and blue ones off the shelf.

"How are these backpacks," his mother said, holding up a Star Wars one in her right hand and a Harry Potter one in her left.

He looked over his shoulder and rolled his eyes. "If I get one of those, coming out of the closet might save me my reputation," he said wryly.

His mother's mouth gaped and she lowered both bags, looking around quickly before stepping in close. "Is that something you plan to do?" she whispered.

Blaine lowered his eyes and shrugged. He hadn't meant to say what he had, hadn't meant to even talk to his mother about the possibility yet, but sometimes his mouth had this habit of saying the things his heart knew he should say even when his brain told him no. "I don't know. Maybe?"

He looked up at her but her face was indecipherable, her lips pressed flat the only sign of how she might have felt. He hated the way she could do that, mask her emotions. He didn't think he'd ever manage to master it like her, no matter how hard he tried. She'd always been the better actor.

"You need pens and pencils," she said and started to head off to that aisle. "Grab a backpack you like and meet me there."

He watched her go, his heart growing heavier with every step away from him she took. He'd hoped he'd have her support in this. If he didn't it was going to be a lot harder. Because he was determined, no matter what anyone else said. He was cautious, but he wasn't afraid. Not after this summer. Not after Kurt. Not anymore.

Sighing, he grabbed a designer black backpack off the shelf and followed his mom to finish their shopping.

"So then the girl said, that's the spirit stick and you just dropped it," Santana said, curled up on Kurt's bed. "And I said that's not a spirit stick you moron, that's a firecracker and if you don't tell them I should be at the top of the pyramid, I'm gonna stick it up your ass in the middle of the night."

"Oh my god, 'Tana, you didn't!" Kurt gasped.

"She actually did," Brittany confirmed. She was lying down with her head in Santana's lap, the long blonde locks wrapped up in her best friend's fingers. "And she was on top of the pyramid the very next day."

"Holy cow, I cannot believe you got away with that," he laughed, twirling around in his desk chair when he heard his email chirp. Blaine's name popped on the screen. He tried to hide it from the girls but he couldn't.

"How's my boyfriend doing?" Santana smirked, cocking her head to the screen. "Did he have a lovely summer in Boston? Did he miss me?"

"He's not your boyfriend," Kurt growled far more possessively than he should have, and perhaps it was that possessiveness that made the next words spill from his lips. "He actually came to see me in Oliver at camp before he went home."

"Really?" Santana quirked a brow and nudged Brittany to sit up. She scooted to the edge of the bed.

Kurt blushed. He hadn't meant to tell anyone. "It was nothing," he said quickly. "Tell me more about cheerleading-"

"Kurt Hummel you-" Santana snapped.

"Kurt!" Burt called him from downstairs and Kurt had never been more grateful for the interruption. "Can you come here a minute?"

"I'll be right back," he said, running downstairs.

The minute he was gone, Santana immediately jumped off the bed and into Kurt's seat and turned the computer on. She clicked through the screens, finally opening the email from Blaine.

"Santana," Brittany protested. "I don't know if you should do that."

"Shh," Santana snapped and she read the screen.

From: banderbro at Hotmail dot com

To: KHummel at HTAL dot com

Date: August 28, 2005

Subject: Miss You

Dear Kurt,

Why is it that I miss you more the more recently I've seen you?

I miss your smile. And your laugh. And your beautiful angelic voice.

I miss your touch. Your arms around me.

I miss your lips. Your tongue ;P

I miss the way you would be smacking me on the arm and telling me to shut up right now.

I miss the courage I feel when I'm around you. It's easier to believe in myself then.

School starts tomorrow and it feels even scarier than it did after Rachel's Bat Mitzvah. I have to come out there. I don't know exactly how or when but I know that I can't hold this in on my own. I need someone other than Rachel in my corner there.

My mom's scared of me telling my Dad. She didn't say that but I know it. I'm gonna talk to Cooper about it when I can. You were right. I need to be careful.

I hope everything's okay with you. You know where to find me if it's not.

*Love you,
Blaine*

Santana was speechless. Until her chair was forcefully whirled around. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" Kurt yelled.

"What am I doing? Santana yelled herself, standing up. "What are you doing hooking up with Blaine Anderson without a word to your best friends? And since you were in NY last winter? What the hell Kurt?"

"What was I supposed to say? Hey guys, everyone's right, I'm a fag just like they say and I've been lying to Brittany dating her and I'm in love with the Broadway star who lives in NY and could have any boy in the world he wants?" Kurt didn't want to cry, but he couldn't stop the tears, he could only wipe them away so more could fall. "I couldn't do that!"

"Why not?" Brittany asked quietly from the bed. "Why couldn't you tell us that? We would have understood. I *did* understand Kurt, that's why I did all that for you."

Kurt looked between the two girls he'd spent the last 4 years telling everything to. Everything but this. Brittany's face was filled with sadness, confusion and worry. Santana just looked angry and betrayed.

"I don't know," he said quietly, his eyes falling. He pushed past her and sat down to read Blaine's email. He could feel Santana's eyes on him but the shivers up his spine were from Blaine's words, not her. Courage was such a difficult thing to capture. "I guess it's just hard to tell our friends. It's hard to risk losing them. Losing you."

Brittany was by his side in a second, kneeling beside him, her bright wide eyes staring up at him. "You wouldn't lose us. Not me and 'Tana."

"Why couldn't you have just trusted us?" Santana asked, but her voice was like ice and when Kurt looked up her eyes were dark and cold. She grabbed her things and without another word just stormed out the door.

"She's not just upset with you," Brittany explained in an almost apology as she got up to get her things. "She's upset with Blaine and with herself and probably a little bit with me."

"Why?" Kurt asked. Brittany shook her head. Her thoughts were not for sharing. Kurt sighed. "I didn't mean to not trust you guys," Kurt said. "I was just scared."

Brittany reached for his hand and squeezed it tightly. "So is she." Brittany offered him a sad smile before heading out after her best friend.

The walk back to Cooper's apartment was slow, his steps feeling heavy as he made his way to the apartment door. Blaine pulled out his keys, but he didn't need them, the door was unlocked, and he pushed it open, walking aimlessly to the couch before collapsing on it.

Cooper looked up with amusement from his seat at the breakfast bar. "So I'm guessing your audition didn't go too well?" he smirked.

Blaine slowly turned his head, glared with a look that would have killed if it could, then stared back up at the ceiling. "Understatement of the year."

"Do you know why?" Cooper asked tentatively.

The thought of the rest of his day made his head ache and staring at the ceiling wasn't helping. He sat up and rested his head on his hand. "Well let's see. It started with Sam and Jake joking and being idiotic and homophobic even though I know they didn't mean it that way. And I very likely failed a test that is not going to make Dad the happiest person in the world. So I completely screwed up the audition I should have aced because I spent the entire day wishing I was someone else entirely, which is absolutely the worst thing I can do before going into the room."

Cooper furrowed his brow. He wondered if he should even tell his brother what he needed to but then decided it would likely be worse if he didn't. "So it's probably not going to make your day any better to tell you that Santana called and by the enormous amount of Spanish she was yelling she seemed to be pretty pissed at you about something?"

Blaine rolled his eyes back in his head and slammed back down on the couch. "Why is this day even happening?" Blaine whined.

"What exactly did you do to her?" Cooper asked.

"Apparently Santana snooped and read an email from me to Kurt where I pretty much said I missed his lips and everything else about him and then she got pissed at Kurt for not coming out to her as if Kurt owes her something and then Brittany informed Kurt that she's not only mad at him but also me. Though I can't for the life of me imagine why," he groaned.

"I don't know," Cooper shrugged. "Maybe she thinks you led her on?"

Blaine sat up, his eyes wide. "What? It's not like we talked all the time, not like Kurt," he protested. "And when she did call we'd just talk about Broadway and her coming to NY. I just...she's so damn talented and when she takes NY by storm I just wanted to be able to say I knew her when."

"Well you most certainly *did* know her when," Cooper chuckled, getting the phone for his brother. "And now you shall pay the price." Walking over he held it out and smiled. "Welcome to the crazy world of girls," he teased and Blaine swiped the phone from him. "Just be grateful you won't have to deal with them when you're older like the rest of us!" Cooper yelled behind him as he escaped to his room.

The last thing in the world Blaine wanted to do right then was call Santana, but he knew that he needed to get it over with. And truth was, he had a few things to say to her as well. He dialed the number. She answered on the second ring.

"Oh well if it isn't Blaine Anderson," Santana sneered into the phone. Blaine threw an arm over his eyes. There was absolutely no way he was going to avoid a headache now. "Didn't think you'd actually call."

"Santana, what is the matter with you?" he asked tiredly.

"What is the matter with me?" she spat. "What is the matter with you? We've been writing and talking for how long now? And you and Kurt decide to keep this gigantic secret from me? Did you think I wouldn't accept you?"

"I don't know Santana, with your warm and embracing attitude, how could we possibly not think you'd be accepting?" he said, sarcasm dripping from every word. But then he took a breath and tried to see things from her point of view. "Look, it's not like we planned to hide it from you and I definitely didn't mean to lead you on if that's what you think. I like you Santana, and I thought that maybe I liked you that way, but then I just...realized I didn't."

"Well you should have told me," she said. "You both should have told me."

"I know it seems easy, but it's not easy at all to realize that you're something that half the world thinks is wrong and then to admit it out loud not knowing whether the people listening are in the good half or the bad." Blaine sighed. "Maybe we should have trusted you but it's not like we even trusted ourselves for a long time." Santana was quiet, something she never was. "I'm sorry if I hurt you. I really didn't mean to."

"I know you didn't," she said quietly. "I guess I know Kurt didn't either."

"He needs you Santana," Blaine said. "I know you're mad at him right now but he needs you to help protect him from the bad guys. I need you to protect him for me."

It took her a minute to answer. And when she finally did, her voice had a quiver that surprised Blaine. "I'll do the best I can," she said before ending the call.

Blaine sighed and closed his eyes. He thought of his own friends and Sam's face swam in his mind. He wondered if Sam would have a similar reaction.

He knew he wasn't quite ready to find out.

"Dude I am so glad that you could come over," Sam said, throwing his coat and book bag on his couch. Sam's apartment was much smaller than Blaine's, probably smaller than any of the other kids at school and Blaine knew that Sam was a little embarrassed about being a scholarship student. Still, he was the best friend that Blaine had and when Sam had noticed he was having a tough day he hadn't hesitated to

invite his friend over. "You want something to drink or something? The little ones should be home in about an hour so we have some time to just hang out before we have to entertain them."

"Yeah sure, whatever you got," Blaine smiled hanging his coat up in the closet by the front door and resting his bag neatly on the floor. "Your parents both at work?"

"Yeah," Sam said quietly and Blaine didn't say anymore. Sam kept his story close to his chest and though Blaine knew bits and pieces he didn't pry. Instead he took the cold can of coke Sam held out for him and followed his friend into the room he shared with his little brother.

Blaine sat in a chair at the desk. Sam threw himself on the bottom bunk bed and immediately turned on the video game console. Blaine didn't get to play video games at his house, his father thought that they corrupted the mind and Blaine wasn't too sure he had a good argument against that belief. Sam's parents though weren't around too much and what they didn't know, Sam thought, couldn't hurt anyone. Dead or Alive was one of Sam's favorites and they started in almost immediately. Sam was ruthless. Blaine mostly liked the story, but there was one other thing that Blaine liked...

"Isn't Ayane the hottest? Her boobs are just mmhmmmm..." Sam drawled, staring at the sexy purple haired ninja. "Though sometimes I think I could really go for Christie. Or even Helena. The opera voice gets me right here," he said, hitting his heart and pretending to pass out.

Blaine rolled his eyes. "You're an idiot."

"What, they aren't your type?" Sam laughed as Blaine blushed but he wouldn't let up on his friend. "I bet you go for the young and innocent anime-types. Hitomi or Kororo?"

"Way to stereotype there white boy," Blaine joked and nudged Sam in the shoulder.

"What?" Sam said innocently. "You Asians stick together, just look at Tina and that kid Mike. They're like attached at the hip all of a sudden."

Blaine chuckled and shook his head. "Those girls are not my type."

"Then who is?" Sam asked.

Blaine looked at Sam. Then he looked at the screen. Any smile faded as his eyes took in Eliot, the blonde warrior on the screen; young and beautiful with bright blue eyes and muscles that filled his form in a way that would have made Blaine's heart beat quickly even if it wasn't already from his fear of the question. He swallowed, his gaze dropping to the floor. He could do this now. He could tell Sam and get it out like he told Kurt he would. He could be brave, like the characters on the screen. Blaine looked up, his eyes back on the game, back on the master fighter. "He is," Blaine admitted quietly.

The room was silent a minute other than the sounds of the game and Blaine chanced a glance over to Sam. His friend looked confused, his eyes shifting between Blaine and the boy on the screen, trying to make sense of what Blaine had just said. Blaine's hands were sweating but he was frozen to the spot, afraid to make a move or even take a breath.

Finally, Sam spoke. "Huh. You think he's hot?" Blaine could feel his face heating up and he was glad when Sam looked back one more time, pausing the game so that it froze on Eliot's face. "He looks like me."

Blaine let out a choked breath and found himself sputtering. "Oh, no, Sam, I don't-

"You don't think he looks like me or you don't think he's hot? Or you just don't think I'm hot?" Sam frowned, flipping the blonde hair that really did look like the characters. "I mean, what's the point of having a gay friend if he can't tell you if you're hot or not."

There were many reactions Blaine had imagined from his friends and this was not one of them. He got out of his chair, pacing a little, looking for a pocket in the room where maybe, just maybe, there was some air that he could breathe because it was getting awfully stuffy in there. "I'm not trying to hit on you or anything Sam. I shouldn't have said anything."

Finally Sam seemed to understand exactly what was bothering Blaine and he dropped the controller on the floor as he stood. "Dude, no, I'm not...I mean, I don't think that," he tried to assure his friend. "It's not like you're the first gay guy I know, I actually seem to be a gay magnet. I have another friend at school who came out to me like last year and, oh, I should totally set you two up!" Sam suddenly shouted happily but he backed down a little at Blaine's shake of his head. "I mean, not like you guys have to date or anything but I'll talk to him and see if he wants to talk to you, you guys can be like gay buddies or something."

Blaine laughed, the tension that had been so constricting letting go a little and he took a breath. "Yeah sure," he agreed, rubbing his neck. "If you want."

"Definitely," Sam said. He sprawled back down on his bed and scooted up against the wall. "So now the fact that you weren't mad that Jake kissed Marley makes a hell of a lot more sense. And Tina at Rachel's Bat Mitzvah." Suddenly Sam gasped, his hand flying to his mouth. "Oh my god it's Kurt, isn't it? The reason you don't want me to set you up?" Blaine turned back to the wall wishing that for just a minute his face would stop turning red. "Oh my god it is! Aww, you guys are so cute! Sucks he's so far away though. You guys have kissed though right? Have you more than kissed? I mean he's younger than you right?"

"Oh my god Sam, shut up," Blaine laughed between his complete and utter embarrassment. He turned around but Sam just looked so eager he couldn't help but share. After all, he'd had to pretty much keep it all to himself for the past year and he didn't know how many times his friends had been talking about their boyfriends and girlfriends and he'd just wanted so desperately to burst with how he felt about Kurt. "Yes, we kissed at the Bat Mitzvah and at the after party and when I went to go see him in his show this summer. We're not really dating because he's hundreds of miles away and his Dad thinks he's too young anyway, but," he looked at his toes bashfully, "he's all I think about. Even when I was kind of with this other boy over the summer when I did Oliver. All I could really think about was what it would all feel like with Kurt."

"Blaine, that's, that's incredible," Sam said with a seriousness he rarely showed. "It is. I'm really happy for you. And Jake and Marley and Tina would be happy for you too." He paused a second then thought again. "Well maybe not Tina. But everyone else will."

Blaine felt as though he'd just run through a giant tunnel to finally see the sun on the other hand. He collapsed on the bed with exhaustion. "Thanks Sam. That really means a lot to me."

Sam smiled gently, then quirked a brow. "You still haven't told me if I'm hot."

"Oh my god," Blaine rolled his eyes, grabbing a pillow from the bed and smacking it right in Sam's face. "Yes, you're hot alright? Kurt thinks so too."

Sam grabbed the pillow and hugged it, his face beaming. "The Kurt and Blaine seal of approval," he said proudly. "I think I can deal with that."

"So how was your 14th birthday Squirt," Cooper asked with a grin as he opened the door to his apartment and threw his keys on the side table. "Everything you wanted?"

"Cooper it was amazing." Blaine nearly threw himself on the couch, draping his legs over the arm rest and staring at the ceiling. "Everything I could have imagined. Do you realize that *everyone* at that table knew I was gay? Every single one and none of them care."

"Even Tina?" Cooper smirked with a raised brow.

"Even Tina," Blaine agreed. "She was just happy it really was me and not her. God Coop, it just feels incredible." He swung around and sat up, too energized to sit still. "It just feels like I could conquer the world."

Seeing his brother this happy was possibly the best gift that Cooper could ever get. He sat on a stool at the breakfast bar, elbows resting behind him and he enjoyed the view of his brother. It was like he'd been held captive for years and suddenly he was free.

Well, almost.

"What about Dad?" he asked as gently as he could.

The smile faded from Blaine's lips and he stood up. Blaine had been thinking about it since the day he'd come out to Sam and for the past two months since then. He wanted to, he really did. But there was something stopping him.

"When I came out to Mom, she said whenever I was ready to tell Dad she'd be there for me," he recalled sadly. "I don't think she expected it to be so soon though." He frowned as he looked up at Cooper. "I don't think she's ready."

"Coming out would throw her life into turmoil too," Cooper said. "I don't want you to think it's your fault because it's not. But depending on how Dad reacts to it, it could change both of your lives tremendously."

Blaine realized how true that really was. And that he owed her the time to prepare for it. And himself.

"I'm okay with just being out at school for now," Blaine decided. "Who knows, maybe he'll hear through the grapevine and I won't have to do any big coming out speech."

"I don't know if that would be better or worse," Cooper smirked and Blaine smiled back.

"I don't know either," he laughed and he delighted in the fact that he *could* laugh about it. "I think we just need to assume it's not going to be good either way."

Cooper slipped out of his chair and fell in beside his brother, wrapped an arm around his shoulder. "I think I'm just going to assume that you are going to be *more* than good either way little brother," he smiled. "Now come on, how about I let you win a game of Careers before bed."

If there was one thing Blaine knew it was that no matter what happened he would always have his big brother by his side. And for that, he'd let Cooper think that he'd let Blaine win. "You're on Coop."

Math was Kurt's least favorite subject, and not only because numbers were just not his thing. He'd done fine in elementary school but somehow he managed to be placed in the math class with every single jock at Lima Junior High. Including the jerks that refused to leave him alone.

"When's your next ballet Princess?"

"I think the girls' softball team needs a new catcher, Hummel."

"The girls' bathroom is across the hall fairy."

Kurt let it all roll off his shoulders. It didn't matter how far away he was, the thought of Blaine going through the same thing day after day and coming out on top always gave him the courage to keep on going. Besides, school wasn't all bad.

"Did you guys hear that Finn Hudson is going to be playing Quarterback for Junior Varsity?" Brittany asked, running over to lunch one day in her cheerleading uniform. "He is so cute," she giggled.

Kurt's ears perked up. "Where is he?" he asked. Kurt tried to keep his head down as much as possible around the jocks and he honestly had no interest in football despite the fact that he was sometimes forced to watch it with his Dad. But Finn Hudson made him rethink that decision. Brittany craned her neck, looking over the gaggle of students milling around the cafeteria, then smiled broadly as she pointed. "There he is."

Kurt's eyes followed her finger and his breath left his lungs with a tiny puff. Finn was tall, lean and adorable. Brown floppy hair, a silly and almost shy smile, and eyes that just seemed like they were so much kinder than the other football players that surrounded him. And even though he wore terrible flannel shirts just like his Dad, somehow the boy managed to pull it off. "So cute," he sighed.

"Cheating on Blaine already?" Santana snapped gruffly. She crossed her arms on the table with a huff eyeing both of her friends. "What's the big deal anyway, he's just a dumb guy. Barely even knows his first name."

"I could teach it to him," Kurt said softly, his eyes sparkling. "Does he need a tutor?"

"Ugh." Santana rolled her eyes and grabbed her books from the table, turning back quickly. "Don't get caught staring Kurt. They'll really kick your ass if they know you're interested in one of them."

Kurt met her eyes and nodded sadly. He knew she was right and he got up as well. "I'll see you guys later."

There was nothing Kurt wanted more than to get out of this school and out of this town and somewhere like New York where no one would care whether or not he was gay. He made his way to his locker, pulling his books out of his bag to put them back in his locker before grabbing his notebook and his English textbook. Without any warning he felt an arm grabbing his and swinging him around. David Karofsky stared down at him and grabbed his book from his hand.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Kurt sneered at him. He may have been almost a foot shorter but that didn't mean he couldn't put up a fight. "Give me my book."

"I don't think so Hummel," he said, examining the paper bag covered book. Kurt had spent a lot of time in class the last 5 months doodling and the names of Broadway shows and pictures of cats graced the rough brown paper. But other things did as well and Kurt felt his face go red. "Who's Blaine?"

"He's no one," Kurt said, but the fear in his eyes gave too much away. "Give it back."

"That's an awful lot of hearts and arrows for a 'no one' Kurt. How do you think your little boyfriend would feel if he knew you called him a 'no one'?" David smiled down at him a cruel and hateful smile. "I think he's someone really important. I think you *love* him. I think it say so right here." David pointed to a heart with Kurt + Blaine doodled inside. He had been so stupid to let his mind wander so far in class.

"You should keep your thoughts to yourself," Kurt hissed.

David slammed the book in Kurt's chest, pinning him between it and the locker. "You should keep your eyes and your dick away from the football team, or any other boy in this school," David snarled. "This is a warning Hummel. You only get one. The next time the whole team will teach you a lesson."

Kurt was shaking as Karofsky walked away and his legs had every intention of crumbling to the ground but suddenly another arm was on him holding him up. He flung himself away from it but it came back again. "Hush, Kurt, it's just me," Santana said softly, rubbing his arm until he looked at her. She smiled but her eyes were filled with worry. "Hey you're okay. He's just trying to look tough, but he's not really. If I'd seen him sooner I would have come over to teach him his own lesson."

Kurt let himself breathe and the image of Santana beating up Karofsky was one that made him laugh despite it all. "I think I would very much like to see that Santana," Kurt told her and she pulled him into her arms.

"I've got your back Kurt," she promised softly. "Britt and I both do."

Kurt smiled. The rest of the world might suck, but he had some of the greatest friends in the world.

From: banderbro at Hotmail dot com

To: KHummel at HTAL dot com

Date: May 19, 2006

Subject: Sadie Hawkins Dance

Dear Kurt,

You are never going to believe what happened. You know how I've been freaking out about the Sadie Hawkins dance for months now trying to decide whether to go or not? Well, I'm going. I am SO going Kurt because this boy Derek asked me to go with him! He's the guy that Sam introduced me to. He's actually a really nice guy and we've been talking a bunch. He knows all about you and he's told me about a boy he kissed over the summer. Anyway, the other day we were talking about how stupid it was that there's a whole dance based on girls asking boys and he asked if I was going and I said I wasn't sure and then he asked if I would go if he asked me to and I said maybe and then he ASKED ME TO GO TO THE DANCE WITH HIM!

Can you tell I'm excited? Not really because it's him, please don't be jealous because of course I'd rather be going with you, but because I'm going with a boy, and because of you and Andy and Derek, I don't think any of us should have people tell us we aren't welcome somewhere because if you don't want to go to a dance with a girl then you don't get to go.

I'm gonna have to tell my Dad. And a part of me is terrified but you know the other part is tired of all this. Tired of hiding and tired of pretending and now that everyone else knows I'm tired of sparing him the burden of having a gay son. I have no idea how he'll react but I think I'm at the point where it doesn't matter. Whatever he does will tell me all I need to know.

*Love,
Blaine*

***From: KHummel at HTAL dot com
To: banderbro at Hotmail dot com
Date: May 19, 2006
Subject: Sadie Hawkins Dance***

Dear Blaine,

I am both terrified and ecstatic for you. (I used a thesaurus for that one because I couldn't think of a word that meant as much as I meant). I mean the dance and your dad and...well, I think I am at a loss for words.

It takes a lot to do that Anderson.

And I am jealous. I'm jealous you get to go to a dance with a boy and I'm jealous that a boy gets to go to a dance with you. And I just hope that some day it will be us. But in the meantime you better find some way to send me pics, okay?

And stay safe.

*Love,
Kurt*

"Mom?"

Blaine knocked on his parents' bedroom door. His father was traveling for work until tomorrow and Blaine knew that he couldn't wait any longer. The dance was Saturday, and as terrified as he was to turn their family upside down, at this point he was more terrified to live his life a secret. He was going to the dance, with a boy, and his father deserved to know. And he deserved to be allowed to tell him.

"Come on in sweetheart," his Mom called and he walked into the room. He never went in there anymore when his Dad was around. But when he was traveling and she was left alone he often would curl up on her bed watching prime time TV with her. Tonight the American Idol finale was on and he climbed up on the bed, grabbing the extra blanket to pull over himself. "You gonna watch with me?"

"Sure," he said, but his mother had known him almost 15 years now and she knew when he hadn't come just to stare longingly at Ryan Seacrest.

She grabbed his hand and pulled him into a hug. He may have been a teenager but he was still her baby. Always would be. And she knew her baby needed a hug. "What's on your mind?"

Blaine was quiet. His heart beat a little quick in his chest and she had her guesses what he wanted to talk about but she waited for him to say it. "The Sadie Hawkins dance is this weekend," he started.

Teresa hummed and nodded. "Yes..."

"Derek asked me to go with him," he said.

"Oh yeah?" she asked happily. She'd been pleased when Blaine had told her that he'd come out to his friends and she knew he was feeling fairly comfortable being out at school, but she hadn't realized just how comfortable.

Her reaction made him smile and he sat up, his own grin flashed across his face. "Yeah," he answered. "He just asked me the other day and I said yes."

"Well that's wonderful Blaine, I'm happy for you."

Her acceptance of him filled him with warmth but it wasn't enough and the nerves returned. With them the smile faded. He looked at her, her eyes knowing as they always did and he tried not to be afraid. "I'm going to tell Dad."

He watched her bite her lip and nod slightly with a sigh. "I know you are," she told him.

"You aren't going to try to stop me?" he asked, surprised.

"I told you a long time ago I wouldn't. When you're ready, you're ready."

"But the beginning of the year," he said, trying to make sense of things. "It seemed like you didn't want me to. I told you I was thinking about it and you just...you walked away."

She brushed her thumb along his cheek softly. "It needed to be your decision."

"But I would have done it earlier!" Blaine yelled suddenly, pulling away. Where the anger was coming from he didn't know but he also didn't fight it. "I didn't tell him for you!"

"Really?" she said softly. Gently. "Because you didn't just ask me if I was ready. You didn't wait to hear me say it. You just told me you were ready and you were doing it." She took his hand and he lifted his eyes to hers. They were full of love. "No permission. No doubts. Your decision and yours alone."

He thought about the last year. Telling Sam, telling his friends, managing the stares and the whispers at school and the worry about home. And he realized his Mom was right. He hadn't really been ready until now.

He curled back into his Mom and watched the TV, no more words necessary. It was nice, being in his mother's arms. He had a feeling that it might just be the two of them together for a while now and he realized he missed his Dad. He missed the good times and he hoped, he prayed, that however he reacted to Blaine's truth he wouldn't lose them for good. He let the music of the night, the songs on the screen, lull him into a sense of security that no matter what happened it would be for the best.

"You know even if Taylor Hicks wins this thing, Katharine McPhee is gonna come out on top," Blaine mused.

His mother ruffled his hair, kissed his head and squeezed him tight. "I am sure she will."

"Dad, I need to talk to you about the Sadie Hawkins dance." Blaine glanced back at his Mom who urged him forward with an encouraging smile. His confidence had slipped some since the other night, but what he did know was that no matter what happened she would be behind him.

"Have you finally decided who you're going with?" his Dad asked, putting the work down he'd been doing on the couch. "I hope you're not going with Rachel."

"No Dad, I'm not going with Rachel." He shifted slightly, nervously, his hands shoved in his back pockets.

John Anderson leaned back, crossing his legs. "Or that Tina girl? I know your mom likes her, but she seems a little crazy to me."

As scared as he was, as much as his hands were shaking, Blaine had to chuckle at that. "No Dad, I'm not going with Tina."

"Well then what lucky girl gets you on her arm?"

Blaine looked at his father's bright eyes and expectant smile and for a moment he almost lost his nerve. Because he knew this was very likely the last time he'd see that smile directed at him or those eyes gazing at him with anything but disappointment, maybe even hate. But what he knew even more was that the disappointment in himself, the hate he'd feel for himself if he spent one more day in the closet, would be even harder to bear.

"I'm not going with a girl," he said far more strongly than he felt. "I'm going with a boy."

The smile disappeared. The eyes hardened. "I don't understand," his father said but Blaine knew very well that he did.

He didn't glance back at his Mom but he felt her eyes on him. He felt the hands of Cooper and Rachel and Sam on his shoulders and he felt Kurt's hand in his, squeezing tightly. "This guy Derek asked me to be his date. I said yes."

His father shook his head. He picked up his work papers and his pen and studied whatever was on the paper that mattered so much less than the son standing before him. "No."

His father's denial fueled Blaine's courage and his mother's words came back to him. "I wasn't asking your permission," he said resolutely. "I was just telling you."

"No." His father threw his things down on the couch and sat forward, a finger pointed. "Absolutely not. I forbid you from going."

Blaine's eyes dropped to the floor. It wasn't the reaction he had hoped for, but it was the one he had expected. "You can do that. That's your choice." His heart was beating furiously in his chest but it had been the same his first night on the barricade. Moments before his death scene, he'd wondered if he could just run off the stage and back home where he wasn't pretending to be a person he was not. But then came his cue and he realized that he wasn't pretending. He was that boy. He could fight as hard as Gavroche. "But you can't forbid me from being gay Dad."

"You're not gay," John snapped.

"Yes Dad. I am." Blaine looked him square in the eye, whether his Dad would look back or not. Suddenly he wasn't scared any more, not even a little. "I've known for a long time now. So have you."

John looked away. "This is unacceptable. Who else knows?"

"Everyone now," he admitted. His father had been the last. "You don't have to support me. You don't even have to love me-"

"I can't sit here and listen to this." John jumped out of his seat and past Blaine, grabbing his keys and his wallet from the table by the door, and stormed out of the apartment.

Blaine closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and let it out. He felt his mother's hands on his shoulders.

"Are you okay?" she asked gently.

He was okay. And he would be okay. He didn't need his father in his life, he had gone too many years trying to be the son his father wanted him to be and never living up to his expectations. But now the prison door was completely open and he was free. "I'm going to Cooper's," he told his Mom, turning to see her eyes filled with tears. "I'll go to the dance tomorrow from there."

"I'm very proud of you," she said, brushing a hair off his forehead. One last gesture for the little boy she knew. Because now he was a man.

Blaine lowered his eyes and smiled. "Thanks."

"He'll come around Blaine," she told him. "You'll see."

"Yeah," he said softly. He looked at the door his father had closed, then raised his eyes to her. "But how old will I be? And will I still care when he does?"

"Say 'Cheese' you two!"

Blaine rolled his eyes but he couldn't stop the grin as he and Derek posed in Cooper's apartment. He'd be happy his brother wasn't taking a million pictures like his mom except that Coop was filming the entire thing to completely embarrass him with someday at his bachelor party.

Blaine glanced with embarrassment at Derek but his friend just shrugged with a grin. Blaine though was done. "As much as I love posing, and by much I mean not at all," Blaine clarified, "Derek and I have to go to the dance."

Teresa sighed and put the camera down. "Fine," she smiled softly. "You two just look so handsome I can't help myself." She came over and adjusted his lapels and his bowtie even though they were already perfect. "Have fun," she told him. "Are you sure you don't want one of us to walk you to the hotel?"

"We will be fine Mom," he assured her. "We walk past the hotel by ourselves all the time on our way to school."

"Ok," she said, her brow furrowed with a mother's worry. "Cooper will be there at 11 to pick you up, no arguments." Blaine held his hands up in surrender. She kissed him on the cheek. "Be careful."

Blaine's eyes softened. "We will," he promised then turned to Derek with a grin. "You ready?"

"I've never been more ready for anything," Derek beamed holding his hand out for Blaine. "You?"

Blaine looked at it, smiled and linked his fingers with Derek's. "Let's go dance!"

They'd stayed with Sam and his date, Tina and Mike, and Jake and Marley and the eight of them danced the night away together. No one bothered them and he and Derek even felt safe enough to hold hands by the wall and dance the slow dance when the music quieted. The night was almost over, Cooper would be there soon, and they'd both drunk a ton of punch.

"Come on," Blaine urged loudly over the music to Derek. "I have to go to the bathroom."

They laughed their way to the restroom, pointing out the tacky decorations of the Summer Night theme plastered over the elegance of the century old hotel. "8th graders should not be allowed to ruin nice things," Derek smirked and Blaine couldn't agree more.

They pushed open the hotel restroom door to three sets of eyes flashing up at them. The boys were rich, smart, strong and entitled. Blaine knew exactly who they were. Everyone knew who they were, they were sons of some of the most conservative legislators in New York. And there were flasks in their hands. Blaine and Derek froze.

"Well lookie what we have here boys." Blonde hair, blue eyed, tall and handsome on the outside, Todd set his flask down. A vicious smirk spread on his face. "The fags are looking for some alone time after making us watch them practically fuck on the floor all night long."

A brunette named George took another sip before handing his drink to his friend and staggering slightly as he stepped toward the boys. "Look at them," he taunted. "So hard and wanting."

"All we *want* is to be able to pee without any trouble," Derek said, his voice a lot stronger than Blaine's would have been. Blaine was lucky his knees weren't shaking and he tried to turn and open the door behind him, but somehow the biggest of the bullies had made his way around to block it.

"Going somewhere pansy?" Michael said, pushing Blaine, forcing him back to back with Derek. "You two were so keen to put on a show at the dance. Now you come in here to finish each other off? Make us watch that too?"

"You're that interested in a little cock, Michael?" Derek snapped.

Blaine heard the punch before he felt Derek thrust back toward him, but he couldn't quite tell what was happening because hands were suddenly around his arms and his waist holding him back. He kicked and screamed but fists started in on him, slamming into his stomach to take his breath away. Derek's cries were lost in the background.

"Shut up faggot," he heard as a hand made contact with his head and his arm twisted backwards. He groaned and he fought and he crumpled to the ground but he held back whatever tears might have come. He would never give them the pleasure of seeing him cry. Whatever his father did. Whatever they did. Kurt had said that Blaine was one of the bravest people he knew so whatever came at him he was done letting the world tell him who or what he was allowed to be.

He was out and he was proud and he knew as he closed his eyes and drifted off into the darkness that Kurt would be proud of him too.

CHAPTER NINETEEN:

This is the Way That I Am

He heard voices in the distance, echoes reverberating in his brain but too far away to make out the words. Some sounded familiar, some he'd never heard before. At least he thought he hadn't. It was very hard to pin anything down in his mind. He felt hands on him and he flinched, remembering the fists that had hurt him, wanting to get away, but these hands insisted. Rolling under him. Lifting him so he felt like he was floating. Floating away and outside, the cool air breezing over him making him shiver as he flew away on the wind into the city lit sky. The slam of a door had him plummeting back to the earth and he screamed but a blanket covered him protecting him from the fall.

"It's okay Blaine, you're going to be okay."

The voice sounded warm and caring, and Blaine searched his memory trying to place it. It couldn't be his father, his father wasn't warm or caring. There was his mother but the voice was too deep. He wished it were Kurt but Kurt was far, far away and he was never more grateful for that, that he hadn't been there and he didn't have to see Blaine like this.

"We're going to the hospital Squirt, okay? We'll get you fixed up in no time."

Squirt. There was only one person who called him that and he turned his head, trying to open eyes that were swollen shut and move lips that ached and he only managed a tiny, "ooo."

"Shh, don't say anything little brother. They worked you up pretty bad but we'll get you good as new in no time," Cooper promised.

Blaine couldn't nod, he couldn't respond at all so he just concentrated on breathing and he let the darkness take him one more time.

It was bright. And loud. And the fluorescent mixed with the sunlight streaming in from the window mixed with the incessant beeping in his ears was making his head want to explode. "Cooper," he cried, searching the room for his brother and his heart beat quickly in fear. It was only once a hand reached for his that he calmed down, focusing on the person sitting next to him. "Mom," he whispered.

"I'm right here sweetheart," she said gently and he could see red rims around eyes that were still shining with tears. "Cooper just went downstairs to get some coffee, he'll be back in a minute."

Blaine started crying himself and lifted his arm to wipe his eyes but it was heavy and he couldn't bend it. He picked his head up to try and look. "Mom?"

"It's just a small fracture," Teresa told him, trying to keep any emotion other than calm out of her voice. "The doctors' say it looks like it was twisted. They put the cast on last night. You can have everyone sign it as soon as you're home," she said, trying to smile.

He dropped his head back onto the pillow and closed his eyes. He remembered Michael twisting his arm when they held him back. He closed his eyes. "Derek?"

"He'll be okay," Cooper said from the door, walking in with two cafeteria coffees in a cardboard tray. He took one out for himself and handed the other to their Mom. "He's got some broken ribs and his face looks about as good as yours does but you're both going to be fine."

"What's wrong with my face?" Blaine pouted.

"Your right eye is pretty banged up but they say it'll be okay. Your jaw too. That's why you couldn't talk last night," Cooper explained. "You're lucky you didn't have any broken ribs."

Blaine scoffed. "Lucky, right," he muttered.

"You know what I meant," Cooper apologized.

They fell quiet, none of them knowing what to say. What did you say when you sent your 14 year old brother off for a school dance only to find him bleeding on the bathroom floor when he didn't show outside on time? What did you say when you thought you were safe and you let your guard down and your heart trust only to have it spit back out at you? What did you say when your husband refused to see his son because it was too painful for him to see his worst fears come true?

"Well let's see how Blaine is doing," said a petite nurse probably in her 40's who thankfully broke the awkward silence. She pulled the blood pressure machine over and his Mom and Cooper got out of the way for her to do her work. She put the cuff on and it filled up, squeezing his arm then letting it go. She took it off and wrapped it back around the pole. "Open up," she said and a thermometer was popped in and out,

adding to the beeps in the room that were pounding in his head. "How's your pain level?" she asked, noticing his wince, "on a scale of one to ten, ten being the most."

"About a 7," he admitted and with a nod she turned a dial on the hanging bag attached to his arm. "Give this about 5 minutes and you'll be feeling a lot better." She grabbed his chart to note his vitals and turned to his mother. "The ophthalmologist will be coming in sometime this afternoon to make sure there's no additional damage to his eye. A social worker will stop by at some point too. We'll monitor him overnight and assuming all goes well he can go home in the morning."

"Thanks," Teresa said, her voice tight. "I think I'll go downstairs to get something to eat if that's okay with you Blaine?"

"Yeah sure Mom, it's fine," he said, nervous that his mother seemed nervous. He watched her go and Cooper came to sit next to him. Blaine closed his eyes, feeling the medicine kick in. The pain in his head and his jaw seemed to fade away. His body stopped aching. But his heart still hurt, and he knew that wasn't likely soon to get better. "Dad's not coming, is he?"

He looked so small to Cooper, wrapped up in white blankets, his eyes closed, lashes falling softly on his battered face. There would be no scars, the doctors said, no lasting marks on his skin. Give it a few weeks and he'd look good as new. Cooper was ashamed to admit he'd worried more about that than his arm. Blaine without playing piano was one thing, but Blaine without the face for stage and screen, well that was something else entirely.

He knew though that even when his skin healed perfectly, there would always be lasting marks in his heart. "So far no Squirt," he answered, wishing he had a better one. "But I'm sure Mom's calling him right now. Maybe he'll change his mind."

"I don't know if I want him to or not," Blaine admitted. "It's bad enough to know it was our fault, I don't need him telling me."

Cooper's hand was instantly in his brother's and Blaine rolled his head to the side, looking tiredly at Coop. "This is *not* your fault Blaine. Not yours, not Derek's, just the guys who did this to you. Do you hear me?"

"Yeah sure," Blaine said, looking back up at the ceiling. There were lots of things he could have done differently. He and Derek could have been more discreet. They could have asked Sam or Jake to go to the

bathroom with them. Derek could have not instigated. Maybe Blaine could have fought back harder, gotten away, stayed safe. He remembered thinking that Kurt would have been proud of him but he'd also promised to stay safe, to be careful. In that, he let down the boy he loved. "Does Kurt know?" he asked softly.

"No," Cooper answered. "I wanted to know what you wanted first."

"He's probably blowing up your voicemail at home," Blaine said, trying to laugh but ending up coughing instead. His eyes opened wide in worry. "You don't think he's called Rachel do you? If he's worried about me-"

"Relax Blaine," Cooper soothed. "It's only 9 in the morning, I'm sure Kurt's going to give you more time than that to call him." Blaine let himself fall back into the bed, his eyes closing again. He wondered how he could possibly be tired already but he felt like he'd just run a marathon. Cooper must have noticed. "Get some rest Blaine. I'm going to go check on Mom, okay?"

"M'kay," Blaine mumbled before he drifted off once more.

Kurt had one ear on his Dad and one on the television as Burt took a call in the other room. He could tell it was about him, his father's eyes kept landing on him then quickly looking away. He wondered if he was possibly in trouble but he couldn't recall anything he'd recently done. He wondered if maybe someone at school had finally noticed the bullying going on and he found the thought both scary and relieving at the same time.

He turned back to the television as soon as his father hung the phone up in the kitchen and casually ignored him as his father joined him. But Burt's voice made him turn immediately. "Kurt."

Kurt would never forget the way his father had sounded in the principal's office the day he'd learned his mother was dying. Even if he had, his father's voice now would have reminded him. "Dad, what's the matter?" he suddenly panicked.

"Kurt, bud, there's been a..." Burt's voice caught and he swallowed, trying to figure out the best way to tell him what had happened. "Blaine's going to be okay, but he's in the hospital."

"Oh my god." Kurt's vision went blurry and his heart raced. He tried to remember how to breathe but it was hard with every possible scenario running through his mind. "What happened?"

"He was hurt," Burt said as delicately as he could. "At the Sadie Hawkins dance."

But Kurt knew enough, had experienced enough in his own life, to read between the lines and his eyes and voice grew hard. "What do you mean he was hurt? The truth Dad, I'm not a little kid."

Burt sighed, rubbing his neck. He'd always wanted to protect Kurt from things like this but he knew there was no way now. "Looks like some guys beat him up. Him and his date." He saw Kurt's eyes open wide and he clarified as quickly as he could. "He's got a broken arm and is pretty bruised up but he's going to be just fine Kurt, they're sending him home in the morning."

That wasn't quick enough for Kurt though and he raced off the couch. "I need to go to him. I need to see him." He started up the stairs to pack his things but Burt grabbed him by the arm and pulled him close. Kurt fought him, the tears finally falling as he hit and kicked and tried to get away. "No, let me go, I need to be there!"

"Kurt we can't go, not now," Burt said and he pulled him tighter. "I need you to listen to me right now. Can you do that?" But Kurt couldn't do it, his tears were overflowing, all of his fears realized; Blaine being hurt, *them* being hurt for who they are, for who Kurt was, and it could just as easily have gone so much worse and it could just as easily have been him, and when he went to school on Monday morning he'd know he wasn't safe, he couldn't hide from that anymore. And Blaine would be devastated to miss his Middle School graduation.

"I need to be there," he cried falling down on the bottom step, pulling away from his Dad and in on himself.

"Kurt listen." Burt went to get some tissues to wipe his son's eyes and let him blow his nose. Kurt hiccupped as his tears came to the end and he finally looked up, eyes red and swollen. But at least he was listening. "Do you remember when your mom died and Blaine called you for the first time? You felt a lot better after that." He put a hand on Kurt's knee and squeezed it tight. "Just hearing your voice will be enough for now."

Kurt nodded. He knew his Dad was right. But it didn't make it any easier. "When can I talk to him?"

"Cooper will call tomorrow when he's settled in. He's promised you can speak to Blaine then," Burt said.

Kurt took a deep breath and looked to the floor. "The day before the Sadie Hawkins dance his Dad walked out on them because Blaine was going with a boy. Now this." Kurt looked back up, his eyes filled with emotion. "Do you think his Dad will come back now?"

"I don't know," Burt said calmly, trying not to add his own emotions to the mix. "But what I do know is that Blaine is a strong kid, and he'll get through this."

"Yeah," Kurt said softly. "But what's he gonna be like on the other side?"

Kurt paced the floor, flapping his hands with anxiety while he waited for his Dad to get off the phone with Cooper. Finally after what seemed like hours, Burt held the phone out to him.

"Go easy Kurt, he's still recovering," Burt whispered his reminder.

Kurt said nothing, just grabbing the phone and holding it to his ear.

"Kurt?"

Blaine's voice sounded small and weak but like he was trying to be as strong as he could possibly be and Kurt couldn't help the tears that fell.

"Oh my god, Blaine, I'm so glad you're okay!" he cried. He looked at his Dad, begging to be allowed upstairs to his room. Burt worried about not supervising the phone call but in the end he knew that the boys deserved their privacy. He nodded, and Kurt raced. "I was so scared as soon as I heard."

"Kurt, I'm so sorry," Blaine said and the tears in his voice were so shocking to Kurt that it made his own stop.

"What are you sorry for?" he asked, curling up on his bed.

"I told you I'd be careful. You told me to stay safe and I promised I would and then..." Blaine sniffled. "I should have been more careful, I shouldn't have let them-"

"Now you listen here Blaine Anderson," Kurt said as sternly as a 12 year old could. "Whatever you *think* you did to make them do this are probably the things that you should be the most proud of. Now you can talk about it if you want to and I'll listen as much as you want, but I really want to hear about the actual dance. Tell me how that was."

Blaine laughed softly through his tears and the phone shuffled as he wiped them away. "It was really great. Derek and I hung out with Sam and Tina and Jake and Marley and Rachel. We danced, with everyone and just the two of us. I felt..." Blaine paused a second, and when he spoke again Kurt could hear the smile in his voice. "I felt amazing. Honest, for the first time. Like I could just be myself and I didn't care what the rest of the world had to say about it."

"Then that's how you should keep feeling. How we both should keep feeling. The bullies want to keep us down, but we can't let them win, right?" Kurt said.

"Right," Blaine whispered. "I love you Kurt, you're the best friend I could ever have."

"I love you too." Kurt swallowed the lump in his throat. He wished Blaine didn't have to whisper it. He wished they could both just shout it from the rooftops. But saying it too loudly hurt too much knowing how far apart they were. "I'm coming to New York to see you this summer. I don't care if I have to hitchhike the whole way."

"Your dad will care," Blaine pointed out. "Especially since you're headed to camp."

"What about you?" Kurt asked softly. "What are you gonna do all summer now?"

Blaine was quiet. "I don't know," he admitted. "I can't audition now even if my dad would have let me."

Kurt thought that he probably shouldn't ask his next question, but he couldn't stop himself. "Did your dad come home?"

Blaine sighed. "No. Not yet. I can't decide if that's a good thing or a bad thing."

"Maybe we should just go with *it's a thing* and decide if it's good or bad later," Kurt suggested.

"Sounds like a plan." Blaine yawned. "I think I need to go back to sleep," he said, and by the rustle in the phone it sounded like he was nestling into bed.

"Okay. I'm glad I got to talk to you. Talk to you soon?" Kurt asked.

"Write to you sooner," Blaine said reflexively before dozing off to sleep.

By the end of June, Blaine's bruises had healed. He could move his jaw and breathe well enough to start working on his scales again though voice lessons were still not in the cards. His arm was healing well according to the doctor and the cast was likely to come off in two weeks. Sam and Rachel and the others had come to visit him over the past month. He hadn't felt like going out much, even when his Mom had told him he could. He and Sam and Jake watched every superhero movie on DVD. Rachel and Marley brought every movie musical ever made. But all that time there was a sadness that permeated the house. Words that went unspoken. Questions that went unasked. Blaine talked about the attack with Kurt and no one else. He hadn't spoken to Derek since it happened.

And at night he could hear his father walking around downstairs. He could hear them yelling. He knew it was about him even though the sounds were muffled and he could only hear bits here and there. Still he could hear enough. And one night when he was feeling better, he decided that he'd heard enough. Quietly, he made his way to the top of the stairs, hidden from view but within perfect earshot.

"You're not sending him to military school John. He's *gay*. The whole point of him not going back to his old school is so he'll be safe," his mother argued.

"And so where do you want to send him, somewhere that he can just do whatever the hell he wants?" John yelled back. "He's had too much freedom. He's out of control Teresa, he needs somewhere to set him straight. Either Fork Union or Hargrave can do that."

"No what he *needs* is a father who cares about him and a little bit of justice. And that fact that you aren't cooperating with the police at all is not helping."

"He asked for it Teresa, he doesn't get to then go crying to the police that someone did exactly what we all knew was going to happen," John yelled.

"He didn't *ask* for anything! What's the matter with John, do you want him to hear you?" Teresa snapped in a whisper.

"Do you think that I can't?" Both Teresa and John whipped their heads up to the top of the stairs where Blaine stood in his pajamas. Blaine made his way down, taking each step slowly. "Do you think I haven't heard you for the past month?" He stopped on the second landing, the distance and the height helping him maintain his confidence where otherwise it may have faltered. "Well you don't have to worry Dad, I don't want to press charges."

His mother took a step toward him. "Blaine, sweetheart, those boys can't just get away with this."

"They've already gotten away with it," he said quietly.

"No, I mean-"

"I know what you mean." Blaine sighed and ducked his head. "It would hit national news..."

"No Blaine." His mother shook her head. "They're juveniles-"

"And you know who they are," Blaine reminded her firmly. "You know it would hit national news. Derek can do it if he wants, but I won't." He looked back up at his father. He'd rarely seen his father scared. The one time he'd run away on the subway may have been the last time. He wondered if that was how he felt now. So scared that he was furious. "Dad, I never wanted to hurt you. I didn't come out to hurt you and I didn't go to the dance to hurt you and I certainly didn't walk into that bathroom to hurt you. And I know that pressing charges would hurt you more than not pressing charges would hurt me." Kurt would probably tell him he was making a mistake. That his father didn't deserve that kind of pity or compassion. He thought that maybe all of his friends would agree. But Blaine could only do what he felt was right and be a better man than his father was. "So you win," he conceded. "This time."

Teresa watched her youngest son, clearly the wisest and most mature of them all, climb back up the stairs to his bedroom. And she turned to the man she tried so hard to love. "Congratulations John. That's the son you're walking out on." She didn't wait to see his response. She simply picked up a pamphlet she had earlier dropped on the coffee table and followed Blaine upstairs.

She knocked softly on the door then entered his room. She wasn't sure what she would find, him punching his pillow or crying into it. But he was doing neither. He was simply sitting against his wall, staring out the window upon the city. He didn't look over to her though it was clear he knew she was there. She closed the door behind her, then sat gently on the bed beside him.

"Blaine, you don't have to do this for him," she said.

"I know that I didn't do anything wrong," he said softly. "And I know that they did. Pressing charges isn't going to change that."

Teresa wanted to argue but she simply nodded. She could tell when her son's mind was made up.

"Are you going to let him send me away?" It wasn't the first time he'd heard the threat from his father. He'd been refusing to pay for him to return to his school since the first argument he'd woken up to weeks ago. "I heard him talking about military schools in Virginia."

She reached a hand in her back pocket and pulled out the pamphlet she'd grabbed, holding it out for him. "I think there's someplace better for you to go. If you want."

He took the brochure from her, staring at the front page. "Dalton Academy?"

"It's an all boys school," she explained while he looked through the rest. "They have a zero-tolerance policy for bullying and an active gay/straight alliance. They have a pretty successful show choir that will only get better with you there. And-"

He turned over to the back page and scanned to the bottom. "It's in Ohio," he whispered, looking up at her with wide eyes.

She smiled warmly at him. "And it's in Ohio."

Rachel had flung herself across the bed face down, overly dramatic sobs nearly drowning out her words. "I can't believe you're leaving. We were supposed to grow up together. Do Broadway together. Originate roles together. We had plans!"

"It's only four years," Blaine said, trying to comfort her. But it was hard when he could barely comfort himself. "I'll be back on Broadway before you can even miss me. And this time it will be on my terms."

"It's just not right," she sniffed, rolling over. He brought her a tissue and sat down beside her.

"No, it's not. But it is what it is," Blaine said. "My Dad wants me out of New York. My mom wants me safe." He took her hand and linked their fingers. "And I'll be in Ohio."

Rachel sat up, still frowning. "But it's like what? 2 hours from Kurt?"

Blaine lowered his head and shrugged. "Maybe a little less. Whatever it is it's a lot closer than here. With Burt's help Kurt and I can see each other on the weekends. And the school actually looks good. Who knows, maybe I'll like it there."

"He just wants to destroy your career so you can never go back to theater because no one cares there that you're gay," she declared. She had never liked Blaine's dad before. She hated him now.

"Maybe," he agreed softly. "But it sounds like no one at Dalton will care either. So maybe he wins the battle, but not the war."

Rachel shook her head and her tear filled eyes met his. "I don't know how you can be so calm about this."

"What other choice do I have Rachel?" Blaine snapped, but he quickly regretted it. "He's not getting his way. And I'm 8 hours closer to Kurt. It could have been so much worse."

"What about staying with Cooper?" she asked with a shred of hope.

"No," Blaine said with a small frown. "Cooper's not an option."

Blaine sat in the guest room filling his suitcase with the things that had been left over the years. It was hard to believe how much that room had become his, but as he pulled item after item out of the dressers and the closet he realized just how much Cooper's apartment had been a second home for him.

"I think that's everything," he said, zipping up the bag. He sat down on the bed with a sigh.

"Blaine." Cooper sat down on the bed and pulled his brother to him. "You're going to be okay."

"I'm not upset about me," Blaine told him.

"Then what?" Cooper asked.

Blaine looked up at him, the big brother that he had always loved and admired more than anyone else in the world. He wished he hadn't just come to realize the sacrifices Cooper had made for him. "I'm just sorry you stayed so long for me. If I had known-

"Blaine stop," Cooper told him. "There is no way I could have gone to LA and left you behind here. Do you think I really could have concentrated on making a career for myself when I was so worried that you weren't safe? Weren't happy?"

Blaine shook his head. "You shouldn't have given that all up for me."

"I'd give up anything for you," Cooper told him and squeezed his hands. "Do you remember after you ran away when we played that game of Careers? Do you remember what you told me?" Blaine shook his head. "You told me I would always lose if I valued fame over love. And you were right. If I'd gone then I would have lost *you*. And no amount of fame is worth that."

Blaine's eyes filled with tears and he tried to wipe them away. "I'm going to miss you so much Coop."

Cooper wrapped his little brother up in his arms. 14 years they'd spent together, rarely going more than a week without seeing each other. Now they were both moving on, to better lives, Cooper hoped, and it was the hardest thing he'd ever done. "You're going to knock 'em dead at Dalton," Cooper said. "You're going to own that school. You're gonna perform like crazy. And you're going to fall in love. You are going to have everything Dad and those bullies tried to take from you."

Blaine nodded his head. He hoped more than anything that Cooper was right.

Memories were the kinds of things that lived in the world of between. Between then and now, here and there, black and white. They were large and small, clear and hazy, good and bad all at the same time. Blaine couldn't count the number of memories he had in the apartment in which he grew up and he hated the idea that this one could be his last. But as he watched his father stare out the window, not a word to him since the moment he'd walked out on Blaine the day before the dance, refusing to look at him now, he understood one thing.

His father was here. And Blaine knew he was listening.

"Are you ready to go sweetheart?" his Mom asked, coming down the stairs with her own small suitcase. She would stay over in Ohio for a week. Gain her bearings. Decide what to do now that the one thing that either held her and his father together or tore them apart would no longer be between them. Blaine knew she was angry. Heart-broken. Torn. And he didn't begrudge her those feelings. Because he felt the same.

"Yeah, I'm ready," he said. The doorman had already taken much of his luggage downstairs on the cart where the car would be waiting to take them to the airport. The only thing left was goodbye.

"I'll call you when we get there," Teresa told John, but he didn't acknowledge her in any way. Still they both knew he heard.

Blaine swung his backpack on his back. He grabbed the handle of his carryon. And he looked back one last time. "I love you Dad." John didn't make a move. Except a tightening in his jaw. Blaine took a step toward him. "There was a time once, when you told me you loved me and I turned my back on you. I hope you remember how that feels."

"Blaine," his mother called softly and with one last look he turned to follow his mother out the door.

His eyes on the floor, without a glance back, he left his final words on the doorstep. "I made a mistake then," he told his Dad. "When you realize that you're making a mistake now, I hope it's not too late."

Blaine walked out the door, closing it behind him. His father stayed by the window, watching the car that waited for his family. He kept his eyes on the street below as Blaine's baggage was loaded into the trunk and he and his mother disappeared inside. It was only then that they blurred with tears too heavy to see outside. He knew Blaine was right about everything. But he remained paralyzed by guilt and fear.

The ride from the Columbus airport was familiar. With his move-in papers in hand, Blaine pointed to the signs at the campus entrance leading them in the direction of the correct parking lot for his dorm. He signed in, received a handful of packets, rules and regulations he'd be expected to know by orientation the next morning. There'd be a meet and greet before movie night that evening where he'd get to know the boys with whom he'd be spending the next four years. He hoped they were nice. He hoped they'd be friends.

Parents were expected to drop their kids and go, returning at the end of the week for parents' night before school officially started. Blaine took his Mom's hand as he walked her across the beautiful campus and back out to her car.

"I'll see you on Saturday," she said, hugging him goodbye. She still found it difficult to believe sometimes that her little boy had become a man, but all the proof she needed was right in front of her.

"I love you Mom," Blaine said, trying not to cry. "Tell Mr. Hummel I say hi. And tell Kurt I'll text him tonight." It was nice to finally be able to do that, now that an Ohio number wouldn't seem out of place.

"I will. We'll all see you in a few days though. Go out to dinner to celebrate."

Blaine smiled, his first true smile in over three months. "I can't wait," he said.

He watched her go. Watched until her car drove away, down the street and out of sight. With a sigh he turned around at the entrance and stared out at the place he would call home for the next four years. The sun beat down on him, mixing with the autumn chill in the wind that was just beginning to form.

His father could do what he felt was right. But so would Blaine. He wouldn't let anyone stop him from doing what he loved or loving who he loved. Walking through the red brick arched gate, he left the lies and the hate behind him. Today was a brand new day and he was going to take Dalton Academy by storm.

ACT 5:

CHAPTER TWENTY:

The Color of Desire

September 5, 2006

"It was amazing Kurt," Blaine chattered into the phone as he got ready for bed his first night at Dalton. "The RA told everyone in our circle to tell the group the most important thing they should know about us if we're going to live together. Jeff told everyone that he sings really loud in the shower. Nick told everyone that he's been afraid of the dark since the burglar alarm went off in the middle of the night when he was ten and he sleeps with a nightlight and sometimes even with the light on."

"That's totally understandable," Kurt reasoned.

"Definitely," Blaine agreed. "So when it was my turn I decided I wasn't going to hide anything. So I took a deep breath and told them that I was gay. And you know what they said?"

"What?"

"Jeff just rolled his eyes at me and said, *Dude, you were supposed to tell us something important. That doesn't matter to us at all.*"

"Oh my god, really?" Kurt screeched excitedly.

"Really. And everyone agreed with him too." Blaine climbed into his new twin bed and looked around his small room. The sheets and the blankets were the same as home. His clothes were the same, his belongings were the same. But everything was different. A brand new computer sat on his stock wooden desk where he could email Kurt without worrying that the wrong person would see what he wrote. He could stay up all night and text him or whisper with his friends about the boys on campus he thought were cute and how none of them held a candle to the beautiful boy just out of his reach. Lying down with his head on his fluffy new pillow, Blaine could hear the laughter of the boys in the hallway and the quiet hum of the dorm fan. And it sounded like safety. He wasn't scared. He wasn't dreading tomorrow. He felt completely at peace. And he didn't know if it was because he was accepted here or if it was because there were no more secrets to hold inside, but either way, it made him happy. "I miss my friends, I miss Broadway and the city, and Rachel and Sam, but the truth is, this already feels like home."

"I'm really glad," Kurt said and Blaine believed he really meant it.

"So how was your first day of school?" Blaine asked.

"Oh ya know, same old same old," Kurt grumbled. "The Neanderthals didn't change over the summer and neither did the dumpsters. Still as disgusting as ever."

Blaine's heart dropped. He hated knowing that Kurt was in pain. "I'm so sorry Kurt, I wish there was something I could do. I wish you could be here with me," he said. The one thing that hadn't changed even though they were in the same state now, was the distance between them.

"It's fine," Kurt said dismissively convincing neither of them. "I'm fine. It's nothing compared to what you went through."

"It's not a contest Kurt and even if it were you would win hands down," Blaine said quietly. "I survived because of you. I came out because of you. And the last thing I thought of before the bullies knocked me out was you."

"Blaine-"

"They bully you Kurt because you're open about who you are," Blaine insisted. "That's an amazing thing. You're amazing and I just wish you could be here where everyone would get to see how amazing you are."

Kurt was quiet on the other end of the line and Blaine worried for a minute that he'd said something wrong. But then Kurt sniffled with a little wet laugh. "Is it bad that I want to kiss you right now?" he asked.

Blaine smiled, and a warm fuzziness rushed through his entire body. He was glad he had the room to himself. "It's the best thing you could ever tell me," Blaine answered.

"Good night Blaine," Kurt whispered.

Blaine closed his eyes and dreamed. "Good night."

"Wow, he looks even more amazing this year."

Kurt followed Brittany's gaze across the busy school cafeteria. The loud and obnoxious room was full of jocks and nerds and the artsy clique that did more sketching of the crowd than eating. Which was probably a smart choice, Kurt thought, given how terrible the cafeteria food was. The jocks though, ate it all and in amongst them, Kurt found the object of Brittany's declaration. So did Santana.

"It's only Finn Hudson," Santana said, rolling her eyes. "He just hit puberty," Santana explained with a snarky air.

Kurt leaned his cheek on his hand. "Yes he did," he responded dreamily.

"I'm going to kiss him," Brittany said matter-of-factly and she popped out of her chair, her books gathered in her hand, and walked off toward him.

Santana's mouth gaped and closed quickly, and without permission Kurt's heart sunk a little in his chest though all rational thought told him he had no reason to feel that way. They both watched as Brittany bounced up to the jock, twirled her blonde locks in her fingers and smiled up at him with the utmost innocence. Finn smiled back and Santana and Kurt anxiously watched their mouths move, hoping they could read their lips and maybe use some teenage sorcery to change the words coming out of them but knowing that they couldn't. Then Brittany stood on her toes, kissed his cheek and bounced right back to them and into her seat.

"Well?" Santana pressed with annoyance when her best friend said nothing.

"He's taking me out Friday night as long as his mom says it's okay," Brittany grinned. She grabbed the apple off Kurt's plate and took a bite before he could stop her. "Don't worry, I'll tell you guys all about it," she grinned just before the bell rang. She grabbed her things and ran off before either could say another word.

For a minute neither of them moved, frozen in place by the jealousy that suddenly weighed them down.

Kurt cursed himself for the irrational wish that he was Finn's date Friday night and he imagined that Santana was doing just the same. One thing was clear. Neither one of them wanted to hear anything about it.

Blaine tapped his feet. He sat on the bench outside the Warbler practice room with ten other freshman who had made the final round. They'd all sung for the council and the current members and each and every one of them was impressive in their own ways. Blaine had no idea how the council would decide on the five that would be given spots.

"You think they're gonna make a decision today?" A boy drew up next to him, leaning forward on his knees with his hands clasped together. He looked up at Blaine when he spoke. The boy had dark hair, like his own but straight and falling over eyes that were striking. He was handsome. Different than Kurt, older than Kurt. "My name's Brad. You were amazing in there."

"Oh, thanks," Blaine said humbly. "You were amazing too." And it was true. Blaine must have had a thing for true tenors because though his voice wasn't as unique as Kurt's, Brad had this special tone that he'd immediately been drawn to, that he felt down into his bones. And maybe it was that and not the way his bluest of blue eyes were looking at him that made Blaine blush.

"Thank you, I appreciate you saying that. But we all know that there are really only four spots open because you're a shoo in. I mean, no one here can compete with Broadway credits," Brad said. And in New York the words would have been biting, a snarky jealousy that was inherent in the world in which Blaine had grown up. But Brad seemed sincere. In awe almost. But there was more to it than that. "Would you like to go out sometime?" Brad asked quickly, his skin blushing in a way that made Blaine smile and laugh. Brad looked away. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have, I mean, you just met me but I've followed your career online for a while and then you were here and-"

Blaine reached a hand out and rested it on Brad's. The boy looked up at him, surprise in his eyes. "Don't be sorry," Blaine told him. "I'm honored. It's just...it's a little bit complicated."

"You have a boyfriend already. Of course you do, I should have known-" Brad shook his head at his own foolishness.

"No," Blaine said but then his heart clenched in his chest. "Like I said, it's complicated. Let me think about it, okay?"

"Yeah, sure, okay," Brad said.

The disappointment on his face pulled at Blaine's heart and he squeezed Brad's hand. "Thank you for asking," he said, meaning it sincerely, and he smiled at the boy. "Really."

Before Brad could say anything else the doors swung open and the council members stood tall in the doorway. "We would like to thank you all for coming out to audition. We wish we could have taken you all but there are only five slots open per class. So our freshman for the year are: Nick Duval, Jeff Sterling, Trent Nixon, Brad Baker, and last but certainly not least, Blaine Anderson."

As each boy's name was called they stood up, huge grins on their faces and though everyone believed Blaine to be a shoo-in, his heart raced until he heard his name loud and clear. He jumped up and before he knew it he was in Brad's arms, neither knowing which one had hugged the other first. It didn't matter though. They both felt it, that tiny spark that says that maybe with a little attention, a flame could possibly grow.

Blaine had to call Kurt that night.

"So there's this boy at school," Kurt started. He was supposed to be doing his homework and he knew at some point his father was going to put a stop to these nightly phone calls with Blaine but he hadn't yet and Kurt was going to take full advantage of it. Besides, it had been over a week now that he'd had to watch Brittany fawn all over Finn and listen to every little detail of their shallow budding relationship and every time she talked about how amazing Finn was Kurt's jealousy just grew bigger and bigger. "He was cute last year but he grew like 6 inches over the summer, gained a ton of muscle, and he is so handsome Blaine, not like you but this rugged goofy type of handsome."

"Um, thank you?" Blaine said with a trace of amusement in his voice. "What kind of handsome am I exactly, since you brought it up?"

"You are movie star handsome," Kurt answered quickly as if the answer was one figured out long ago. "His name is Finn and he's totally straight, actually he and Brittany are dating now which is just weird, I have no idea what they even talk about, but looking never hurt anyone, right?"

There was a pause before Blaine answered, "Right," and Kurt did not miss his hesitation at all. He worried right away that he'd hurt Blaine's feelings or made him feel like Kurt didn't like him anymore, but just as he was about to apologize Blaine said, "I met someone."

Kurt felt like his heart was ripped from his chest and he forgot how to breathe. "Oh," he managed to squeak out before his lungs forced his breathing to return to normal.

"His name is Brad," Blaine said carefully. "He was at the Warbler auditions with me. He..." Kurt wasn't sure he wanted to hear exactly what *he* did. "He asked me out."

"Oh," Kurt repeated. "That's great."

"I won't go if you don't want me to Kurt," Blaine said quickly. "The last thing I want to do is hurt you."

"Blaine." Kurt took a deep breath and let his rational mind replace his emotional one. "You're in high school, at an all boys boarding school that is welcoming to gay kids. I'm in junior high in Lima where the only thing as gay as me is the yearly Sound of Music sing-a-long. We're two hours apart and until someone invents a teleportation device or decides that they're going to lower the driving age by a few years, we can't see each other more than one day a week at the *most*." Kurt shook his head. It was so hard for him to say, so hard to let him go, but he had to. "I can't hold you back."

Blaine suddenly felt as though his entire being was drowning in a pool of sadness. The idea of Kurt saying it was okay was one thing. The actuality was something entirely different. "Kurt-"

"Blaine, I love you. And I know the relationship I want with you," Kurt said. "And it isn't kisses on the weekends and phone calls and letters and it isn't puppy love, it's real, and the truth is I'm just not ready for it. We're not ready for it."

Blaine was pretty sure he was ready but no matter how much it hurt he understood, and he had to respect, that Kurt wasn't. "Why does this sound like goodbye?" Blaine asked sadly.

"It's not," Kurt said with absolute surety. "I'm never saying goodbye to you."

"So what do we do?" Blaine asked.

Kurt sighed. Being mature was exhausting. "We wait. You'll date all the charming Dalton men and I'll stare longingly at straight boys I can never have," Kurt smirked. "And you'll tell me all about it and I'll tell you all about it, just like we promised."

"And kisses?" Blaine asked, memories that he wanted to be real again flooding his mind. "I still want to kiss you so bad."

Kurt bit his lip. There was no way he could say no to that. "As long as neither one of us has a boyfriend, we can have all the kisses we want," Kurt decided. "Deal?"

Kurt could almost hear Blaine's smile. "Deal."

From: RachelBerry at yahoo dot com

To: banderbro at Hotmail dot com

Date: September 18, 2006

Subject: Missing You

Dear Blaine,

I'm sitting backstage waiting to go on and all I could think about was you sitting in your dressing room writing to Kurt. It was years ago but it was like it was yesterday and all I want to do is go dance with you in the corner and yell at each other. Do you remember that night that you left that note for me in my bucket and when I reached in to scrub the floors I had to turn my laughter into tears? I have that note up on my dressing room mirror. Sometimes I hope just for a minute that I'll find another one hidden on set.

I miss you so much.

My dads are letting me be tutored full time. I couldn't return to school without you, and especially not knowing what those awful boys did to you. I still talk to Sam and Marley, they come over sometimes. First day back Jake and Puck got expelled for trying to fight those guys. Sam pulled them off but it was too late. They're both heading to public school now.

My dads are keeping an eye on your mom. They won't tell me much, just that it's adult problems for them to work out and that you're in the best place you can be while it happens. It's hard to believe that, but I'll try. I hope it's true. I hope you're okay. I can't wait to see you during winter break.

*Keep Shining,
Rachel*

His knock on the door was quiet. Hesitant. The idea of introducing himself to the Headmaster just one month into the school year and asking for something he was pretty sure he wasn't allowed to have was nerve-wracking for Blaine. It felt too familiar. And yet here he was, knocking on the door.

"Come in," called the deep voice inside that he'd heard that first day of school.

Blaine opened the door and stepped inside. The headmaster's office was everything that he thought it would be; dark browns and leather and wood and books. It reminded him of his father's office which really didn't make his racing heart slow at all. "Hello Sir. Do you have a minute," he asked nervously, staying by the door. "My name is Blaine Anderson."

"I know who you are," the headmaster said with a smile as he rose out of his seat and came to shake Blaine's hand. He was tall and well built and Blaine imagined he was handsome when he was younger but now his hair was graying and lines that no doubt came from running a school full of boys were accenting his features. "Why don't you have a seat, I've been meaning to invite you down to talk."

"Thank you Sir," Blaine said and he took a seat in the winged-back leather chair.

"So how are you liking Dalton," the headmaster asked as he came to casually rest against his desk in front of Blaine. "I hope you've found that everyone is treating you well."

"Oh yes, it's really been amazing," Blaine beamed.

"I know the Warblers were excited when they heard you would be joining us this year. You have a few fans amongst them," the headmaster shared. Then he admitted, "You have one here too."

Blaine blushed and looked down modestly. "Really?"

"When I heard you were coming here I got out my Les Mis playbill and there was your name in the little insert – *The role of Gavroche will be played by Blaine Anderson*. I remember your performance," he said.

Blaine didn't know what he was supposed to say to that but there was no doubt that it could only help him and he let himself get his hopes up just a little. "Well Sir, that's kind of why I'm here. I really miss being on stage..." His voice trailed off. He'd been thinking about it since Rachel's letter. The other night he'd dreamt he was back on the barricade. He had so much at Dalton that he knew he shouldn't be greedy, but he couldn't help the large hole he felt in his heart.

The headmaster went around his desk with a sigh and sat down, leaning back in his chair. He tented his fingers in thought. "You're the first freshman to sing lead with the Warblers," he said slowly. "And you didn't audition for the fall play."

Blaine shook his head. "I need a waiver from the union and I couldn't do it in time. Plus, I guess I'm a bit of a snob when it comes to theater," he admitted. "But CATCO is having auditions in Columbus-"

"Blaine." His voice was sympathetic, but also stern. And Blaine's hopes crashed to the ground. "Students aren't allowed to do activities off campus until their junior year. I can't make an exception for you and even if I could your father has already said no."

Blaine lowered his head. He should have known that even here his father would swipe at his happiness wherever he could. "That's okay, I understand," he muttered, getting up from his chair. "I'm sorry I wasted your time."

As his hand touched the doorknob, the headmaster gently stopped him. "Blaine." He turned and looked over his shoulder. He was doing all he could not to cry. "Get a waiver for the spring show. You might be a bit surprised with what our boys can do. And how much you could teach them."

Blaine nodded. "I'll think about it," he said, and he walked out of the office.

"I think it's a good idea," Rachel said as she looked at Blaine through the Skype call. "I mean, your father can't stop you from participating in a school production and I'm sure Equity won't give you a hard time about it. And that way you can keep up your skills, and just imagine the types of roles you'll get to play."

"They're doing Fiddler on the Roof in the spring," Blaine said with a lack of enthusiasm.

"Well just think, you could play Tevya years before your time," Rachel smirked. "And I will be your expert on all things Jewish."

"Fabulous," he said, rolling his eyes. His phone beeped on the nightstand beside him and he reached for it.

From Kurt to Blaine: How was your date with Brad?

Blaine frowned. Rachel didn't miss it. "What's the matter?"

"It's Kurt. He wants to know how my date with Brad went," he said.

"Well how *did* your date with Brad go?" Rachel asked excitedly. "This was what, your third? Did you kiss? Did you do more than kiss?" She wagged her eyebrows suggestively.

"We didn't do more than kiss," Blaine told her and he wondered why he hated talking about it so much. He definitely didn't hate the date or the kisses. When they kissed it was different than it had been with Kurt or Andy. Brad's skin was beginning to bristle with the ghost of a beard coming in and it sent a thrill of excitement straight through him that also came with a small dose of guilt. "We had a lot of fun. We went to the movie night and we sat curled up together on the floor and watched Rainman. Not exactly the most romantic of movies, but it was still fun."

"But you feel guilty," Rachel reasoned and Blaine hated that she knew him so well. "Kurt told you it was okay, right? I mean what are you going to do? Sit around for four years and wait for him?"

"Maybe," Blaine said. But he knew he wasn't being reasonable. Kurt was reasonable, Rachel was reasonable and they were both right. He shouldn't hide away just because the boy he loved was too far away to be with.

From Blaine to Kurt: It was good. We watched Rain Man.

From Kurt to Blaine: And then he walked you home...in the dark...to your dorm...and then... ;)

"Why doesn't he care that I'm kissing another boy?" Blaine asked with a pout. And that's when he realized that it wasn't just his own guilt that had him tied up in knots about this. It was that Kurt didn't seem to mind him being with someone else.

But Rachel seemed to think otherwise. "He cares Blaine, of course he cares, but what's he gonna do? He's hung up on this Finn guy who he wishes he could date like you're dating Brad but he can't so he's gonna live vicariously through you and maybe imagine for a minute that it's him kissing you instead of Brad."

"I wish it was him kissing me instead of Brad," Blaine said.

From Blaine to Kurt: I wish it was you kissing me instead of Brad.

"Does Brad know that?" Rachel asked.

"No, I don't think so," Blaine admitted. "We haven't said specifically that we're boyfriends or exclusive. It's only been three dates. I told him it was complicated. He probably wants that though."

"I'm sure he does," Rachel said with a frown.

From Kurt to Blaine: I wish it was me kissing you instead of Brad too. I will see you in three days.

Columbus Day was right around the corner and it would be their first time seeing each other since the dinner with their parents that first weekend he had moved into Dalton. They'd talked a lot that day and they held hands at one point but with Burt watching closely the closest they had gotten to a kiss was a brief one on the cheek. But in only three days he would be spending Columbus Day weekend with Kurt and his Dad, sleeping over together for the first time since Rachel's Bat Mitzvah, and Blaine was making absolutely sure that no matter how many kisses he and Brad shared that he did *not* have a boyfriend this weekend.

From Blaine to Kurt: I can't wait.

"I'll talk to Kurt this weekend," Blaine sighed. "It isn't right for me string Brad along if I'm in love with someone else."

"I don't think it's talking you're going to be doing," Rachel smirked.

From Kurt to Blaine: I can't wait either. Goodnight.

"What did he say?" Santana asked. She was curled up in pajamas at Kurt's house, sleeping over because her mom was away with her dad at some doctor conference somewhere. She waited for only a second before smacking an upside down Kurt with a pillow. "That good, huh?"

"No, it's not-" Before he could finish Santana snatched his phone and scrolled through the conversation.

"Wanky!" she cooed, and tossed it back. "Though I hope you'll do a little more than just kissing this weekend."

"I'll leave that stuff to you," Kurt said. He grabbed his phone and plugged it in before sliding beneath his sheets. Santana took the hint and crawled into her sleeping back on the floor. Kurt had been worried about her. Ever since Brittany started hanging out with Finn and the rest of the football team, Santana had been dating around herself. Trying to keep up, Kurt thought. It made Kurt sad. Both girls were distancing themselves from him whether it was intentional or not and that wasn't helping him at all. His clothes were constantly ruined with the almost daily dumpster dive and more and more Kurt started wondering just how he was going to get through another day. But Blaine's words and Blaine's courage always came back to him and so no matter what he continued to walk the halls with his head held high. "Besides kissing is one thing, but if he's going to keep dating this Brad kid then it isn't fair to any of us for things to get more serious with me and Blaine."

Santana scoffed as the lights went out around her, Kurt having turned them off at his bedside. "I don't think things *can* get more serious, you are so in love with him it's like you'd get married tomorrow if you could."

"That's not true," Kurt objected, and it wasn't. They had never spent more than a week together. Kurt knew the distance was part of what made things so perfect. "Besides that wasn't what I meant by serious."

"Sure it's not," she teased, but Kurt ignored her. He closed his eyes and snuggled into his pillow, letting his mind drift to thoughts of Blaine on the floor instead of Santana. They would stay up all night talking about everything and he wouldn't get jealous and they would kiss...he was more than ready to kiss now. He was

just drifting off when Santana said, "Maybe I should show you what to do on a popsicle just in case. Brittany and I practice all the-"

A pillow hit her before she could finish and with a laugh she threw it back. Kurt grabbed it, curled into it, and tried to go back to sleep, hoping that his dreams didn't make him wake up wanting to take her up on the offer.

"I want you to behave this weekend and be respectful. Mr. Hummel is putting a lot of trust in you letting you stay over at his house."

Blaine rolled his eyes at his mother, grateful she couldn't see, as he waited outside for Kurt and his Dad to pick him up for the weekend. "It's not like I haven't been there before," he reminded her.

"Number one, the first time you were there I didn't know. Number two, if I *had* known, the first time you were there you were too young for me to worry about you being disrespectful. And three-"

"You're just saying this because I'm g-" Blaine snapped angrily.

"And three," his mother finished her lecture firmly, "I have always told Cooper to be respectful when he goes to his girlfriends' homes so no, I am not saying this because you're gay."

Sometimes Blaine hated the way his mother always knew what he was going to say before he said it. But she was wrong. "Kurt's not my boyfriend," he said sadly.

"Whatever you want to call him, neither Mr. Hummel nor I are naïve enough to believe you will not be thinking about doing things that boyfriends do," she said. "And you need to remember, young man, that you will be 15 next month and he is only 13. It's different than it used to be."

This conversation was going from bad to worse on the scale of things he did not want to hear and he was just about to tell his mother that when the Hummels drove up. "They're here Mom, I've gotta go."

"I love you Blaine," she said quickly. "And remember what I said."

He tried to forget what his mother said. Seeing Kurt again was like a breath of fresh air and they fell back into step just like they always had each and every time they saw each other. Just like nothing had changed.

And nothing had changed, not in the Hummel home. All the same pictures from four years ago hung on the wall with just a few more added. All the same furniture and rugs and everything he remembered from the last time he'd been there still stood in the same places. And Kurt's bedroom hadn't changed either.

Sure the magazine clippings and posters were updated and the Broadway playbill wall had grown, but the stuffed animals he'd slept with four years ago were still there and the little desk set he'd had on his desk was still there and his furniture still bore that telltale sign of being from the kids section.

As hard as Blaine tried to forget his mother's last words he couldn't. Because he hadn't realized until just then how much older Brad was than Kurt. And how much older he was than Kurt.

And just as they sat on the bed chattering away about the goings on at school and it quieted down and they stared into each other's eyes, knowing that despite everything else, this was why he had really come to visit, Blaine leaned in and he brushed his hand along Kurt's cheek that held not a trace of the beginnings of a beard like Brad had. And he closed his eyes and leaned back with a sigh, wishing his mother had never said a word.

"Kurt, we need to talk."

"Kurt, we need to talk."

Kurt had been very very very nervous about Blaine coming for the weekend. So much had changed since the last time he'd been here and though their friendship was so much stronger now it was also extremely confusing. And as he laid in bed three nights ago Kurt worried so much that Blaine was out with his handsome Dalton boy and it hurt his heart to think about the things they could be telling each other, the secrets they might be sharing that had only belonged to Blaine and Kurt before. And though he knew that Blaine was older and he would try things before he would and that was a good thing as long as Blaine brought those things back to him like he had before, it still killed him to picture that happening. Because that happening meant that Blaine and Brad were boyfriends and boyfriends meant that Blaine was off

limits and he so much wanted Blaine to not be off limits. But then Blaine texted him that he wanted to kiss him and he thought that maybe, just maybe, everything would be okay.

Apparently he'd been wrong because they were just about to kiss before Blaine pulled back and now Blaine was staring at him, looking at him in that forlorn way that had regret written all over it and saying things like *Kurt we need to talk*.

"Can we at least get through one kiss before we do this?" Kurt tried not let his heart sink to the floor. He'd tried to prepare for the things he hoped to happen to not happen, but preparing for rejection clearly didn't take the pain away.

"Kurt." Blaine looked down, hiding away his beautiful gaze that always said so much and always looked at Kurt in a way that made him feel like the most special thing in the world. "Kurt I don't know if we should."

"Why not?" Kurt asked and his voice was a mix of heartbreak and challenge. "Did he ask you to be his boyfriend? Did you say yes?"

"No," Blaine assured him but his cheeks colored anyway. "There are just...there are things I want to do with you that you're just not ready for."

Those were not the words Kurt expected. "What? How do you know I'm not ready?" he challenged.

"You said it yourself. You weren't ready," Blaine said softly. "You said we weren't ready, but-"

"But you're ready," Kurt said and there was anger in his voice that he wasn't exactly sure from where it came. Blaine looked up at him then and Kurt tried very hard to appear his oldest self because he did not want this moment slipping away. If they didn't do this now Kurt feared they never would again. "You want to do all those things with him?"

Blaine shook his head and squeezed his eyes shut. "No, I want to do all those things with you Kurt, that's the problem, but you're thirteen and I'm almost fifteen-"

"The difference in our ages hasn't changed over the years Blaine," Kurt said bitterly. "It stays pretty much the same."

"When my mom told me it would be different now I didn't want to believe her but-"

Blaine reached for him but Kurt sprung up from the bed as if Blaine's hands held fire and he crossed his arms angrily against his chest.

"My age didn't matter to you when I was 11 and I kissed you at Rachel's Bat Mitzvah and it didn't matter to you last year when you kissed me at camp, and it didn't matter three days ago when you said-"

"I don't know Kurt," Blaine interrupted and he was clearly as upset as Kurt, just differently so. "I just know I can't."

"I was ready for you to tell me you couldn't because you had a boyfriend. I wasn't ready to be told it's because I'm too young!" Kurt ran out of the room.

"Kurt," Blaine called after him but he ignored him. He ignored his father in the living room when he looked up and asked what was wrong and he flew through his tears out the door to the backyard. He needed air, he needed the cool breeze on his face. He needed the stars that for years now were the only daily thing he could share with Blaine.

"Kurt," Blaine spoke softly behind him.

Kurt wiped his tears away furiously, not wanting Blaine to know that he'd managed to break his heart before he'd officially even given it to him.

"Kurt please don't cry," Blaine pleaded. "I'm sorry."

"This isn't proving my case too well that I'm old enough to be with you," Kurt sniffled and shivered.

"Everybody cries Kurt, come on," Blaine said gently and when Kurt felt the warm coat slipped over his shoulders he didn't resist as Blaine's fingers lingered there. He let Blaine's hand gently turn him and he let them pull him into a warm hug against Blaine's chest. Blaine smoothed his hand through Kurt's hair, calming him but it wasn't making anything easier on Kurt.

And apparently it didn't make it easier for Blaine either because when he pulled away and he looked down at Kurt, still holding him in his arms, the regret was gone. Only the want remained.

"I'm the same kid I was three days ago," Kurt said, his voice little more than a whisper.

"You're right, you are," Blaine breathed and Kurt would have sworn that Blaine's eyes glowed gold.

"You were thirteen the first time we kissed and that was two years ago so I can't be too young for that," Kurt reasoned. His heart was racing at the way Blaine was looking at him as if he were fighting a war inside his head and trying so hard to win. "It's just a kiss," he whispered.

"Just a kiss," Blaine repeated and he leaned down just enough for Kurt to surge forward, their lips meeting between them. Kurt closed his eyes, his skin tingling as the spark that had always been there since the moment they met rushed through him. And Kurt didn't need years to know that Blaine was his coffee. He didn't need years to know that this was what he wanted forever, what he had wanted since he held his mother's hand in a Broadway audience and saw his soulmate up on that stage. And as the kiss deepened and the things that Blaine said he wasn't ready for swept through his mind like leaves to chase in the wind, he didn't need years to know that no matter what happened between now and *old enough* that he and Blaine would be together in the end.

Blaine pulled away only when he had to and he rested his forehead on Kurt's. "God Kurt, how do I love you so much?" he breathed.

"We always want what's just out of reach," Kurt answered.

Blaine pulled back to look hard into Kurt's eyes. "Do you think that's all this is?" he asked.

Kurt shook his head and gave a sad smile. "I hope not." He knew it wasn't for him.

Blaine cupped Kurt's face and brushed a thumb across the soft skin of his cheek that felt like silk beneath his skin. "I'll wait for you," Blaine promised, before kissing him gently once more. "I'll wait for you."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

A Heart Full of Love

From: banderbro at Hotmail dot com

To: at HTAL dot com

Date: November 16, 2006

Subject: Fifteen Candles

Dear Kurt,

Happy Birthday to me! The guys threw me this awesome party, serenaded me with a ridiculous version of "Fifteen Candles" and just generally caused enough of a ruckus that we were yelled at by teachers and staff three times. But it was my birthday, so they couldn't really do anything to us. Go me!

It wasn't as good as you and your Dad coming out here last weekend for my birthday dinner. That was really special. Can you thank your Dad again for me? I loved being able to see you. And I thought about what you said. I think you're right. I have to do Dalton's show next semester. Professional or not I have to keep acting if I want to still be any good when I get home. And you're right. It's a good way to stick it to my father. ;P

Speaking of which, he hasn't called. I don't know why I'm surprised. I mean I guess I'm not. But it still hurts.

You're lucky Kurt. Your dad is amazing.

Well this letter went downhill fast. Too bad for that "no erase" rule we have.

I miss you. More than I should.

The Warblers are having a show before Winter Break. I hope you and your Dad will come.

Love,

Blaine

It was dark, the score was 14-0 and Burt was watching the game with a beer in his hand when Kurt snuck up behind him and flung his arms around his dad's neck in an embrace.

"Oh hey there bud," Burt said, looking up over his shoulder at him with a chuckle. "To what do I owe this honor?"

"Nothing, you're just the best dad ever," Kurt said. He walked around the couch to sit down. Sitting back against the arm, he crossed his legs. 'Blaine says thank you again. For dinner."

"Ah. I should have known all the love had something to do with Blaine," Burt teased. "Well tell him he's welcome and he doesn't have to keep thanking me. How's he doing?"

Kurt frowned. "It's his birthday and his Dad didn't even call. What kind of Dad does that?"

Burt frowned. "Not the kind of Dad you want to be. So remember that someday when your kid tells you something you don't like."

Kurt laughed. "I think that is years and years away." He was just about to say something when his father's team scored and he rolled his eyes and hid his grin as he waited out the celebration he was all too used to. Finally Burt settled back down. "So, the Warblers are doing a show before Christmas."

"Get me the dates and we'll go," Burt said without any persuasion.

"See? Best dad ever." A penalty was called on Burt's team and Kurt groaned while his father swore louder than he probably should have. "I think I'm gonna go to bed."

"You get all your homework done?" Burt asked.

"Yes," he answered.

"Good," Burt smiled. "Have a good night son. Love you."

"Love you too Dad."

"My little brother's not so little anymore."

Blaine smiled and leaned back on his pillow. The light was off and he'd just been heading to bed when Cooper called. "Hey Coop."

"Fifteen. I remember when you were five."

"You remember when I was born and Mom brought me home from the hospital and you asked her if you could please bring me back."

"Yeah well, I'm pretty glad they didn't let me," Cooper admitted. "So how's the birthday so far? Any birthday kisses?"

"Just on the cheek from Kurt last weekend," Blaine said. He had been pretty certain that if he and Kurt could have ditched Burt at the restaurant he would have gotten more, but they'd had no such luck.

"What about that Brad kid?" Cooper asked.

"I told him we could just be friends." Blaine sighed. "God Coop, am I being stupid?"

"Yes." Blaine groaned at Cooper's response. "Look, I get it. I know how much you care about Kurt. But are you gonna join a monastery until you and Kurt can be together?"

"When I'm with Kurt I only want to be with Kurt," Blaine said, trying to explain something he was having trouble understanding on his own. "And when I'm here I want to be with someone because *Prep School Boys*, Cooper!" Cooper laughed. "But if I'm only thinking of Kurt when I'm with them, how is that fair to anyone?"

"So you're joining the monastery," Cooper concluded.

"Just call me Brother Blaine," he sighed.

"Already do Squirt," Cooper teased.

Blaine's mind wandered and Cooper's must have too because the line grew quiet. This birthday wasn't shaping up the way he wanted it to. Dalton was great, his friends were awesome, but if he had to choose he wasn't where he wanted to be or with the people he wanted to be with.

"You okay Squirt?"

Blaine picked sadly at the crease in his blanket. "Dad hasn't called," Blaine told him.

There was quiet on the line. Then Cooper said, "I'm sorry."

"I don't know what I thought or what I'd been hoping for. I just thought maybe..."

"You can't change him Blaine," Cooper said. "And you can't blame yourself. Someday he'll realize what a big mistake he's making. That he's losing one of the most precious people who exist in the world."

Blaine didn't think he was that precious, but it was nice to hear. "Is Mom okay? She tried to sound fine when she called me this morning, but I know she's hiding stuff."

"Mom's okay," Cooper said. "I promise."

"Okay." Blaine didn't really believe Coop, but he knew that even at fifteen, his brother would always try to protect him. "I should go. It's late."

"Happy Birthday Blaine."

"Thanks."

Blaine hung up and tucked himself snuggly into bed. His phone still in hand, he knew it was too late to call Kurt. But he wanted more than anything to talk to him.

From Blaine to Kurt: You still up?

From Kurt to Blaine: Of course.

From Blaine to Kurt: Did you get my email?

From Kurt to Blaine: Of course. My dad says you're welcome and stop thanking him. He also needs the date of the show.

From Blaine to Kurt: December 16. It's a Saturday. The weekend before winter break. My mom will be up too. She says she's going to try to get my dad to come. I kind of hope he does. It will be better than seeing him for the first time when I get back to New York.

From Kurt to Blaine: Yeah. Better with hundreds of people around then alone.

From Blaine to Kurt: That's what I'm thinking. Though if he doesn't come then we can try to get your Dad to go out to dinner with my Mom and leave us on campus for the Warbler shindig after the show.

From Kurt to Blaine: We can certainly try.

From Blaine to Kurt: My brother says I should join a monastery.

From Kurt to Blaine: How does a monastery differ from Dalton?

From Blaine to Kurt: Excellent question. Let's see. I suspect the monastery is much quieter. Robes instead of blazers. More humming, less singing.

From Kurt to Blaine: Doesn't sound as good.

From Blaine to Kurt: You're probably right. The food's probably better though.

From Kurt to Blaine: Says the Prep School snob who's never had a day of public school slop in his life.

From Blaine to Kurt: I am sticking my tongue out at you.

From Kurt to Blaine: I am blushing.

From Blaine to Kurt: You're adorable when you blush. I want to make you blush more.

From Kurt to Blaine: I don't think they allow this kind of talk in the monastery Blaine.

From Blaine to Kurt: Then I better stay at Dalton. Nite Kurt.

From Kurt to Blaine: Nite Blaine.

From: Slopez at yahoo dot com

To: banderbro at Hotmail dot com

Date: December 3, 2006

Subject:

How did you know you wanted to kiss Kurt?

The moment Kurt told the girls he was going to Dalton for a Warbler concert they insisted on coming along. It took a bit more convincing to get Burt and the other parents to agree to leave them alone at Dalton for a few hours after the performance, but with promises to behave themselves and an invitation to dinner for Kurt from Blaine's mom, they eventually agreed. Blaine had texted him that morning that his dad wasn't coming.

On the drive to Dalton Burt learned all the gossip at the performing arts school as well as at the junior high. Brittany chattered on about Finn, much to the annoyance of Santana and Kurt. Santana claimed to be dating the junior high's biggest bad boy, though Kurt and Brittany had seen no real evidence of that story. And Kurt, Burt realized, was oddly silent on his own life.

"Is everything okay at school?" Burt asked, glancing quickly to the seat beside him.

"What? Oh yeah sure, fine," Kurt answered, but Burt didn't miss the girls' pursed lips and shifty eyes as he glanced into the rearview mirror.

Nick watched Blaine standing in front of the mirror of their dressing room, eyes glazed over, absentmindedly putting more and more gel into his hair until his curls were nearly gone.

"Hey Dude. You alright?" he asked, slapping a hand on his back. "You can't possibly be nervous of this little crowd."

"Of course he's nervous," Jeff smirked. "Kurt's here."

Blaine snapped out of it and his eyes immediately flickered to Brad, who was pointedly avoiding Blaine's gaze.

"It's not Kurt," Blaine insisted and he turned around and grabbed a towel to wipe off his hands. He leaned back on the table and his eyes fell to the floor. "I just really wish my Dad was here."

The room grew quiet. The Warblers were Blaine's best friends other than Kurt by now and they all knew how much he'd been hoping this show could have helped him and his father make amends before Christmas. In fact, they'd all put a lot of work into making it happen just in case his Dad had decided to come.

The leader of the undergrads, Wes, stepped forward and put a hand on Blaine's shoulder. Blaine looked up at him and he saw determination in his eyes. "This doesn't change anything," he told Blaine. "If he couldn't bother to come, then you just sing the song so hard and strong that he feels it all the way in Ohio. Understood?"

Blaine nodded but he didn't have a chance to say anything because suddenly the boys were announced.

"Please welcome to the stage, the Dalton Academy Warblers!"

"Thank you all for coming, you've been an extraordinary audience for us and we just love sharing the joy of the season with you." Wes took the microphone from the stand center stage and he carried it with him as he spoke, moving slowly down the line of boys. "The holidays aren't just about today's joy though. They're also about wishes for the future. We'd like to close tonight with a very special performance. We've never had a freshman sing lead before, but we have had the utmost pleasure this year of welcoming not only an incredible talent, but an incredible person to the Warblers."

Kurt smiled, sitting between his father and Brittany. He watched as Wes slowly made his way further and further stage right where Blaine stood at the very end of the row. He grabbed Brittany's hand, nervous

excitement rushing through him. Blaine had told him he was singing. He hadn't said what. And though Kurt knew Blaine could sing the phone book and he'd love every word, it had been far too long since he'd seen Blaine perform and he couldn't wait another minute.

He'd have to though, because Wes continued talking. "He's given me permission to tell you that bullying and hate brought him to Dalton. And the Warblers have found it an honor to surround him with nothing but love. And we hope that he can inspire you to spread that love wherever you go. Ladies and Gentleman, please give a warm welcome to Blaine Anderson."

Kurt's heart leaped into his throat and the tremendous pride that he felt was only a fraction of the solemn pride he saw on Blaine's face. Brittany squeezed his hand, but Kurt never took his eyes off of Blaine, just in case his best friend needed him for support.

The music began, created by the a cappella magic of the background vocals. Kurt was pretty sure that no one in the house was breathing. And then Blaine stepped forward, opened up his heart, and let his music come out.

*Sometimes I lay
Under the moon
And thank God I'm breathing
Then I pray
Don't take me soon
'Cause I am here for a reason*

Blaine let his eyes fall on Kurt and his Mom. His angels who had saved him, no matter how hard he had cried.

*Sometimes in my tears I drown
But I never let it get me down
So when negativity surrounds
I know some day it'll all turn around because...*

*All my life I've been waiting for
I've been praying for
For the people to say*

*That we don't wanna fight no more
There will be no more wars
And our children will play
One day, one day, one day.*

Blaine had sung for thousands, but his honesty tonight had his nerves racing. He'd chosen the song for a reason. He'd hoped that his father would change his mind last minute, remember the love that he had for Blaine and come to hear him sing. He'd hoped he'd hear the song and realize the mistakes he was making. But he let Wes' words sit in his thoughts and he sang as hard as he could, hoping that somehow it could settle in his father's heart from miles away. And he sang for all the other kids whose mothers and fathers and brother and sisters were in the audience and needed the words. For all the kids like Kurt who were bullied and needed a "one day." All he wanted was a world where everyone could be themselves without fear. No more fighting. A world where children could play with whomever they wanted, gay or straight. A world where he and Rachel would be free to be friends.

*It's not about
Win or lose
Because we all lose
When they feed on the souls of the innocent
Blood-drenched pavement
Keep on moving though the waters stay raging*

He remembered back to the night he'd told the Warblers of his attack. How he'd laid on the ground, bleeding and in pain. How he'd just wished that the word was different. That he could go to a school dance with a boy he liked without fearing for his life. And how he wished he could go home, knowing that he'd be as safe as he was here at Dalton.

He remembered Wes playing him this song. And he remembered crying.

*In this maze you can lose your way
It might drive you crazy but don't let it faze you no way*

*Sometimes in my tears I drown
But I never let it get me down
So when negativity surrounds*

I know some day it'll all turn around because...

*All my life I've been waiting for
I've been praying for
For the people to say
That we don't wanna fight no more
There will be no more wars
And our children will play
One day, one day, one day*

He couldn't change the people who refused to hear. All he could do was go on. Go home. Be who he was, not let his father get to him. Refuse to be the victim. Refuse to be abused or rejected. He would choose to believe that one day, as his mother and his brother said, his father would accept him and regret the years he lost. Blaine was going to do everything he could to make sure that he didn't regret them too.

*One day this all will change
Treat people the same
Stop with the violence
Down with the hate*

*One day we'll all be free
And proud to be
Under the same sun
Singing songs of freedom like
One day, one day*

*All my life I've been waiting for
I've been praying for
For the people to say
That we don't wanna fight no more
There will be no more wars
And our children will play
One day, one day, one day*

He saw Kurt on his feet the moment they finished the song and the crowd joined him. Kurt screamed, the crowd cheered, and Blaine bowed and acknowledged the crowd. Blaine's mother had tears in her eyes, Burt put an arm around his son, and Blaine's brilliant smile lit up the theater.

It had taken every ounce of willpower for Kurt not to run onto the stage and hug Blaine, and it was taking even more to wait until Blaine's mother was done crying proudly in his arms before taking his turn. But the moment she finally let go, Kurt smiled at him and Blaine smiled back and opened his arms and Kurt ran into them.

"Every time I see you perform you just amaze me more and more," Kurt whispered in Blaine's embrace. Blaine squeezed him tight then let him go, beaming down at him. "How do you do that?"

Blaine shrugged slyly. "I guess I just get better with age," he smirked and Kurt rolled his eyes and smacked him lightly on the shoulder, though honestly he couldn't deny it in any way.

"Alright boys," Burt said, breaking them apart with a pointed look. Kurt stepped back to join the girls. "You four are going to hang out here, together, correct?" The four kids nodded wordlessly and they all knew that Burt didn't believe them in the slightest.

Blaine piped in to try and save them. "The Warblers are having a gathering back in our rehearsal hall Mr. Hummel," he assured him. "Just some snacks and music and dancing. We'll be fine."

"I'm trusting you," Burt said, looking directly at Kurt. Kurt swallowed hard and nodded. He didn't want to do anything that would make his father choose not to go.

"Come on Burt, they'll be fine," Mrs. Anderson said and Kurt let out a breath of relief. "We'll be back in a few hours kids, have fun and be good," she added, her eye on her son. Blaine flashed her his most charming smile and she knew that none of them had any intention of being good.

Kurt and Blaine were hand in hand when they got back to the rehearsal with Santana and Brittany trailing behind. The only girls in a sea of older boys, they were caught between a desire to prove themselves and protect themselves. They instinctually reached for one another's hands as they walked in as well. Blaine

noticed that the upperclassman had congregated across the hall, music already blasting, and he was glad that his friends could be slowly initiated with a less intimidating crowd.

"Well look who's finally arrived, the guest of honor," Jeff shouted.

Blaine blushed. "Come on guys, I'm not the-"

"We were talking about Kurt," Trent said deadpanned, but winked at the girls. Now it was Kurt's turn to blush and they sat down together, curling up on a couch. "And who are these lovely ladies you brought with you."

"Santana Lopez and Brittany Pierce," Blaine introduced.

"You're right Blaine," Santana smirked. "You are the best looking of the Dalton boys."

"Ow," Jeff yelled as he flung his hands to his chest like an arrow pierced his heart. He tumbled onto the ground. "Your girl just killed me Blaine."

"I have never said that guys, I swear," Blaine said and the other boys just laughed. "Don't be jerks," he frowned throwing a pillow at them, and he turned to Kurt and the girls. "Guys these are my friends, though I'm not sure why. Nick, Jeff, Trent, David, Wes, Thad and Brad."

They all waved, the girls sitting on the floor against Blaine and Kurt's couch. Kurt watched Brad warily from across the room and Brad clearly did the same.

"So tell us about yourselves Santana Lopez and Brittany Pierce," Nick said and the girls told them all about Lima Junior High, the cheerleading team and performing arts classes.

"Brad looks a bit uncomfortable," Kurt whispered in Blaine's ear while the others talked. "Maybe I should move to the other side of the couch."

"Maybe we should go outside," Blaine said, wagging his eyebrows but just then Jeff yelled.

"Truth or Dare!"

Kurt's mouth gaped at the game suggestion. "Maybe we should," Kurt whispered back.

"Oh guys, come on," Blaine whined but Santana smacked him on the shoulder.

"It'll be fun," she snapped. "Besides, Kurt here needs to prove his mettle with your friends doesn't he?"

Brad stood up and shoved his hands in his pockets. "I think I'm gonna see if the guys next door will let me hang with them," he said and he left the room.

Blaine went to get up to go after him but Kurt stopped. "Let me instead?"

Against his better judgment, Blaine nodded and Kurt went after his best friend's crush, not minding at all that it got him out of the game of Truth or Dare at the same time. Brad was at the threshold of the door the upperclassman were hooting and hollering behind. "Brad," Kurt called quietly.

Brad turned and seeing it was Kurt leaned against the door. "Look, Kurt, I don't have anything against you, I just..."

"It's hard," Kurt finished for him. He took a step closer, and shrugged his shoulders. "Look I get it. It's not easy for me either. To see you."

"It should be," Brad said, his eyes drifting to the floor. "He loves you."

"And he likes you," Kurt said. "Very much. And I can't compete with the things you offer him. Not yet anyway."

Brad looked up at him, surprise in his eyes. "It's not like that Kurt. I mean, it hasn't been and..." He sighed, and his gaze drifted to the open door where Blaine sat with his back to them in a circle with his friends. "I like him. I really do. He's incredibly talented and sweet and he's just...he's kind. In a way that not too many people are."

Kurt smiled softly in remembrance. "When I was 8 years old, I saw a boy on a barricade. And when I met him at the stage door he invited me backstage with him. 8 months later when my mom died he was the first person to make me smile. He was my first kiss on the cheek when I was 9. When I was 11 I was the first person he came out to. He was so scared when I kissed him then but then we stayed up all night talking. He tells me that when the bullies beat him up I was the last person he thought of before he fell unconscious." Kurt didn't tell Brad all this to make him jealous. He just didn't know if Brad knew all that

and he wanted Brad to understand. "I know how sweet and kind he is and I know that he cares about you. It's just...we've been waiting so long."

Brad nodded, finally understanding. He'd wondered what had Blaine so tied to this boy, and now he knew. Kurt thought that he couldn't compete with Brad, but in reality there wasn't a chance that Brad could compete with Kurt. "You shouldn't wait anymore," he said before turning back to the door and disappearing inside.

With a sigh Kurt turned back to the room his friends were in and he stood off to the side in the doorway.

"Truth or Dare Blaine!" Thad yelled.

"Truth," Blaine answered, pulling his legs to his chest in anticipation.

Thad smiled. "Okay. If you were marooned on an island with just one person, who would you want it to be?"

Blaine didn't need even a second to think before he answered the question. "Kurt."

Kurt shivered against the cold winds as the sun set behind the Dalton skyline. Blaine let go of Kurt's hand to wrap his arms around him and keep him warm. "Do you want to go back inside? They might be done playing by now."

"No," Kurt said, shaking his head. "I just want to be with you."

Blaine smiled and reached back down to take his hand. "Come on." He led Kurt across campus to his favorite place. The gardens outside the chapel weren't blooming in the winter and the ground was hard and cold, but the stone landscaping survived all seasons and Blaine still loved it.

"It's beautiful here," Kurt said and Blaine was glad he could see it too.

"I come here when I need to think, or just when I need to be alone," Blaine said. He sat down, leaning back against a thick oak tree and tugged Kurt down with him. Curling up between Blaine's legs, Kurt rested against the warmth of his chest.

Blaine wrapped his arms around him and pulled him close. "I wish I never had to let you go," he said, resting a kiss on top of Kurt's hair.

"I wish I didn't have to go," Kurt sighed. "Your friends are crazy but nice and Dalton is amazing and I wish I could just stay here forever."

Kurt sounded so sad, Blaine wished he could just snap his fingers and fix everything. "How *are* things at school Kurt?" he asked. "You don't talk about it much anymore."

With one hand Kurt absentmindedly played with a small smooth stone on the ground. "I try so hard not to let it get me down. But it's hard," he admitted. He picked the stone up and twirled it in his hand. "It's bull you know. That stick and stones hurt more than names? Bones heal but I don't think you ever forget the names people call you."

Blaine brushed his thumb against Kurt's cheek. "Then let me call you some names to remember." Kurt sat up, one hand resting on Blaine's thigh, and looked up with blue eyes that shined in the darkness with nothing but trust and love. Blaine smiled and if he had ever thought he could love someone more than he did Kurt he knew for sure now that he could not. "You're beautiful. You're smart. You're funny. You're my angel and you are full of love and yes, you are gay but don't ever let them convince you that's an insult because *this* is what gay gets you."

Blaine leaned in and kissed Kurt's lips, cupping a hand on the back of his head to pull him closer. Their cold noses touched and it made them laugh against each other but they didn't let go. They never wanted to let go.

The cold disappeared as the heat of their skin rose and Kurt shifted closer, wanting, wishing, many things but most of all wishing he were older, old enough, and he let the hand on Blaine's thigh roam higher and higher until he felt Blaine's own hands stop him and gently pull him away.

"You don't have to do that," Blaine whispered, staring at the ground with his eyes closed.

"What if I want to?" Kurt asked softly.

Blaine looked up and met Kurt's gaze, so innocent and not at the same time. Blaine brushed his cheek with a thumb wanting so much from Kurt, so much but not that. He smiled gently. "I'm just not ready," he sighed.

"But you said-"

"I was wrong Kurt," Blaine told him. "I was wrong and you were right. We're not ready for those things and that's okay because I don't want to rush this. I don't want to rush anything. I want to cherish each and every moment with you and not have any regrets. Okay?"

Kurt bit his lip but he nodded. "Okay."

"Good," Blaine said and pulled him back into his arms. They sat quietly for a few minutes, listening to the sounds on campus. Boys laughing. Robins singing. They both knew they should get back to Santana and Brittany but neither of them wanted to.

"Kissing is still okay though, right?" Kurt asked, looking up at him with a grin.

Blaine laughed and nodded. "Kissing will always be okay."

"Dare!" Santana yelled, bouncing on her knees waiting. She waited while Jeff thought and thought and then his eyes lit up.

"I dare you to kiss Brittany," he said.

Santana's skin immediately flushed and her heart beat quickly in her chest and she looked over at the girl sitting next to her that she knew without a doubt that she would die to kiss and she realized that this was her chance. Brittany looked back at her, her lips quirked in an amused smile. "Are you okay with this?" Santana asked.

Brittany shrugged and grinned. "Sure why not?"

"It has to be a real kiss, not some quick peck on the lips," Jeff insisted.

Santana shot him a look, pretending that her heart wasn't pounding and her nerves weren't racing and her stomach wasn't filling with butterflies desperate for escape. She raised a brow at Brittany once more just to make sure and Brittany just smiled and nodded. Santana leaned over and closed her eyes and she was surprised when Brittany's lips met hers first and she hitched a breath. She had kissed boys before but it

had never felt like this, like every thing about her that had never felt right was suddenly exactly where it was supposed to be. She reached a hand up and threaded her fingers through Brittany's soft golden locks and she pulled her closer, never wanting to let go.

Then the boys started hooting and hollering and clapping and whistling and Brittany pulled slowly away from her. Santana didn't ever want to open her eyes as her cheeks flushed with embarrassment and when she did she couldn't even look at Brittany. "Hope you boys enjoyed the show," she snapped before getting up. "I need some fresh air."

She put up a show of confidence until she was out of their sight then she fled, down the stairs and out the door, letting the cold air work its way into her lungs to cool the heat in her body. She leaned against the brick of the building and closed her eyes, but when she did all she saw was Brittany.

"Are you okay?" she heard Brittany ask.

Santana opened her eyes and Brittany was standing there with the moonlight shining off of her and her face so soft and warm, a shy smile gracing her lips and Santana couldn't say a word.

But Brittany could. "That was hot," she grinned.

And Santana realized she had nothing to say and she stepped forward, grabbing Brittany by the waist and pulling her close, capturing her lips, kissing her the way she'd be dreaming about for months.

Burt had texted Kurt that they were on their way back to Dalton and Blaine and Kurt reluctantly made their way back to the building hand in hand.

"Call me if you need me at all, okay?" Kurt asked, worry in his voice. "I hate the thought of you being home without Cooper."

"I'll be okay," Blaine promised. "Mom will take care of me and I could always go over to Rachel or Sam's if I need to."

"I just worry," Kurt said.

"And I love that you do," Blaine smiled. "But I will write you every day and call if I need to. Probably the worst thing about the whole vacation is how much I will miss you."

Kurt smiled and nudged Blaine's shoulder with his own. "I will miss you too."

They walked in silence for a few minutes until the Warbler's hall came back into a view. In the darkness they could see the silhouette of two people, long hair flowing, against the wall.

"Is that...?" Kurt gasped.

Blaine smiled and squeezed his hand. "Yes. Finally, it is."

"Did everybody have a good time?" Burt asked as he drove the trio back home.

Brittany and Santana held hands and snuggled in the back seat as best they could with their seat belts on. Kurt was staring out the window with a dreamy smile. None of them responded.

Burt looked in the rear view mirror and over at his son and smiled. "I'll take that as a yes."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

No Fear, No Regret

December 23, 2006

Dear Kurt,

Here I am, once again, hiding away in my room, putting feelings on paper to be locked up and sent away for your eyes only. It seems silly since I will email and text and call you a hundred times before you get this, but call me nostalgic. There's nothing like letter writing.

I have been home for 5 hours and 23 minutes and my father has not spoken a word to me. I don't know whether I should be shocked or not. I don't even know why he's here. He watches me though, when he thinks I'm not looking. As if he's looking at the ghost of someone he used to love but is gone now, forever. It's creepy, to be honest. And how sad it must be for him.

Funny thing is, I'm not angry. Not really. It's like with the weight of hiding lifted off my shoulders, I can put the burden of him loving me on him. And we'll see what happens, how I feel when and if and how he chooses to come back. With you by my side I'm sure I'll be just fine.

I miss you. Tremendously. As I always do when you're not with me. Sometimes when I'm lying in bed late at night and I can't fall asleep, I count the days until we can be together for real. I always fall asleep before I get to the end. Which means that there are way too many days.

Normally I'd stop now but this letter might go on for a while because honestly I have nothing else to do and sure I could call you, but I think more when I'm talking and this way all the nonsense that goes on in my head just comes out on the page without second guessing until I've written it and then I'm not allowed to erase. Who made up that damn rule anyway?

So my family is coming for Christmas Eve dinner tomorrow. Cooper's staying in California, sniff sniff, but the rest will be here. My father's parents. My mother's sister and brother. My cousins, all of whom are Cooper's age, not mine. I have no idea why Christmas is hosted here but I've never dreaded it before. Someone is bound to notice my father isn't talking to me or even acknowledging my existence and they will ask why and dammit Kurt, I am done with the lies.

I've kept my bags packed. Because I am pretty sure that if I come out to my family, it will be the end of me living here. Mom can only do so much as long as she lets him stay here. She says he has his reasons. If he told them to me then maybe I'd understand but silence is impossible to understand and easy to shout over.

Little people know...when little people fight. We may look easy pickens but we've got some bite. So never kick a dog, because he's just a pup. He'll fight like twenty armies and he won't give up, so you'd better to run for cover when the pup grows up.

I think this is what it feels like to be all grown up.

And I'm not giving up.

Because I love you. I LOVE you. I love YOU.

Blaine

Blaine didn't go downstairs until 3pm the next day and nobody cared. His relatives were due at 4, he'd talked to Kurt for 2 hours until Burt dragged him away from the phone and then he talked to Sam and Rachel. Rachel and her Dads were having a Jewish Christmas, Chinese food at home and then the midnight screening of Dreamgirls. Sam would be at church until about 9 then home the rest of the night. Everybody wished him luck. He was certain he would need it.

His suit was black, his tie was red, his hair was slicked down the way he'd been doing it at Dalton. Maybe it would keep his older cousins' fingers out of his curls. Maybe this year they'd realize he was no longer a kid.

His mom was in the kitchen and he hopped on the stool, watching her cook. She went all out, though the deserts were all catered. But the ham was in the oven and the potatoes were cooking and she was doing whatever else it was that Moms do to vegetables to make them taste good. It smelled like Christmas, even if it didn't feel like it.

"Where's Dad?" he asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

"He went to pick up everyone at the airport," she said looking up at him. The fear on his face was obvious, at least to a mother's eyes. So was the sadness. She put down her utensils and leaned over the counter island, offering her hand. With an emotion filled smile, he took it and looked up at her. "It's your choice how this Christmas goes," she told him.

"No pressure then," he smirked, but his heavy sigh was enough to see all the pressure weighing on him. "Do you think any of them know already?"

"Honestly?" she said. "Probably not. Anyone who doesn't see you in your element isn't going to suspect a thing." She patted his hand and went back to her vegetables. "Do you want them to know?" she asked not looking at him.

"I don't care if they know or not," he said. "I mean, I guess I feel like it shouldn't be a thing, even though I know it is. And my friends at Dalton have made me see that if people don't love me for who I am then that's their problem, not mine."

"I'm glad Dalton has been so good for you," she said.

"Yeah," he smiled. "I'm going to audition for the spring show. I called Equity and they said the waiver's in the mail so do me a favor and don't let Dad confiscate it?"

"I will keep my eyes peeled," she winked. He traced his fingertips along the lines of the marble countertop. He looked up at her with his infamous puppy dog eyes. She laughed. "What do you want?"

"Rachel's doing a cabaret on December 28. She asked me if I would perform a song." He blinked his lashes. He pouted slightly.

His mother rolled her eyes. "Of course you can do it," she said and Blaine let out a little yelp of excitement. "But only if I can come."

Blaine grinned. "Of course you can come!"

Every year, his parents' relatives insisted that he sing for them. So Blaine sat at the piano and regaled them with all the Christmas standards they loved, until he couldn't think of anymore. They applauded and

he smiled and then he ran away to the kitchen to help his mother put the dinner on the table. Last year he had sat uncomfortably through the yearly comments, holding his breath and turning his cheek just so he didn't make waves. But he was tired of it. He was tired of the secrets and the hiding when the person he'd really been hiding from already knew the truth. His mother had said it was his choice, and he'd made it.

So he brought out the Christmas ham and the peas and the eggnog and he sat down, his phone tucked securely in his pocket. And he waited, though he didn't have to wait long at all.

"With that voice Blaine you must have a girlfriend," his Aunt Kristie said, a teasing lilt to her voice.

Blaine shook his head with a tight smile. "No, not really."

"All the girls are after him," his father spoke up and Blaine's eyes shot up like daggers. "He's just trying to decide which one he likes best. Isn't that right Blaine," his father asked with a glare.

One of his cousins piped up. "You want a sweet girl Blaine. A girl who can..."

Blaine tuned out, slipping his phone from his pocket and texting underneath the table. Kurt had said to call him if Blaine needed him at all.

Blaine to Kurt: Call me. Now.

"...Don't pressure him men, let the boy figure out what he wants," Aunt Kristie was saying. "I'm sure it can't be easy to choose when you have every girl-"

Blaine's phone rang loudly in his pocket and the table quieted. He quickly took it out and looked at it.

"Blaine," his mother objected, "no phones at the table."

"Mom it's Kurt, I have to answer," he said, pressing the screen to accept the call.

His father stood up angrily but before he could say anything, his Aunt asked, "Who's Kurt?"

"Kurt is my boyfriend," Blaine said clearly before leaving the table and a room full of gaping relatives to go to his room.

The moment he got there he shut the door and burst into laughter.

"Oh my god Kurt, you should have seen their faces," he cackled into the phone. "It was amazing."

"Blaine," Kurt said quietly. "You just called me your boyfriend."

"I know, in front of everyone!" he laughed, falling on his back on the bed. He looked up at the ceiling, his face bright with the amazement of what he had just done. Adrenaline was rushing through his veins but he had never been prouder of himself.

"Blaine." Kurt repeated insistently, a little firmer than before. "You just called me your boyfriend."

"Oh my god Kurt you should have seen them," Blaine howled, trying to catch his breath. "I never knew how easy it would be to shut up the Andersons."

"Blaine!" Kurt shouted, knowing it wasn't easy at all. "You just called me your boyfriend!"

Blaine couldn't understand why Kurt was yelling at him and then he finally realized what Kurt had said. He suddenly grew quiet with the shocking realization that he had just called the boy he'd loved for years but refused to define because everything about defining it was terrifying, his boyfriend.

"Did you mean it?" Kurt asked quietly, his voice quivering.

Blaine sat up. He grabbed a pillow and curled around it as he crossed his legs underneath him. His heart was pounding now for an entirely different reason. "Do you want me to mean it?" he asked just as quietly.

"I..." Kurt hesitated and Blaine realized that he was holding his breath. "I don't know. We didn't want to rush anything. No regrets, remember?"

"Is being boyfriends something we'd regret?" Blaine asked nervously.

Kurt was quiet a minute, thinking. And Blaine could hear the seconds tick away on the clock as he waited for the answer. Then finally, Kurt spoke. "I don't think I would. Do you?"

"No," Blaine quickly answered, letting out a sigh of relief. "I don't think I would regret it at all."

The slam of the front door was the first sign that his relatives were leaving. Out the window, he watched them exit the apartment building, one by one leaving him alone in the house with his mother and father. His heart raced, knowing it was time. He looked at his bags packed by the door. He got up off the bed and quickly texted Rachel.

From Blaine to Rachel: I hope you're still okay with a house guest.

He slipped his phone back in his pocket seconds before his door flew open and his father stormed inside barreling toward him. He felt the smack across his face before he could even put a thought together and instinctually Blaine's hand flew to the injury.

"How dare you tell them all that you're gay?" his father yelled.

Blaine looked up but there were no tears in his eyes. "How dare you tell them all that I'm straight?"

His father took a step toward him but his mother jumped between them. "John, that's enough." She turned to Blaine and took him by the shoulders, touching a finger delicately to his cheek. "Blaine are you okay?"

"I'm fine mom," he answered stoically.

She turned to his father but stayed by Blaine's side and he was grateful at least for that. "We all need to take a breath," she said.

But Blaine shook his head. "I don't need a breath Mom," Blaine said. "I need my life back. And I can't do that here." He crossed the room and grabbed his suitcase by the door, the one he'd never unpacked for this very moment.

"If you leave this house don't think of coming back," his father told him.

Blaine scoffed. "Why would I come back?" He looked at his father. The man he'd looked up to and feared and tried so hard to please for so many years. The man he knew that he would let back in the moment he asked, because he still, more than anything, just wanted his father's love. "You've made this choice Dad," he said. "You, not me. The funny thing is, I love you and I accept you for who you are because Mom and Cooper tell me that you have your reasons for hating who I am and that someday you'll come around. And

I may not trust you but I trust them. So I'm going to Rachel's now. And I'll stay at Dalton, and maybe with Cooper over the summer. I *won't* come back Dad," Blaine told him. "But when you're ready, you can always come back to me."

He pulled his suitcase and rolled it out the bedroom, carrying it down the stairs. His father didn't move but his mother followed him to the front door. "I'll come get you from Rachel's on the 3rd. Take you to the airport. And I'll see you at the show still?"

Blaine gave her a kiss on the cheek and a hug goodbye. "I love you Mom," he said. "And I may not understand it, but I'm not mad at you for staying."

She wiped her cheeks of the tears that had fallen. "You are the most amazing kid in the world Blaine. I hope you know that."

Blaine smiled and his thoughts went to Kurt. "Maybe the second most amazing kid in the world."

"Stop worrying, okay? I'm at Rachel's and I'm fine, I promise," Blaine said. His phone was to his ear as he lay upside down on Rachel's bed in his pajamas, staring at the ceiling. "I love you too Kurt."

"Awww..." Rachel said wistfully as he hung up. She was making up a bed for Blaine on the floor of her room. Her dads had offered him the guest room, but Rachel had pouted, argued that Blaine shouldn't be alone in his time of need, and all three of them gave in. "You guys are like Romeo and Juliet."

"Without the poisons and daggers I hope," Blaine said. "We're both too young to die."

"The Fantasticks then," Rachel offered, throwing the pillow down at the head of Blaine's bed and joining him on her own.

"The wall must always remain," Blaine said softly. He shook his head. He was tired of there being walls between him and Kurt. "No thanks."

She grabbed his hands, pulling him up to sitting and he closed his eyes as the blood rushed from his head back into the rest of his body. Rachel could still see the redness on Blaine's cheek and she frowned. "I don't know how you're this calm," she admitted.

Blaine opened his eyes and looked at her. Her face was filled with worry and sadness. He shrugged. "Maybe it just hasn't hit me yet," Blaine said. "Maybe in the morning I'll wake up with all the anger and hurt, but right now I just feel kind of numb and a little relieved. Like something I'd been expecting my whole life has finally happened, so I don't have to dread it anymore. And if I always knew it was coming, I guess I don't see much point in getting worked up about it now."

"Still," Rachel said, but she lowered her eyes. She honestly had no idea what to say in this situation. If it had been her...but then she knew it would never be her. There was nothing she could do to lose the love of her fathers. They supported her in everything she wanted to do. "Do you think you're too young?" she asked, changing the subject abruptly back to Blaine and Kurt. "Being boyfriends? Do you think he's too young?"

"I swear Rachel, sometimes I think he's older than me," Blaine said. "He's too mature for his age."

"But, I mean," she blushed slightly, looking up at him shyly. "I know there are things that 15 year old boys are ready for-"

"I'm not ready," Blaine corrected her.

But Rachel didn't give up. "Well, but what if you were?"

Blaine looked at her, and he couldn't help wonder if maybe they weren't really talking about him and Kurt. "What's the deal Rachel? Is somebody pressuring you? You aren't thinking about-"

"Oh no!" she said quickly and Blaine breathed a sigh of relief. Whether he was ready or not, he knew for certain that Rachel wasn't. He watched her reach over to her dresser drawer and pull out a binder. "There's this show..." she said, handing it to him.

He opened the binder, the title page staring back at him. "Spring Awakening?"

Rachel smiled. "I auditioned and I got the lead and it's just in workshops now, but Blaine, it's amazing," she said with a bright smile and eyes wide. "But there's kissing..."

"So? You've kissed a boy before," Blaine said, but he didn't miss the blush on Rachel's cheeks. Blaine gaped. "Wait a minute. You haven't kissed a boy before?" Rachel bit her lip and she ducked her head, shaking it slightly. He was about to laugh, only because it was funny to him that he had kissed boys long

before Rachel, but he quickly realized that she wouldn't be amused. "Well, is there a boy you've wanted to kiss?"

She looked up at him, her fingers nervously dancing together in her lap. "Maybe?"

For a minute Blaine's heart beat quickly in his chest as he thought Rachel meant him and he stammered. "Rachel, I mean, I'm honored, but-"

She smacked him with a pillow before he could get another word out. "It's not you, you idiot, it's Sam," she blurted out before she could stop herself.

Blaine's jaw dropped. "Oh my god, you want to kiss Sam?" he exclaimed. He didn't even need an answer though because her look said it all and he grinned. "Do you *looovee* him? Do you want to *maaarrry* him," he teased.

Rachel took up the pillow again, smacking him left and right and back again. Blaine was laughing, hysterical, reaching off the bed to get the pillow Rachel had left on the floor until he tumbled to the ground. He recovered quickly though, grabbing the pillow and fighting back until they were both screaming with laughter.

A knock on the door stopped them cold and they froze in their spots as they turned. Two heads peered around the door, trying to mask the smiles on their faces. "You guys sure you don't want to go to the movie?"

"I think Blaine and I will see Dreamgirls another day," she said, taking his hand. "Besides, we have rehearsal for the Cabaret show in the morning and Blaine still needs to get his music."

"Then I suggest that both of you stop attacking one another, get yourselves into bed and go to sleep," Hiram said. "Your voices need rest."

Neither Rachel nor Blaine had the decency to look guilty, but they did both put their pillows back down where they belonged and crawled under the covers of their beds. Rachel's Dads smiled. "Goodnight kids," they said, turning off the light and closing the door.

Rachel sat up to put her moisturizer on her face and her lip balm on her lips and she couldn't help but see the glow under Blaine's sheets as his phone lit up.

"What are you doing?" she asked suspiciously.

"Texting," he grinned.

"Texting who?" she demanded, crawling out from underneath her covers. She sat on her knees, her hands fisted on her hips.

Blaine stuck his head out so he could see her and he looked so pleased with himself she wanted to strangle him. "Sam," he said and flew back under the covers.

Rachel gasped and jumped out of bed onto his, clawing at the covers to get underneath so she could wrestle the phone out of his hand. He locked it before he let her have it.

"You are awful," Rachel pouted as she threw the phone back at him and climbed back onto her bed. "You are an awful boy and I hate you."

"No you don't," Blaine teased. "You love me." He was quiet a minute before adding, "Not as much as you *loooove* Sam though..."

She growled and turned her back to him. He laughed and took his phone back out.

Blaine to Kurt: Torturing Rachel may be my new favorite pastime.

It had only been about a week since Blaine had been on stage, but it had been far longer since he'd performed before an industry crowd and to say he was nervous was an understatement. He was glad at least that he was doing pop instead of musical theater, and he was glad he was just doing one song, and he was very glad that his mother and Sam had come to see him because otherwise he might have started doing somersaults around the theater just to calm his nerves.

"You're gonna be fine sweetheart," his mother told him as he leaned on the table in the booth where she and Sam sat.

"Yeah dude, I have no idea why you're so nervous. You've performed for like, thousands. This room is maybe 100," Sam said.

"A hundred of maybe the most important people in my career," Blaine pointed out.

As if on cue, Sam's eyes grew wide, Blaine felt a tap on his shoulder and he turned to see Harvey Fierstein smiling at him. Blaine felt his stomach flip. "Mr. Fierstein," he said, his voice high with surprise.

"Rachel pointed you out to me," he said, his lips quirked with amusement. "She used to talk about you all the time during Fiddler, so when she invited me here and told me you were performing, well, she said I had to come meet you."

"Well, I'm glad to know I'm not the only one who has trouble saying no to Rachel Berry," he chuckled nervously. "It's an honor, really sir."

"Break a leg tonight," he said, holding his hand out.

Blaine shook it firmly and kept himself together until the legend walked away. Then he turned back to his Mom and collapsed on the seat next her. "Oh my god, am I still breathing?" Blaine asked dramatically. "Am I dreaming? Am I even alive?"

"Dude, that guy's voice is weird," Sam said.

Blaine rolled his eyes. "Sam, sometimes you are such an idiot."

His mom smiled and wrapped an arm around him. "You're gonna make him remember you tonight."

The lights dimmed and everyone took their seats. Blaine rested his chin on his hands as he watched his best friend take the stage.

"Good evening everyone," Rachel said, her tiny little self filling the room with her energy. "I'm so glad you all could come for my first Cabaret performance. To see all of you come out and support me really means a lot. It seems crazy that at 15 I could already have enough of a journey in my life to sing it for a whole hour and a half, but when I was putting this show together I realized just how much life has given me. And I couldn't have done any of it without my Dads. So please welcome the best parents in the whole world, Hiram and Leroy Berry."

The audience applauded, and Hiram, Leroy and Rachel started immediately into a hysterical version of "Four Jews in a Room Bitching," adapted from March of the Falsettos.

Three Jews in a room bitching
Three Jews in a room plotting crime
I'm bitching, he's bitching, she's bitching, we're bitching
Bitch, Bitch, Bitch, Bitch
Funny, Funny, Funny, Funny
All the time

In thunderous applause at the completion of their song, Hiram and Leroy kissed Rachel softly and left her alone on the stage. Just a stool and a microphone, the piano to the side, she began her journey singing "Any Dream Will Do." Throughout the night, she moved through her life, the happy moments and the sad until she came to the present day. And then she pulled the second microphone back on stage and smiled.

"So, I know I make it seem like I've been alone through a lot of this journey. That's the drama queen in me," she said and everyone chuckled. "But there's someone very special who has been by my side since the first grade. Backstage at Les Mis, we were like brother and sister. Loving each other one minute. Fighting the next. But when it was us against the world, well, he could be my fiercest defender."

Rachel looked at Blaine and he smiled warmly back at her.

"See, Blaine has always been a fighter. It was never something he liked to do, in fact he hated it. But unfortunately, life sometimes has a way of challenging us."

Blaine could see people turning to look at him. He wasn't unknown and he was sure the assault at school had spread throughout the Broadway community as fast as rumors fly through Dalton. He wondered what else everyone knew about him. And he realized proudly that he didn't care if they knew it all.

"Blaine Anderson, I love you. And I would love if you'd come join me," Rachel said, and the spot light turned to him as he got out of his seat and made his way to the front of the stage. The first thing he did was hug her. And the second thing he did was take his microphone.

"Thank you Rachel," he said. Standing now, under the lights, microphone in his hand, piano beside him and a darkened audience, Blaine wasn't nervous at all. "You know, fighting is something that a lot of us in this room have had to do. We fight for attention and parts and stage time. But we fight in the world too, just to be accepted for who we are. And then, whether we're 15 or 50, at some point we realize, there's no point in continuing to fight. We are who we are. And if other people can't accept it, well, that's their

problem. Because there are people in this world that love us just for who we are. Rachel," he said, looking fondly at her. "You were the first, accepting me before I even accepted myself. My brother Coop, my Mom, my good friend Sam out there," he said pointing. He lowered his eyes and he bit his lip shyly before looking back up. "And my boyfriend Kurt. Who's home with his family today, but he's been with me almost as long as Rachel. And he's the reason I can breathe today."

Rachel took her stool next to the piano and sat down. Blaine turned to the accompanist and nodded, he moved the microphone stand out of his way, and he sang the song that said exactly what was in his heart.

Because he was done with the lying and the pretending and the hiding. He was done with fighting people who couldn't accept him for who he was. He didn't have to stay here. He could stay where he was loved and valued. Where he could finally catch his breath.

*I don't wanna be left behind
Distance was a friend of mine
Catching breath in a web of lies
I've spent most of my life
Riding waves, playing acrobat
Shadowboxing the other half
Learning how to react
I've spent most of my time*

*Catching my breath, letting it go,
Turning my cheek for the sake of the show
Now that you know, this is my life,
I won't be told what's supposed to be right*

He let the magic and the energy of the moment fill him up. His mother's smile and Sam's in the back of the room. And as Rachel's voice joined him to sing on the tag line, he smiled at her. No one would hold either of them back or get them down. Life was too short. And love made it easy.

*Catch my breath, no one can hold me back,
I ain't got time for that
Catch my breath, won't let them get me down,
It's all so simple now*

Kurt made it easy to stand up for himself, to believe in himself. But it wasn't just that. Letting all the love that was in his life overpower the hate, it lifted the weight of the world off his shoulders. Everything seemed brighter, lighter, easier to handle. And some day, the ones who walked away would learn the error of their ways.

*Addicted to the love I found
Heavy heart, now a weightless cloud
Making time for the ones that count
I'll spend the rest of my time
Laughing hard with the windows down
Leaving footprints all over town
Keeping faith, karma comes around
I will spend the rest of my life*

*Catching my breath, letting it go,
Turning my cheek for the sake of the show
Now that you know, this is my life,
I won't be told what's supposed to be right*

As Rachel joined him again he walked over, took her hand and led her center stage.

*Catch my breath, no one can hold me back,
I ain't got time for that
Catch my breath, won't let them get me down,
It's all so simple now*

With a sparkle in his eye that he directed just at her, he pointed to her, the first to believe in him. The first to believe in his love for Kurt.

*You helped me see
The beauty in everything*

He let Rachel take the next chorus on her own. This was her show. The story of her life. The song belonged to her as much as it did him.

*Catching my breath, letting it go,
Turning my cheek for the sake of the show
Now that you know, this is my life,
I won't be told what's supposed to be right*

Hand in hand they sang, light on their feet, joy on their faces. Hope in their eyes. Whatever happened now, they would both be okay.

*Catch my breath, no one can hold me back,
I ain't got time for that
Catch my breath, won't let them get me down,
It's all so simple now

It's all so simple now*

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

How Can I Live When We Are Parted

From: Kurt . Hummel at HTAL dot com

To: banderbro at Hotmail dot com

Date: February 14, 2007

Subject: Summer Lovin'

First of all, HAPPY VALENTINE'S DAY! I am sitting in my room crying that I can't see you tonight because snow has decided to blanket THE ENTIRE EARTH! Okay maybe not. Maybe just the entire Northeast. Doesn't matter. As long as it's between you and me it's the worst snow storm ever.

And I'm emailing because as soon as I hear your voice I'm gonna lose it. Seriously. We should be kissing. Not talking on the phone. Stupid snow.

And not only that, but my father has decided that today when I'm supposed to be with you but I'm not is the perfect day for me to decide whether or not I'm going to camp this summer. How about no Dad. How about Blaine can't go home so he can stay with us Dad. How about that?

(How'd ya like that segue into the question? Subtle, huh?)

(Who the heck made up these no erase rules because my face right now is bright red.)

Ok, geez, ok. Um. So... what do you think? About staying with us for the summer? I mean, I don't want to be presumptuous and I bet you and Rachel and Sam have this amazing summer in New York planned out but...I just thought...maybe? I mean, how amazing would it be to be able to make up not seeing you today with seeing you every day for 3 months?

Ok, well, I'm gonna text you right now that you should check your email before you call me. Hope you're having fun. Those Dalton hills must be amazing for sledding if they're letting you out of your dorms. Say hi to everyone for me.

Love,

Kurt

"I miss you too," Blaine said after Kurt picked up the phone on the first ring. "And yes the sledding is amazing but kissing you would have been much better. And warmer. Or sledding with you and then kissing you to warm up?"

"Blaine stop, you're killing me," Kurt said falling back on his bed with a pout. "I had plans for tonight."

"Then maybe it's better we're not together," Blaine said lightly, but in his heart it wasn't light at all. In his heart it covered up the nightly dreams he shouldn't have been having.

"Nope," Kurt said. "Not better. So...did you read the rest of my email?"

Blaine was quiet a minute and Kurt bit his lip nervously. "Kurt," he said and his tone was anything but promising.

"Don't you think it would be fun? Spending the summer with me? We'd finally get to be together. For real. As boyfriends." Kurt was trying not to whine. He really hoped he wasn't whining.

"Kurt," Blaine tried again, apologizing almost because he knew that what he had to say wasn't at all what Kurt wanted to hear and he hadn't wanted to tell him like this, over the phone or in an email. But he had no choice now. "I'm gonna spend the summer in LA with Cooper."

Kurt's stomach twisted. "Oh." His eyes filled with tears, but he refused to let himself cry over this. He never should have gotten his hopes up.

"Kurt, I'm sorry, I know it's not what you want. But Cooper asked and..." he trailed off slightly, his voice growing smaller. "I have to do this."

"Yeah. Of course. I mean, I get it," Kurt said, his voice tight enough to keep his heart from breaking. He just hadn't thought about Blaine's career in a while. He had almost forgotten about how his being a Broadway star created this gap between them. "There's a world of opportunity in LA-"

"It's not that Kurt. I mean, yes, I can maybe do a show while I'm there and meet some people but that's not why I'm going," Blaine admitted. "Not really."

"Then why?" Blaine was silent. And Kurt realized this had been building for a while now. The first time they'd seen each other again after Christmas had been amazing, but ever since then, Blaine had been pulling away. He hadn't seen it before but now it was clear as day. "You're scared. You're scared of us actually being together."

"I know it's stupid," Blaine said quietly.

"Why?" Kurt asked, suddenly sounding braver than he felt. "Why are you scared? Is it because of our ages?"

"It's not just that," Blaine said, which Kurt of course knew meant it was partly that, but Blaine wasn't ready to share the other fears that sent his heart racing. "Please don't be mad Kurt, I love you and I'll miss you like crazy, but I just..."

"I'm just afraid you won't come back," Kurt said quickly. "That you'll find everything you've ever hoped for out there with Cooper and you'll decide to stay."

"It's impossible for everything I've hoped for to be out there Kurt," Blaine said. "You're not out there." Kurt smiled softly and then the tears started to fall and his voice failed him. Blaine could hear it immediately. "Don't cry Kurt, please? See this is why I wanted to tell you in person, so I could hold you and kiss you so you wouldn't for a second think it was because I don't want to be with you."

Kurt choked out a tiny laugh. "Stupid snow," he said and he took a deep breath. "You better write me," he ordered as sternly as a 13 year old could order his 15 year old boyfriend.

"Every day," Blaine promised with a sigh of relief. "Sometimes more. Sometimes I just might text you all day."

"Just remember the time difference because if my dad finds out you're texting me at midnight he'll take my phone."

"Just remind him that the alternative was me being in the room next door instead."

"Good point," Kurt noted. Neither said anything for a minute, lost in their heads. "This wasn't the Valentine's Day I had hoped for," Kurt said finally.

"What had you hoped for?" Blaine asked, lying back on his bed.

Kurt smiled and closed his eyes. "I hoped for a romantic walk across campus. The sun bouncing off the snow. Maybe making snow angels or beating you in a snow ball fight," he grinned. Blaine's soft laughter filled him with happiness. "And then we'd go inside and get hot chocolate and we'd find a little nook somewhere where no one would find us."

"And then what Kurt?" Blaine breathed.

"And then you'd kiss me," Kurt dreamed out loud. "And I'd kiss you back and you'd wrap me up in your arms and you'd tell me you love me and I'd tell you how much I love you and I can't wait for us to someday be together, for real."

"I love you Kurt," Blaine whispered.

Kurt sighed. "And then I'd tell you about summer and you'd tell me you'd stay and we'd make plans and live happily ever after," he ended sadly.

Blaine's heart twisted. "I'm sorry."

Kurt opened his eyes, twisting a loose thread on his comforter. "Maybe we can do all that next Valentine's Day?"

Blaine smiled and his tension slipped. "I would love to do that next Valentine's Day."

Los Angeles was amazing. Blaine had thought that nothing could feel more like home than New York, but LA was like New York with palm trees and film studios instead of theaters.

Cooper showed him everything from the shops to the restaurants to the local frozen yogurt shop he loved to treat himself to. They went to Paramount Studios and Universal and Cooper introduced him to the friends he'd made, all actors trying to make it in the business, some succeeding more than others.

But it wasn't all play. He had meetings and auditions and booked a few staged readings. He performed with Cooper a few times at local Broadway nights, and he had agents who asked him to keep in touch.

Kurt was right, it was tempting to stay. But it always felt like something was missing.

He didn't text all day and night like he'd promised, not because he didn't want to but because Kurt had indeed gone to camp, was starring in production after production, and his phone was basically off limits. But every night in the darkness of the living room Blaine would tap out an email telling Kurt all about his day. And in the morning there would be a reply that would make him, just for a moment, wish they were both back home in Ohio spending the summer side by side.

If there were such a thing as perfect while they waited for time to slip by, Kurt and Blaine found it. They would talk every day by phone, usually at night recapping their days. They would email every few days and without even talking about it, once a week a letter would come for each of them in the mail. In the letters were things better left to paper. Things to keep forever. Things like, *I love you*.

Kurt and his father went to every one of Blaine's performances at Dalton and Blaine came down for as many of Kurt's recitals and shows as he could manage.

In January of 2008, Blaine and Kurt's whole world changed because Blaine got a beat up old car, courtesy of Blaine's mother and Burt, to go along with the driver's license he'd earned in November, and suddenly real live dates without Burt in tow were possible. The drive was long and Blaine had Warblers and rehearsals and homework, so they were limited to every other week as long as there wasn't a single snowflake in the sky, but those every other weeks were, in Kurt's opinion, amazing.

His favorite days were the ones that were so beautiful outside that no one else was around and he and Blaine could find themselves alone together in their favorite room; dark browns and mahoganies so masculine and romantic they made Kurt's insides twist into tendrils of need even without Blaine there. But with Blaine...

They kissed. A lot. Most of their dates when they weren't spent eating or shopping were spent with Kurt lying on top of Blaine, kissing his lips and his neck and every other inch of skin that Blaine kept uncovered for him to touch. And while there were strict rules that hands were to stay "north of the equator" and clothing was to stay firmly in place, if they accidentally brushed up against one another, well, neither one of them were going to complain. They wouldn't do anything more than that. No matter where they went,

Dalton or Kurt's house or somewhere halfway in between, they didn't have guaranteed privacy and Kurt absolutely refused to make out in a car.

It suited them both. For Blaine it prevented them from going further than he knew either one of them was ready to go. And for Kurt, it kept Blaine from learning secrets he didn't want him to know.

"You're lying to him," Santana told him as she once again brought him into the McKinley girl's locker room after school on a Friday afternoon. She went immediately to the freezer and grabbed him an ice pack. "You know Blaine wants to know that you're okay, that you're safe, and you lie to him every time."

"I don't lie to him," Kurt protested and he took the freezing pack and placed it on his aching ribs with a quick intake of breath.

"*You know how it is*, isn't telling him the truth Kurt. It isn't telling him that things are worse. That the hockey players and the football players are bigger and bolder and that pushes on the playground have turned into things that can really, really hurt you."

"It's not like they're taking me into the bathroom and beating the crap out of me," Kurt said, visions of Blaine's attack crashing through his mind. "So they pour slushies on my head or throw me into dumpsters or push me against the lockers. I'm not weak Santana, I can take it."

"But you shouldn't have to Kurt, so I don't know why you're letting it happen!"

"What else am I supposed to do?" Kurt yelled. "Let you fight my battles and get your ass kicked too? Put Brittany at risk? Tell Blaine so he can barrel over here and the next thing you know he's right back in the hospital instead of staying where he's finally found safety? Telling is completely out of the question 'Tana, because then the only thing that's gonna happen is I get my ass beat more or somebody else gets hurt."

"There's another possibility," Santana said quietly.

Kurt highly doubted that. He'd gone over every possible scenario in his head but he couldn't come up with any solution that actually made things better. "What?"

"You could transfer," she said gently and his eyes snapped to hers. "To Dalton."

Kurt laughed. He laughed because didn't she think if that was even remotely a possibility he would have begged for it over the summer? "And I suppose you just have 40 grand lying around that we can shell out to one of the most prestigious private schools in the country." Santana was quiet. "Didn't think so."

February 10, 2008

Dear Blaine,

Kurt crumpled it up. It couldn't possibly qualify for the no erasing rule if he hadn't even written anything other than his name yet. He tossed the paper over his head at the wastebasket and winced at the pull in his side. Damn Karofsky.

What the hell was he supposed to write anyway?

Dear Blaine,

Every time you've asked me if I'm okay and I said yes I lied. Every time you tried to shift us so I was on the bottom I stopped you so you didn't accidentally crush my bruises. Your 14 year old boyfriend is too weak and defenseless to protect himself from a bunch of jackasses who hate me because I love you. I wish I could go to Dalton so if you could just manage to pick \$40,000 off that money tree in your back yard, that would be amazing.

Kurt threw his pen across the room, thankfully not breaking anything or marking the wall. He fell down on his bed, face scrunched into the darkness in his covers, hoping for a solution to come flying before his eyes.

But there was none.

"Kurt!" Burt called from the bottom of the stairs. "Time for rehearsal!"

Kurt sighed and pulled himself up. That was the only solution. Keep performing. Lose himself in characters that were stronger than him and better than him and surround himself with people who loved him and didn't care who he loved.

That was the only thing he could do.

February 14, 2008

Blaine picked Kurt up at his house on Thursday. Like a real date. He was dressed gorgeously in tight black jeans and a purple button down that contrasted beautifully with his skin. And he was holding out flowers, a beautiful bouquet of red and yellow roses.

"Oh my god," Kurt breathed.

"I wanted to make up for last year," Blaine said with a blush.

"I've been watching the forecast all week," Kurt said as he brought the flowers into the kitchen to put them in water. Blaine followed. "I was going to have to go take some names if they started saying there was even a chance of snow."

Blaine grinned. "Well there's not a flake in the sky," he said.

"Good thing," Burt said as he strolled into the room with a smirk. "Or else Kurt would not be getting in the car with you and you'd be spending Valentine's Day here."

"Which we are *not* doing," Kurt said firmly, then looked at Blaine nervously. "Right?"

"Right," Blaine said with a laugh. "Just dinner and a movie."

"And the movie you will be seeing is..." Burt asked with a raised brow.

Kurt looked at Blaine. Blaine smiled at Kurt. "*Definitely, Maybe*," he said and tried to hold in his chuckle when Kurt sucked in a breath. "It's PG-13, and it's starring Ryan Reynolds."

Kurt swallowed. Because this was really their first movie together without a chaperone. And Blaine had picked a romantic comedy starring Ryan Reynolds. Who they both agreed was cute. Which meant-

"We better get going," Blaine said as he grabbed the hand of his beautifully blushing boyfriend.

"Be home by ten please, you both have school tomorrow. You have your school ID Kurt?" Burt asked.

"Yes Dad," Kurt said at the same time Blaine answered, "Yes Sir," and steered Kurt out the door.

Kurt was quiet as Blaine walked him to the car and he got in quietly and did up his belt quietly. Blaine began to worry and he turned the car on but looked over to Kurt before going anywhere. "Are you okay?"

Kurt nodded, a bit harder than maybe he should. "Just trying to stay presentable," he said, voice strained.

Blaine laughed. "Ryan Reynolds does it that much for you?" he asked.

"No," Kurt said and he looked at Blaine. "But he does that much for you, and you taking me to see his movie on Valentine's Day does that much for me."

Blaine reached over and took his hand, but his eyes looked too much like pity. "Kurt-"

"Don't you dare Blaine Anderson," Kurt said and he turned so he was facing him in his seat. "I turn 15 in 3 months, it is our first real Valentine's Day together, so don't you dare finish that sentence you were starting."

Blaine lifted his hands in surrender and then he looked at Kurt. Really looked at him. And he wondered exactly when Kurt had stopped being a boy. "Are there new rules for tonight?" Blaine simply asked.

Kurt sat still. Then he bit his lip. He wanted new rules for sure, he knew exactly what he wanted, but he wasn't sure yet if he was ready to say it out loud. "I don't know yet," Kurt admitted. "Let's just go and find out."

"Okay." Blaine finally left the driveway and drove to the mall. They'd decided to have dinner at Breadstix and Blaine had made reservations earlier. They were careful, in public. Their conversation was easy. Their hands stayed on their own sides of the table. If their feet reached out every once in a while to remind themselves the other was still there, well, it was subtle and certainly not against any rules.

"I love this," Blaine said, leaning back in the booth happily. "Being out with you. Taking you out."

"I love it too," Kurt said. "But if we don't hurry we're gonna miss the movie."

Blaine paid the check and then went to the theater, getting their tickets and popcorn and drinks. Kurt held back, waiting for Blaine to pick the seats and he chose ones way in the back.

They played the games and answered the questions and watched the commercials on the pre-movie program. And then the lights went down and darkness flooded them until the movie started.

"I want to change the rules," Kurt whispered in Blaine's ear and he could feel Blaine shudder beneath him.

"Are you sure?" Blaine whispered.

Kurt nodded. "Clothes stay in place. But..." Kurt blushed and he looked at the screen. "But that's it. The only rule."

Blaine closed his eyes against the surge. Kurt reached over and gently touched his hand before bringing it toward him, their hands nesting on top of the armrest. Kurt rubbed soft, teasing, circles with his thumb on Blaine's knuckles, then threaded his fingers through Blaine's, slowly bringing their hands over to his side. To rest on Kurt's thigh.

When Burt asked them what the movie was about when they got home, neither one of them was able to give a coherent answer.

He'd made it past his birthday, school was over in 3 weeks, and Kurt had never been so happy for summer because he didn't know how much longer he could stand this. He dropped his school bag by the front door, raced up the stairs and closed his bedroom door. He pulled his shirt off to look at the wounds in his mirror. It was far from the first time Kurt had come home with cuts and bruises from being thrown into dumpsters or slammed into lockers.

"Kurt, what on earth is going on?" Burt yelled as Kurt quickly pulled his shirt back on over his head.

It was just the first time his Dad had ever seen them.

"You're supposed to knock Dad, god, can't I have any privacy in this house?" Kurt yelled back.

"Take your shirt off," Burt told him, stepping closer.

"What? No dad, it's nothing, I just fell on the barre the other day rehearsing," Kurt lied.

"Those bruises are not from falling on the barre Kurt, or off the stage, or into a giant pit of piranhas or whatever other lie you can think up in your head," Burt snapped.

"Dad, I'm fine. Don't worry about it, please," Kurt begged.

"And if I called Blaine?" Burt said. "Would he tell me you're okay? Have you been hiding this from him too or have both of you been hiding it from me?"

Kurt looked at the floor in silence. He didn't know if his dad would actually call Blaine or not but either way they would both end up mad at him. Because Blaine knew, Kurt knew that he did, but Kurt had been minimizing it all year. "Please don't call him dad," he whispered.

Letting go of a breath, Burt sat down on the edge of Kurt's bed, grabbing his hand and pulling his son toward him. "Let me see," he said gently before reaching out and lifting Kurt's shirt. Kurt blinked back the tears as he stared over his father's head. There were old bruises beneath the new ones from that day and Kurt knew how bad it looked. His father allowed him the dignity of keeping his comments to himself as he carefully examined Kurt's wounds. When Kurt winced at one tiny press of his ribs, Burt let his shirt drop. "First we're going to the doctor to have you looked at. And then you're going to tell me who did this to you."

But Kurt shook his head. "No, dad, please, don't make a big deal of this, there's only three weeks of school left!"

Burt reached up and took hold of Kurt's chin, forcing their eyes to meet. "Neither one of those things is a choice Kurt. We'll talk about choices later but right now it's the doctor and then the truth."

Kurt nodded in defeat. "Okay."

It turned out, choices were limited. When it all came out Burt learned that almost the entire Hockey and Football teams had been harassing Kurt the entire year. McKinley couldn't expel them all or even suspend them. The teams were in championships. They'd have to forfeit if Principal Figgins took action which

would seriously limit their funding for next year to the point of putting the whole school in danger. The administration wouldn't do that for one kid being harassed because he was gay.

They assured his safety through the end of the school year. And then Burt unenrolled him.

They looked into school choice and there was a possibility he'd be allowed to go to school with Mercedes, but she said that things weren't really that different there. Talking with her parents, Burt realized it really wouldn't be safer.

Despite their plans the previous year, Kurt returned to camp, this time as a Counselor-In-Training, and Blaine returned to LA, having booked a show for the summer. Burt told Kurt not to worry about school, they would figure it out when he got home and Kurt did try not to worry. But it was hard, not knowing where he was going. And he was coming home only a few days before McKinley started.

He came home to a Dalton uniform on his bed.

"I don't understand," Kurt said looking up at Burt, the shock on his face mixed slightly with anger. "We can't afford this Dad, what on earth did you do?"

"I talked to the Dean at Dalton. You've been given a scholarship which pays half the tuition and I mortgaged the shop for the rest." Kurt went to open his mouth but Burt wouldn't let him speak. "Your safety is more important than anything. This is not negotiable. Dalton actually starts in two days. Boarders have already moved in." Kurt knew that. He turned away and stared out his window. "We'll commute for the first week and then bring your stuff up to move in over the weekend." Kurt didn't know why he was angry other than he hated that a bunch of bullies at school could cause his father to risk his whole business and flip his whole world upside down. "I thought you'd be happy," Burt said. "I thought this was what you'd want, to be able to see Blaine every day."

And then Kurt realized why he was mad. Because Blaine was terrified of this and neither one of them had been given a choice and what if Blaine was right and being together actually ruined everything they had? Kurt wasn't mad at all. He was just scared.

He was so scared he couldn't even figure out how to tell Blaine before the first day of school arrived.

Kurt had been to Dalton so many times, he really knew the place by heart by now. Sure, the classrooms he was unsure about, but the main halls, where to eat, the gym, those things he already knew.

He also knew where to find Blaine in the morning and he headed straight there, the cafeteria that Blaine told him the Warblers congregated at before classes began every morning. When he got to the door though, he froze. His breath seized in fear the moment he saw the group laughing and joking and throwing things at one another. Kurt didn't know if someone noticed him first or if Blaine just felt his presence, but his boyfriend turned around, saw him, and slowly rose with a confused look on his face. Blaine grabbed his bag and walked right over.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Well," Kurt said, trying to keep this light. "I'm wearing a Dalton uniform, so I've either done an amazing job of infiltrating your strong defenses to spy for McKinley, or..." He took a breath when Blaine's expression didn't change. "Or I've been enrolled in Dalton."

Blaine shook his head, words escaping him. "I don't understand," he said softly.

Kurt bit his lip. He had hoped Blaine would just be happy. But his father had hoped the same thing and that hadn't happened either. "Is there somewhere we can talk?" he asked.

Blaine nodded without a word and Kurt followed him to a small study room down the eastern hallway. Kurt sat in one of the chairs far more fancy than he'd ever find at McKinley. Blaine stood by the door, arms crossed. Kurt couldn't tell from his expression what he was feeling.

"I...I haven't been totally honest with you," Kurt said quietly.

Blaine scoffed. "Clearly."

Kurt lowered his eyes. "When you would ask me how things were going at McKinley I always told you they were fine, but they weren't fine Blaine. I was getting beat up every day. I didn't want to tell you because I knew you'd come to try and rescue me and I was afraid you'd just end up hurt again." He bravely looked up, and Blaine's face had softened slightly. "I didn't tell anyone, though of course Santana and Brittany knew because they were there. But three weeks before the end of school my Dad found out."

Blaine still didn't say anything, but he uncrossed his arms and leaned against the wall. He was listening and that's all that mattered to Kurt.

"The school wouldn't do anything other than ensure my safety for the end of the year by basically escorting me to and from all my classes. My dad unenrolled me at the end of the year. I went to camp, you went to LA, and when I came home two days ago there was a Dalton uniform on my bed."

"And you didn't think that maybe you should tell me?" Blaine said quietly.

"I knew I should have Blaine," he said, eyes looking up at the boy he loved with all of his emotions swirling. "But it was such a shock and I don't know," he said, tears forming in his eyes. Blaine still didn't come to him so he got up and he went to Blaine. Blaine didn't move, but he looked like he wanted to reach out to him and Kurt took that as a good sign. "When I was a little boy, someone made me wish on stars I didn't believe in. And I wished that someday me and my best friend could go to school together. And maybe it's just coincidence and wishes don't come true, but maybe they do." Kurt reached for him and took his hand. Blaine let him and his honeyed eyes began to glisten with tears. "I know you're scared. Well, I'm scared too. With every letter I'm still certain you see me as that little boy at the stage door."

"I guarantee within a day Kurt, I'm gonna fall off that pedestal you've always placed me on," Blaine said, his voice tremulous.

Kurt gave a weak laugh. "Well, the pedestal has gotten shorter over the years. You could probably just step off if it now if you wanted to."

"I'd rather that than you see me fall."

Kurt squeezed his hands tightly and stepped him one pace to the left. "There you go. Safely down, no worse for the wear."

They gazed at one another, an amused smile on Kurt's face, nerves and hope on Blaine's. He didn't seem to know what to say so Kurt took the lead. He stepped back and held out his hand.

"Hi," he said. "I'm new here at Dalton. I could use someone to show me around."

Blaine blinked and smiled and shook Kurt's hand. "Well, I'd love to," he said. "But don't get any ideas. I have a boyfriend and I love him very much."

Kurt smiled back. "Well he's a lucky guy. I'm sure he loves you even more."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Does He Feel What I Feel?

September 8, 2008

Dear Blaine,

It will take me exactly 47,620 letters to hand deliver to you before I save my dad 20 grand in postage so I figured I'd better start now.

I somehow thought that when we were together in school it would feel different. I mean, during the day it is different, I get to see you and kiss you and rehearse for the Warblers with you but...I mean at night.

At home I would lie awake alone in my bed and stare out at the stars and wonder if you were staring at them too thinking of me. And now I find that even though you are right across campus and I can practically see your window from where I am...I still wonder the same thing.

Only now I wonder, was I too much today? Did I crowd you? Am I cramping your style, big junior hanging out with a sophomore? Are you wishing I didn't transfer, are you wishing I was still in Lima?

I don't. Wish I was still in Lima. But I do wish I knew better what you were thinking now that I'm here.

Love,

Kurt

Kurt made his way across campus to meet Blaine and his friends for breakfast. It was his first real morning at Dalton after his first real night, and there was just a little chill to the air that he knew would fade by midday. He had his bag on his shoulder, his letter in his hand and he had to physically stop himself from throwing it out.

Hand delivery was much more nerve wracking then tossing it in the mailbox and forgetting about it.

For a minute he considered taking a detour to the student center to just put a stamp on it and mail it but that would defeat the purpose of the hand delivery, so he just gritted his teeth, ignored the knot in his stomach, and opened the door to the cafeteria.

Blaine's smile from across the room made it a little easier, his soft kiss in front of the whole school made it even a little easier than that and when Kurt sat down he put the envelope flat on the table and wordlessly slid it over.

Blaine raised a brow. "What's this?" he asked with a laugh.

"A letter," Kurt said and he bit his lip nervously. Blaine took it and started opening it curiously and Kurt thought he might pass out. "I'm gonna go get some coffee," he said and before Blaine could respond he was halfway across the room.

He took his time, filling his cup, mixing cream and sugar in even when he didn't normally. Stir, stir, stir he forced his hand while all the while glancing surreptitiously toward his boyfriend. Blaine had the letter open and was reading it but his back was to Kurt and he couldn't see anything. But the minute he returned to his seat, Blaine looked up at him with a dark intensity that seemed like anger and took him by his arm.

"Come on," he said.

If Kurt thought he was nervous before he was pretty sure he was going to have a heart attack now and he grabbed his things as Blaine did and let him lead them back to that small study room where they'd talked only a week ago. Blaine threw his things down on the floor and he took the bag from Kurt's arm, tossing it down beside his own.

"Blaine, what are we-"

He couldn't get in another word because Blaine pressed him up against the door, kissing him fiercely, and it took Kurt a minute to figure out what was going on before he relaxed and opened, letting the tongue that was begging at his lips to enter. Blaine wanted more, it was obvious by the press into Kurt's thigh, and Kurt wasn't going to lie to himself and pretend that he didn't want it too. But even more he didn't want to get expelled for inappropriate behavior before he'd barely even started and he raised his hands to Blaine's chest that felt far better under his fingers than it should have, and he gently pushed him away.

"Blaine-" he breathed.

Blaine's eyes were blown almost black. "You're not crowding me or cramping my style, I love that you are here and I don't ever want you to go back to Lima," he nearly growled.

Kurt stared at him. He'd never seen Blaine like this before. But he certainly wouldn't mind seeing it again. "Okay then," Kurt said lightly, as light as he could get his racing heart and breathless lungs to say. "Well. That's settled then."

"Settled," Blaine said before surging forward and kissing him again and this time Kurt just gave into it. He draped his arms over Blaine's shoulders and Blaine grabbed hold of his waist pulling him closer before slipping into an embrace and Kurt sighed, happier than he'd really ever been before. The kiss grew softer before it slowed and Blaine pulled away slightly, resting their foreheads together. "Do you know what I'm thinking now?" Blaine whispered against his lips.

Kurt leaned back against the door and looked at him, his mouth quirked into a smile. "You know, you could have just written me back," he said with a grin.

Kurt grabbed his math books from his locker and headed out to Blaine's dorm room. He knew Dalton was going to be harder than McKinley, but this Algebra was beyond him. Luckily his boyfriend was a genius in pretty much everything and promised to help guide him through it.

He bounced up the stairs, waving to the Warblers in the dorm and others of Blaine's housemates he'd been getting to know. Upperclassman had more dorm privileges than lowerclassman, so they tended to gravitate to Blaine's.

"No Rachel, I know I told you I really wanted to do it but I can't anymore," Kurt heard Blaine say as he approached the door. Kurt stilled just out of sight. He didn't mean to eavesdrop. Well, actually, he really did. "Kurt's here now and...yes, I know it shouldn't change anything but it does."

Kurt didn't like the words. He hated the resignation in Blaine's voice even more and he stepped into the doorway to find Blaine looking out the window. "I'm not giving up on them Rachel, I'm just..." Blaine turned with frustration and his eyes fell on Kurt. "Rach I have to go," he said and he hung up before she could get could get in another word. "Kurt-"

"What are you giving up on?" Kurt asked. He felt cold. He wasn't sure why.

"Kurt, please just come in," Blaine pleaded and Kurt realized he was still standing outside the doorway, his math book tucked under his arm. "Let me explain."

Kurt took one step inside, closed the door behind him and leaned against it. "I don't want you giving up on anything because of me," Kurt said.

"There's a show that's going from off-Broadway to Broadway. The roles are set but they're casting for understudies and-"

"What is it?" Kurt asked tersely.

Blaine blushed and lowered his head. Because he knew what Kurt was going to say. "It's Next to Normal."

Kurt gaped. "Are you kidding me?" Blaine didn't say anything and Kurt had an overwhelming desire to get on the phone with Rachel and make sure his boyfriend's plane tickets were booked. "You are seriously going to give up on a chance to play Henry to stay in Ohio? Because of me?"

"Yes," Blaine said and he was dead serious. Kurt didn't know what to say and he didn't move so Blaine did instead. Before Kurt knew it, his hands were grasped by Blaine's. "I just got you. I was so scared and now I'm not scared anymore, the only thing I want to know is how amazing we can be together."

"But Henry-"

"Is a great role. But so is the role of Kurt Hummel's boyfriend, private school hot shot," he smirked. Kurt glared at him like he was a wayward child. It was the same way Rachel had been talking to him but his mind was made up. "My brother and I used to play this game, careers. And I won every time. You know how?" Kurt shook his head. "I never valued fame over love. Dreams change Kurt. Broadway isn't going anywhere but if I leave you now-"

"I'm not going anywhere either," Kurt said. "And the last thing I want is you giving up your dreams for me."

Blaine shook his head and he laughed. "You and Rachel are two peas in a pod," he said. He looked up, into Kurt's bright blue eyes, eyes shining with the courage to let go and the fear of losing him so soon. "I'm not giving up on my dreams Kurt. I just have different ones now."

Kurt stared at him doubtfully, lifting his book in front of them. "Helping me with math? That's the dream?" he questioned. "Because I'm pretty sure I'd rather be on Broadway than do that."

"Well I wouldn't," Blaine said and he leaned in, his lips softly brushing Kurt's before he brought a hand up to his neck and pulled him in for a kiss. The book fell to the floor but Kurt didn't care as he rested his arms over Blaine's shoulders. "I can't do this on Broadway," Blaine breathed.

"Well you could if I was there with you," Kurt said.

Blaine nodded. "Someday Kurt," he promised. "That's the dream I have now. You and me and Broadway."

Kurt drew him close and kissed him again, harder and deeper than before. "That's a dream I can get behind."

"I failed," Kurt said as he balanced his lunch tray along with his books.

Blaine laughed and rolled his eyes. "You didn't fail."

"I wouldn't have," Kurt said. "If you had stuck to the rules last night."

"Your rules were boring Kurt," Blaine complained. "And even with everything I was doing to you, you still knew the answers to every question on the study guide. You didn't fail."

Kurt smirked. "Well I think I owe you some payback. I highly suggest you watch your back at Warbler practice today," he said, then turned back with a tease. "Or watch your front."

"Jesus Christ Kurt, Wes will kill us if he finds us fooling around during a meeting," Blaine groaned.

"Well then," Kurt winked. "He better not find out."

Wes found out. Every single time, Wes found out and Kurt and Blaine began to realize they weren't even remotely close to discreet.

Perhaps it was years of pent-up frustration, letters back and forth, phone calls and texts, always wanting the one thing they couldn't have which was the touch of the fingertips, the kiss of the lips, the caress on their skin. Or perhaps it was just that they were teenage boys. Whatever it was, Kurt and Blaine couldn't get enough.

And they knew they had to put the brakes on before they did something they'd regret.

Or not regret. They knew they wouldn't regret it. They just knew they weren't ready. Not really.

Except Blaine was ready.

"Blaine, I think I love him," Rachel said one night on the phone. "And I think I'm ready. I mean I have sex with him most nights on stage, what's the difference if we do it off stage?"

Blaine was getting a little bit tired of hearing about this Jesse St. James guy and he *really* didn't want to talk to Rachel about her sex life. But, in a weird sort of way, he also did. Because it had been two years now and she'd grown up with Jesse in a matter of speaking, ever since they first started Spring Awakening. "Are you sure you're not just scared of losing him because you guys are leaving the show in December?" Blaine asked. "Because I don't think that's gonna happen, not the way you talk about him."

"I don't know. Maybe?" she said. "I mean, I know I love him. I don't know why I said think because I know. And I know he loves me. So what's the point of waiting?"

Blaine wandered around campus the next few days trying to answer Rachel's question. *What was the point of waiting?* he asked himself over and over. He loved Kurt. Kurt loved him.

With Kurt lying on top of him, kissing him fervently, their far too clothed hips pressing against one another, Blaine had trouble answering the question.

Kurt stopped, his lips kiss swollen, his hair a mess, and his voice a little bit breathless when he asked, "Blaine? Are you okay? Something's wrong, just tell me."

Blaine looked up at him, into the face that he loved and adored and if he was honest with himself wanted to spend the rest of his life with. And Kurt was looking down at him as if he felt the same. And yet he couldn't for the life of him get himself to answer Kurt's question.

"It's nothing," he said, but Kurt eyed him doubtfully. He knew they needed to talk about this but no matter how hard he tried to get the words out, his voice wouldn't allow itself to be heard. "Hang on," he said and he slipped out from underneath Kurt and went to his desk. He pulled out a notebook and a pen and he went to sit down on the bed, legs crossed beneath him, facing Kurt.

Curiously, Kurt mirrored him. And Blaine wrote.

I don't know how to say what I want to say. Honestly I don't even know exactly what I'm thinking.

He sheepishly handed the notebook over to Kurt who flashed a puzzled smile with a wrinkled brow and took the notebook. Kurt read it. He looked back up at Blaine who was just barely watching through lashes resting above blushed cheeks, his fingers picking at the blanket on his bed. And Kurt wrote.

Whatever it is it's okay. Whatever we've written has always been okay.

He handed it back. Blaine read it, took a deep breath, and poured his feelings onto the page.

I'm in love with you. And I don't mean little kid in love with you. I mean, I want to be with you in love with you. But there's something holding me back.

Could part of it be that you're writing this down on paper and can't even talk about it?

Blaine read Kurt's words. He looked up to see that adorable smirk, nervous that he'd gone too far but hoping it was okay because whatever they said on paper was always okay. Blaine smiled sheepishly.

I suppose that could definitely have something to do with it.

We knew this Blaine. We knew this was something we'd have to work through. Being able to talk to each other on paper or on email is very different from saying the words out loud.

It really is. I didn't think it would be, but it really is.

You know we've never fought? Not one argument? If we haven't even put ourselves out there emotionally like that, then we're not ready to do it in other ways. Because what you're saying you want, it is emotional Blaine. I know how much it seems like it's not, believe me, it sometimes seems like that to me also. But I feel it Blaine. And if you let yourself, you'll feel it too.

Blaine read Kurt's words. And he looked up from the notebook. Kurt's lip was bit between his teeth and his cheeks were rosy. His eyes were open, so open Blaine thought he could fall into the depths of them. And he did. He set the notebook aside and he leaned in, cupping Kurt's beautiful, vulnerable face in his hand. Wordlessly, he brushed a thumb across Kurt's lips, releasing them from their nervous hold. Warmth rushed through his veins, warmth brought on by love and hope and fear, and he grazed his lips against Kurt's. Kurt kissed him back, soft and careful and Blaine's lips parted for him, if he wanted it. Kurt's tongue inside him was neither desperate, nor tentative. It was slow and deliberate and it made Blaine feel more than he ever had before. And he realized that if *this* could make his heart feel like it was going to overflow, if tears came to his eyes and the blood roared through his veins and his body swelled with desire just from this, he couldn't even imagine how powerful truly *being* with Kurt would feel.

He was shaking and breathless when Kurt finally pulled away. Without looking at him, Blaine reached for the pen, but Kurt's hand gently rested atop his, stopping him. Blaine's eyes were terrified when he looked up.

"Just talk to me," Kurt asked quietly, his blue-green eyes a swirl of his own emotions. "Please?"

"I feel like I could lose myself in you," Blaine whispered. "Sometimes I feel like I already have."

Kurt though gently shook his head and smiled softly. "I won't let that happen." He reached out and pulled Blaine into his warm, safe embrace. Blaine always marveled at how much stronger Kurt was than him despite being almost two years younger. He supposed that despite his age, Kurt had always been ahead of him. He'd experienced loss first. He'd experienced love first. He'd experienced loneliness while Blaine was receiving standing ovations night after night.

Now it was time for them to experience things together, but it had to be all of it. The loss and the love and the loneliness and the standing ovations.

They hadn't even fought yet.

"What do you think our first fight's gonna be like?" Blaine asked. "Do you think we're gonna scream and yell and stomp away only to miss each other the moment we're apart? Or do you think it will be slow and simmering, building for days before we finally confront one another only to realize that if we'd just talked things out in the beginning we could have avoided the whole mess?"

"You have a very active imagination about our fighting Mr. Anderson," Kurt teased. "But we're two drama kings. It's bound to be explosive. Tragic almost. A near show for the people around us who will take sides and bets but never truly get to see the fruits of their labor because in the middle of the night we'll meet, clandestinely at the halfway point between our dorms. And we'll kiss before we talk because the power of our fight couldn't come even close to the power of our love. And then we'll sit and talk and realize where we went wrong and how to make it all right again."

"Who has the active imagination now?" Blaine asked pointedly.

Kurt just squeezed him tight and guided him down on the bed. Blaine curled up, his head resting on Kurt's chest. "And then we'll make love, slow and gentle, or maybe quick and dirty, I don't know, it probably depends on what we fought about. But no matter what, afterwards we'll lay in each other's arms, just like this. And I'll stroke your arm," he said, doing exactly as he said. "And you'll brush your thumb along my chest, just like you are now. And we'll know that everything will be alright. No matter what. Because we won't lose ourselves in each other Blaine. But when we go our separate ways, we'll always find our way back."

"God," Blaine breathed, his eyes watering. "How on earth did I find you?"

"From the top of a barricade," Kurt answered.

Blaine smiled and held Kurt tight. "Well I'm very glad I came back down."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

A Heart Full of You

Dalton Academy busses weren't anything like the orange school busses of McKinley. These were like luxury vehicles, with leather seats, actual seatbelts, and television screens at every seat. Most of the boys had their eyes transfixed on whatever sports game was going on in front of them. Kurt had eyes for no one but the boy sitting next to him.

"So how long have the Warblers been performing at nursing homes?" Kurt asked. They'd been preparing for this performance for weeks, as if it were Nationals itself.

"Since before either of us were born," Blaine told him. "I think this is like the 24th year or something? The residents look forward to it every time we come and it's like they have a sixth sense or something. We wouldn't miss it."

The Dalton Academy bus stopped at the front door of the nursing home and the choir members filed out with a cacophony of excitement. Many years ago the Dalton Academy Warblers had won Nationals after playing for this nursing home. They'd brought their newest setlist and the residents' favorites won them a trip to Nationals. Ever since, the boys had returned each year, and each year the residents had continued to handpick the songs that would bring them to Nationals.

Kurt instinctively reached for Blaine's hand as they exited the bus, then pulled away nervously. "Are we okay here?" he said, carefully eyeing the door.

Blaine smiled and clasped their hands together. "Yes," he assured him. "We are fine here and this," he added, squeezing Kurt's hand for good measure, "is fine here."

"Come on love birds!" Jeff called with a grin and the boys realized they were the only ones still standing by the bus.

"Come on," Blaine said. "We have a duet to sing."

The songs were a hit with the residents. The Warbler Council went around to get their votes and the rest of the boys spent the time sitting and talking with the men and women in the cafeteria turned auditorium. Blaine had learned early his freshman year how important their visits were. For some who had no family, volunteers like the Warblers were the only company they got.

"Your voice is beautiful dear," a white haired, wrinkled, and feisty eyed woman named Rosa told Blaine.

"Thank you," he said politely.

"And the boy you sang with. He has a voice like an angel."

That time, Blaine smiled proudly. "Yes. He does."

Rosa leaned in close to him, a brow raised. "Is he your boyfriend?" Blaine's eyes opened wide and he felt his face flush. She just smiled and leaned in like she was sharing a secret. "I could see it in your eyes just then. You were prouder of him than yourself."

"His name is Kurt," Blaine told her and Kurt's name on his lips sounded reverent. Blaine looked around for him, but he wasn't in the common room.

"I think he went off to the rooms dear," she said, tipping her head toward the hallway on Blaine's left. "Go ahead and find him. Young love shouldn't be separated for too long."

"Yes Ma'am," Blaine said standing up. "It was very nice to meet you."

Rosa giggled to herself, blushing slightly as he walked away. "Such a gentleman," she mused.

"You in love with him?"

Kurt had ventured down the hallway with staff's permission to meet with folks who hadn't been able to make it to the performance. They'd heard it though, piped in through the speakers in their rooms. So the minute Miriam heard Kurt say hello, she knew who he was.

Kurt blushed at the question. She'd asked about his duet partner and if he was as cute as Kurt was. "The cutest," was the answer that came along with an incredible glow on his cheeks. Kurt found himself telling her all about Blaine, his roles on Broadway but also just the little things that he did.

And then she asked, "You in love with him?"

Kurt shrugged and blushed brighter and looked at her sheepishly. "You probably think I'm too young to know what love is."

She rested her wrinkled hand, skin soft as snow, on his and she shook her head. "You're too young to know what marriage is. But love? When a newborn baby is held in loving arms, she understands better than anyone what love is. It's as we get older that it becomes so much more complicated. So no," she said, smiling softly. "I don't think you're too young to know what love is. I think you're still young enough."

"I love him too," Blaine said and Kurt turned to see him standing in the doorway. Blaine smirked and shrugged his shoulders. "You know, just for the record."

"How long have you been standing there?" Kurt accused.

"Long enough to know I love you even more now than I did before," Blaine said and he reached a hand out. "Come on. It's time to go."

Kurt leaned down to give Miriam a kiss goodbye, promising he'd come back soon. She squeezed his hand and then Kurt met Blaine at the door.

"Will you accompany me back to the bus?" Blaine asked, holding out his arm.

Kurt linked his elbow with Blaine's and smiled over at him. "I will accompany you anywhere you go."

"So I was thinking," Kurt said as he and Blaine made their way hand in hand to the cafeteria after Warblers rehearsal. "When we get to Lima for Christmas I think we should go ice skating and get hot chocolate."

"Kurt-" Blaine started.

"I had to get you a stocking to go with the rest of ours, but I couldn't decide. So I got two for you to pick between.

"Kurt, listen-"

"And my Dad's new girlfriend Carole...wow, that's still really weird to say...wants to know what your favorite Christmas dish is so she can make sure you feel at home."

"Kurt!" Blaine shouted, pulling on his hand to get him to stop. But now that Kurt was looking at him, face as excited as a kid in a candy shop, the last thing Blaine wanted to do was ruin it. He had no choice though. "I'm going home for Christmas. To New York."

Kurt looked as though every Alexander McQueen in his closet had just been ripped away. "What?"

Blaine looked out across campus. It was too hard to meet Kurt's eye. "Cooper called and told me he's coming in and I can stay at the hotel with him. We're gonna do a family dinner there, Cooper has it all planned. Mom's inviting Rachel and her dads and Sam and his family. And she's telling all the relatives that they're welcome to come but if they can't handle me being there then they shouldn't." Blaine shrugged nervously. "So other than Dad I should be okay."

Kurt looked shell-shocked. "When did he call?" Kurt asked. "Last night?"

Blaine bit his lip and his gaze fell to the ground. "A week ago."

"What!" Kurt shrieked. "A week ago? And you're just telling me now?"

"Well I hadn't really decided," Blaine told him, trying to explain. "I kept going back and forth about the idea."

"So you thought you'd just not include me in the decision?" Kurt said. Boys passing them on campus, started slowing as their voices raised, but Kurt and Blaine didn't notice.

"I knew what you would say Kurt." This was exactly why Blaine had put off mentioning it until now. "I didn't want to...I wanted it to be my choice."

Kurt's hands flew to his hips. "Even though it affected me."

"It's not like we're married Kurt!"

"Well good," Kurt snapped. "Because I wouldn't want to marry someone who can't even talk to me!"

Kurt froze. Blaine froze. The crowd of Dalton Academy students that had gathered around them started whispering.

"Blaine, I'm sorry," Kurt said quietly.

Blaine looked up at him. "You know what? Forget it."

And Kurt watched with a heart full of regret as Blaine turned his back and walked away.

"Blaine's not coming for Christmas," Kurt said. He was lying back on his bed, talking to his Dad on the phone, and trying not to cry. "He's going back to New York."

The quiver in Kurt's voice may have been subtle but it gave away everything to the man that had raised him. "I know you must be disappointed son, but what's got you so upset?"

Kurt bit his lip. He hated this. But it hadn't been his fault. "We had a fight." Tears dripped down with the words.

"Because he's going home?"

"Because he's known for a week and he just told me today," Kurt said with as much righteous indignation as he could muster. "I've been talking about plans for a week now and he's just been lying to me."

"Now Kurt, it doesn't sound like he's been lying exactly," Burt told him. "Did he tell you why he waited?"

Kurt sniffed. "He said he hadn't decided, but I'm sure it was just an excuse. If he can't even talk to me about things like that..."

"You need to give him a break son," Burt said. "Should he have told you sooner? Sure. But he didn't. And I know how you snap when you're hurt, so I can't imagine your reaction is gonna invite him to talk to you about things like that in the future." Kurt was silent. "Am I right?"

Kurt hated admitting when his father was right. "What do I do?"

"I might start with an apology," Burt suggested.

"I tried," Kurt argued. "He just walked away."

"Well, then, don't let him walk away next time."

"I fucked up Cooper." Blaine fell back on his bed, phone in hand.

"Let me guess. You got a B in Chemistry. Or you flubbed a lyric during rehearsal. Oh, did you buy vanilla yogurt when you meant to buy cherry?"

Blaine hated his brother. "I didn't tell Kurt I wasn't going home with him for Christmas until today," he said.

"Oh. Well. Yes, then you did fuck up."

Blaine rolled his eyes. "Thank you very much asshole, now how do I fix it?"

"Well I guess that depends on Kurt's reaction," Cooper said.

"His reaction was yelling at me and telling me I'd be a shitty husband."

There was silence on the line for a second. "Blaine," his brother said slowly. "Is there something you need to share with the class?"

"No, there's not..." Blaine couldn't handle Cooper's sarcasm anymore. "You know what? Forget it." Blaine moved to hang up on his brother, but he wasn't quick enough.

"Is that what you told Kurt? To forget it?" Cooper asked him. "Before you walked away, just like you were about to hang up on me?" Blaine didn't say anything. But he also didn't hang up. "That was the bigger fuck up then not telling him you were leaving Blaine."

Blaine threw his arm over his eyes. He hated when his brother was right. "So what do I do?"

"One generally starts these things with an apology," Cooper said. "And then groveling, if that doesn't work. Boot licking. A few other things I'm going to continue imagining you two aren't old enough for."

"And if none of that works?" Blaine asked nervously.

Cooper sighed. "He's mad because he loves you Squirt. Just don't be stupid and you'll be fine."

Blaine tossed and turned until midnight before he decided that his happiness was more important than his dignity.

From Blaine (12:03am): I'm sorry. I should have told you sooner.

From Kurt (12:05am): Yes. You should have. We don't keep secrets from each other.

From Blaine (12:08am): Says the guy who didn't tell me he was being bullied and didn't tell me he was coming to Dalton until he showed up on the first day of school.

From Kurt (12:09am): Touché

From Blaine (12:15am): You know, I don't recall resolving our first fight over text as one of the options we presented.

From Kurt (12:17am): We probably should have guessed it though.

From Blaine (12:19am): True. It does kind of put a damper on the makeup sex.

From Kurt (12:25am): I do expect make up kisses in the morning.

From Blaine (12:26am): Deal.

From Kurt (12:30am): And then we sit down and talk.

From Kurt (12:32am): I'm sorry too Blaine. For what I said. I don't...I mean, I shouldn't have...

From Blaine (12:3am): I forgive you. And I love you.

From Kurt: I love you too.

Make up kisses in the cafeteria nearly got them sent to the headmaster's office; a place neither had ever been, nor ever wanted to be, for misbehaving. Then class separated them until Warbler rehearsal brought them back together and it wasn't until after dinner that they were able to find a minute to truly talk. But curled up on Blaine's bed, Kurt's head resting on Blaine's chest, Kurt was finally able to ask the question that had kept him up until midnight the previous night.

"I just don't understand why you would *want* to go home Blaine," he said.

Blaine had known Kurt wouldn't understand. "They're my family Kurt," Blaine said. Kurt just stared at him as if he knew there was so much more to the answer and Blaine let his eyes slip to the floor. "Christmas at your house...seeing you and your dad..." Blaine looked up, his face pained. "I just can't. If I don't go home, I have no chance of that for myself. And I know it must seem crazy to want that or think it could possibly happen. But that's all I've ever wanted. For my dad to love me and be proud of me. And him loving *me* less doesn't make me love *him* less. I'm sorry Kurt," he said and he took his boyfriend's hand. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt him. "I'm sorry, but I have to keep trying."

Kurt stroked up and down Blaine's arm gently. "It's not crazy to want that," he said softly. "And I admire you so much for trying. It makes me feel..."

Kurt trailed off and Blaine shifted enough for Kurt to raise his eyes to meet Blaine's. "It makes you feel what?"

It took Kurt a moment to answer. "Safe?" he said. "Like, I know I can screw up, like yesterday, but you won't just leave. You give second chances Blaine, and that's amazing."

"I would never leave you Kurt," Blaine said, hugging him close. "I'm not sure I could even if I tried."

Kurt felt the words all the way from his heart to his toes and suddenly words weren't enough to say how he felt. He traced his hand along Blaine's arms but when he looked up, bright blue eyes had turned dark. Blaine's quickly did as well. "I think we said something about make up sex," he whispered only seconds before he leaned in and captured Blaine's lips.

Blaine's words were swallowed by Kurt's kiss and he could do nothing but surrender. He wrapped his arms around Kurt's back, holding him tight, never wanting to let go. His body registered Kurt's weight on top of him before his brain did. His limbs seemed to float and his pants grew tight beneath the press of Kurt's own straining hardness. Embarrassment turned quickly to desire until his thoughts caught up with the rest of him and he reluctantly pulled away.

"Kurt...I can't," Blaine stammered breathlessly, staring up at the most beautiful creature he had ever seen. "I mean, I won't be able to-"

"I don't want you to," Kurt whispered, leaning over once again as he pressed his mouth against Blaine's neck and rolled his hips with Blaine's. "I don't want to stop."

Blaine pulled back again, looking Kurt in the eye, searching for any sign of doubt or fear. When he saw none, he slowly slipped his hands from Kurt's back to his waist, guiding them gently. Both of them lost their breath in the pleasure of it. "Is this what you want?" Blaine asked softly.

"Yes," Kurt hissed as a wave of warmth flowed through him. "Please."

Blaine didn't respond. He trailed his hands down from Kurt's waist, giving him every second to say he'd gone far enough, but Kurt had meant it when he said he didn't want to stop. Blaine lightly caressed Kurt's hips before hesitantly bringing them up to trace the back pockets of Kurt's pants. "Is this okay?" he asked. Kurt moaned in response, nodding his head but unable to find the words. "God, Kurt, you-" Blaine's words failed him as well, as Kurt's rhythm grew more desperate, his skin more heated. Blaine relaxed his hands to rest on the swell of Kurt's ass, squeezing, pressing Kurt into him as he rose to meet every thrust. He wanted to do more, to let his fingers roam even further down Kurt's body, but he kept them where they were.

"I don't think I can-" Kurt panted, his forehead pressed against the wrinkles of Blaine's shirt.

"It's okay," Blaine said, his eyes closed and his head thrown back in his own bliss. He laid a gentle hand on Kurt's hair and stroked softly. "You're okay. Love you so much. Want to feel you."

That was all Kurt needed. Blaine felt him tense and he wrapped him up tight, safe in his arms, riding the wave with him. Breathing as one, Blaine's own pleasure raced through him, and their voices called out each other's names in harmony.

Blaine fell back on the bed, his head still spinning, when Kurt started laughing. It was a nervous chuckle against Blaine's chest as their breathing slowed and their heartbeats returned to normal. When he rolled off of Blaine, there were tears in his eyes, but they sparkled with delight. Blaine kissed his head, and then his nose, and finally his lips.

"How was that?" he asked with a grin.

Kurt pretended to think hard. "Well, it wasn't naked on the grass after a slow-motion run from one side of campus to the other. But I think we did okay."

"Next time," Blaine laughed, holding him close. "Next time."

December 20, 2008

Dear Kurt,

It's dark in the hotel room. Cooper is snoring. The lights of the Empire State Building and Christmas trees light up the city.

I miss you.

And I lied to you.

I mean, I didn't really lie, but there was another reason that I didn't tell you why I was coming to New York. Something I meant to say...to ask...but I just couldn't find the nerve.

I would have loved for you to come with me.

I don't know why it was such a hard thing to ask that I couldn't do it before you left for home. Maybe it was because I knew it was selfish, wanting it in part just to show everyone that not only was I gay but I was loved too. Maybe I knew that you might say yes and that it was more important for you to be with your Dad and Carole this Christmas so you could get to know her and Finn better. Maybe I was afraid, knowing that in a hotel room to ourselves we could make mistakes we would never be able to take back.

Maybe I knew just how much I wanted to make those mistakes.

I met Jesse today. And god Kurt, it just seems like Rachel's moving so fast with him, they're so young to be doing the things that I know they're doing, but then I remember that with you it wouldn't seem wrong at all, and I get it all mixed up in my mind.

I didn't mean to have this letter become about having sex with you, really I didn't! I'm just a stupid teenage boy I guess.

I wish you were here.

And not for all those other reasons, but because Christmas without you just seems wrong. You're my best friend and the love of my life and to not have you in my arms Christmas morning seems wrong. And yet I know that I did this. The first year we really could have been together and I made the choice to be apart from you. I made the choice out of fear.

When will I stop being so afraid Kurt?

Love you so much,

Blaine

"Merry day before Christmas Blaine," Kurt said and Blaine could hear the happiness in his voice even if he couldn't see his face through the phone. He'd been worried Kurt would be mad about the letter. Maybe he hadn't even gotten it. With Christmas packages, the mail was sure to be late. "What are you doing?"

"I am sitting in my hotel room waiting for Cooper to come back from shopping. I would have gone with him except he's shopping for me since the lazy bastard likes to wait until the last minute. And it's usually called Christmas Eve, Kurt."

Kurt laughed. "It's Christmas Eve day, therefore the day before Christmas. And as long as Cooper comes back with the perfect present, does it really matter how long he waited to get it?"

Blaine shrugged. "I suppose not. It's just...I'm getting nervous. About tomorrow. Not the present part of it but the Christmas dinner part of it," he clarified. "My dad's coming. So is my Aunt and Uncle and my cousin. The three of them were there when I dropped the gay-bomb on them all."

"Is that like the A-bomb?"

"Yes, just with a rainbow instead of a mushroom cloud," Blaine said, but his voice peppered with sadness. "I wish you were here."

"Yes," Kurt said and his tone was terser than Blaine would have liked. "I got your letter."

Blaine's heart dropped. "I'm sorry Kurt, I really am," he started to apologize. "I'm such an idiot, but I-"

"Hold that thought Blaine," Kurt interrupted. "There's someone at the door."

Blaine sighed and bit his lip and then he heard a knock at his own door. Wondering if Cooper forgot his key, Blaine opened it to find Kurt standing there, his phone to his ear. "Oh." Kurt smiled. "It's just you."

Blaine just stood there, staring, not comprehending at all what had just happened and how Kurt was both on the phone in Ohio and standing in front of him in New York at the same time. "Kurt...I..." he dropped the phone to his side before remembering to hang up. "What are you doing here?"

Kurt tipped his head to the side, sliding his own phone into his back pocket. "I believe you were saying something about you being an idiot?"

"Kurt, you were supposed to be spending Christmas with your Dad and Carole and Finn. How...how are you even here?"

"They make these things called airplanes," Kurt smirked. "And they can carry lots of passengers at the same time." Blaine was still staring wide-eyed like he had no idea what Kurt was saying. "Carole and Finn had never been to New York. So when I showed my Dad the letter, he packed us all up."

"You showed your dad the letter?" Blaine asked. He quickly tried to remember what he'd written. There was a lot about sex, he remembered that.

Kurt smirked again. "Only part of it. I'm not an idiot," he said and teased, "Not like you."

"You're not going to let that go?" Blaine asked.

"Well, you were the one who said it, not me. Although if you are an idiot," Kurt said, stepping toward him and wrapping his arms around Blaine's waist, "then you're my idiot. And I have no problem showing your relatives that."

"Kurt I..." He tried to clear his head. "Your family. Where is your family staying?"

"One floor up. Finn and I are sharing a room."

"Oh," Blaine said. For a moment his heart panged with jealousy though he didn't even know why.

Kurt could see right through him. "He's completely straight Blaine, and he's probably going to be my brother someday, given the googly eyes that my Dad can't stop flashing at his Mom."

"Oh," Blaine said again. "Are they coming for dinner tomorrow too?"

"My dad talked to your mom, so I'm gonna guess yes. Oh, and I should probably say Cooper isn't out getting you a present. Well, I guess he might be," Kurt said. "But he really just told you that so I could surprise you alone."

"Cooper...?" Suddenly it all made sense and he rolled his eyes. "Of course he did."

Kurt frowned and his brow furrowed. "Blaine, are you glad I'm here?" he asked. "You seem-"

"I'm glad," Blaine assured him with a soft kiss. "I am stunned and nervous and feeling incredibly stupid all around. But I'm glad you're here."

"Good," Kurt said. "Because I'm glad you asked me to come."

"Now I am just nervous," Blaine said. He shook his hands and bounced on his feet and let out a deep breath as he and Kurt stood in the hotel lobby waiting for everyone to arrive. His mother had invited Rachel and Sam for moral support and Rachel had somehow managed to drag Jesse away from visiting with his parents for Christmas to come with her. Blaine half expected the five of them to have to escape back to Sam's house. He gripped Kurt's hand and hid behind a pillar as he saw his Aunt and Uncle and cousin come through the door. They didn't see him and went straight to the restaurant.

"Blaine, we don't have to do this you know," Kurt said, peering at him with worry. "My family can go somewhere else for dinner and you can-"

"No," he said firmly and walked them out from behind the pillar. "I'm doing this. You came all this way and I'm having Christmas dinner with you, my family be damned."

"Blaine!" Rachel yelled and all of Blaine's nerves disappeared as she ran to him and jumped into his arms.

"Well hello there," he laughed, pulling her in for a tight hug and then letting her go. He looked her up and down. "You look fabulous."

"Thank you." She flipped her hair and smiled. Jesse came up beside her.

"Hey man," he said, holding his hand out for Blaine.

"Hey," Blaine said, shaking his hand. Then he looked over to Kurt and gestured. "Jesse, this is my boyfriend, Kurt. Kurt, this is Rachel's boyfriend Jesse."

"It's nice to meet you Kurt. Rachel tells me you guys are penpals?" Jesse said to Kurt.

Kurt smiled. "Yes, she writes to me about you all the time," he teased and Rachel stuck out her tongue at him.

Suddenly though she was quiet. "Blaine," she nearly whispered and tipped her head in the direction of the front door. His dad walked through wearing a suit and tie, looking around. His eyes met Blaine's for only a second before he turned and walked into the restaurant.

Kurt looked over at him, the nerves and the sadness written all over Blaine's face. "Still time to bail," he said with a smirk, trying to make light of an all too heavy situation.

"No." Blaine shook his head. "Let's just wait for Sam and then go in."

They chatted for a bit, Kurt and Jesse getting to know each other while Blaine and Rachel caught up. Sam texted that his family was "annoying" and he was running late, but he'd come over later. They were about to head inside when Cooper found them, dressed in jeans and a sports jacket and he flung an arm around his little brother's shoulder.

"Thought you could use a little moral support going in there," he said warmly. At Blaine's grimace, Cooper gave him a squeeze. "Don't worry, mom and I aren't going to let anything happen. Besides, I think we outnumber them." Cooper winked at Blaine and he couldn't help but laugh.

"Okay, let's do this," Blaine said. He grabbed Kurt's hand and walked with his boyfriend, his brother and his best friend into Christmas dinner.

"So how long have you and Kurt known each other?" Blaine's cousin asked. "You guys were dating last Christmas too, right?"

Dinner had been going well. His father wouldn't look at him or speak to him and his Aunt and Uncle kept pretending not to sneak glances at them, but Blaine's 20 year old cousin had welcomed both him and Kurt with open arms.

The question though was not one that Blaine had prepared to answer, although now that it was on the table he couldn't imagine why he hadn't thought it would be asked. And he knew he had the chance to lie, to say they'd met at Dalton, but the thought of reducing their relationship to months rather than years twisted a knot in his stomach.

And yet, answering truthfully, acknowledging the significance, the longevity of their relationship, was admitting to everything he'd been afraid of his father knowing for years. Rationally he knew his Dad couldn't take Kurt from him anymore. His mother and Cooper would never allow it even if he had an actual way of doing it. But old fears died hard, and he twisted in his seat.

Kurt squeezed his hand, his mother and Cooper nodded to him and Rachel smiled encouragingly. So with a flick of his eyes to his dad, he looked back to his cousin. "Yes, well, actually, Kurt and I met when he was 8 and I was 9."

Blaine watched as his father's head snapped to him in shock, but with his heart hammering in his chest, he told their story. "Kurt came to Les Mis one day and I saw him in the audience during curtain call and I don't know, he just, was adorable. And then we met at the stage door and Mom and his parents let him come backstage like he was an old friend and he met Rachel." She grinned, remembering that day. "And then of course he went home to Ohio and I thought I'd never see him again, but right after September 11th a letter came to the theater for me, and it was from Kurt. His teacher had them writing to pen pals in NY, and we've been writing ever since."

"Aw, that's so cute and romantic," his cousin said.

Blaine's father though most definitely didn't think it was cute at all. John put his napkin down and stood up while everyone just watched. He left the table, put his coat on and silently walked out the door.

Before he could even realize what he was doing, Blaine was up and out the door, following him. "That's it?" he yelled across the lobby. He didn't care if he was making a scene. "All you're going to do is walk away?"

His father turned, his eyes blazing. "Don't do this Blaine. Not here and not now."

"Then when else Dad? Because if you walk away now I don't know when we might see each other again."

"You really want to talk?" His father drew close, whispering between gritted teeth. "You've lied to me half your life Blaine, kept god knows how many secrets. But now you want to talk? Fine." His father stepped back, putting his hands on his hips, and let out a breath. "So your trip to Ohio with Cooper."

"Was to see Kurt," Blaine said, holding his chin up high. "Yes."

"And how long has your mother known you two were writing to each other behind my back?"

Blaine refused to answer. "You'll have to ask her."

"How long have you been dating?" his father asked.

Blaine lowered his eyes for a moment, then raised them, refusing to be embarrassed or ashamed. "Since Rachel's Bat Mitzvah. Kurt was invited."

"Kurt was invited," John repeated quietly then let out a loud scoff. "Four years. So everyone knew except me."

Blaine's stomach clenched with scorn. He had no idea how his father dared to play the victim. "Everyone was safe to tell except you!"

Blaine almost expected his father to strike, but instead he could swear he saw sadness, not anger, in his eyes as it felt like minutes passed, the two of them frozen in time.

His father stirred first. "You think you know me so well," he said. His voice was thick with regret.

But Blaine just slowly shook his head. "I don't think I know you at all."

John didn't say another word. Blaine watched his father walk out the door. He wondered if there would be a day when one of them didn't turn their back on the other.

Before tears came to his eyes, he felt Kurt's hand in his and he turned. Pale and beautiful, Kurt's lips turned up in a smile filled with love. Next to him was Rachel, looking worried.

"Jesse and I are doing a Broadway concert tomorrow night," she said softly. "Cooper too since he's back in town. Sing with us?"

His father may have chosen to walk away. But Blaine knew that there were people in his life that never would. Two of the most special ones were there and would always stand beside him. "I would love to," he said.

"I can't believe I am sitting in a room full of Broadway stars," Kurt whispered, as Jesse and Rachel sang another ballad from Spring Awakening. His eyes were full of wonder.

Blaine though just laughed. "Three of those Broadway stars are your boyfriend, your boyfriend's brother and your boyfriend's best friend. And then her boyfriend makes four. You belong here Kurt. Just as much as the rest of them."

Kurt shook his head. "No. I'm just a kid from Ohio, who does Community Theater sometimes and spends the summer at performing arts camp."

"God Kurt," Blaine said, his voice full of amazement as he shook his head. "You are so much more."

They turned back to the stage on Jesse and Rachel's final notes, clapping with the rest of the crowd. Jesse went off to get some water and Rachel took the mic, smiling. "There's nothing I like better when I'm doing these shows than when my best friend is here to join me. Blaine Anderson, I miss you and Broadway misses you. So come on up!"

She clapped and the audience clapped and Blaine leaned over to Kurt. "Trust me?" he whispered before he left without an answer and jumped onto the stage. Kurt could do nothing but stare nervously after him.

"I miss Broadway every day," Blaine started. He took the mic Rachel handed him and turned to the crowd of friends and mentors, agents and fans. He sat down on a stool center stage. He'd given his music to the pianist earlier that night, his decision made as he'd laid awake the night before, rolling over in his mind everything his father and Kurt had ever said to him. "I started my Broadway career on the top of a barricade. And I started my life one night at the bottom. A curtain call. A stage door. And an 8 year old boy stood on the other side of a different barricade, and asked, "Could you sign my poster?" Blaine looked down at Kurt and smiled. "I said, my name is Blaine. And he said his name was Kurt. And later that night I told my mom that Kurt was the most beautiful boy that I had ever seen." He found himself blushing and glanced at the floor, then looked back up. "It's been almost 8 years since then. He sang for me backstage that day and I was blown away by the beauty of his voice. And today's he's gonna sing for you."

Kurt stared up at him dumbfounded, and shook his head wildly, but Blaine would not take no for an answer. "We've grown so much Kurt. From such dark places. *But the strongest roses will fair thrive on being neglected. If the soil is rich enough.*" Kurt's eyes shifted as he recognized the words from Secret Garden. Blaine nodded to the piano and sang.

*When a thing is wick, it has a life about it
Now, maybe not a life like you and me
But somewhere there's a single streak of green inside it
Come, and let me show you what I mean*

He held out a hand to Kurt. Kurt flashed back to years ago when he swam in the center of a lake, Cooper and his Dad talking on the beach. Blaine raced out. And Kurt had called, *Colin Craven not so fast*. He followed Blaine then and he would follow Blaine now. He slipped out of his seat and went to the front of the stage. He took Blaine's hand and stepped up. He smiled as Blaine sang to him, a song that reminded him of them. Of the last 8 years, struggling to break free. To find a life and a light that had started in that theater, and waited until the time was right.

*When a thing is wick, it has a light around it
Maybe not a light that you can see
But hiding down below a spark's asleep inside it
Waiting for the right time to be seen*

*You clear away the dead parts
So the tender buds can form
Loosen up the earth and let the roots get warm
Let the roots get warm*

*Come a mild day, come a warm rain
Come a snowdrop, a comin' up
Come a lily, come a lilac
Come to call, callin' all of us to come and see*

Blaine grabbed the second microphone and handed it to Kurt. And Kurt sang his first solo in a Broadway crowd, eyes never straying from Blaine's, calm coursing through his veins.

*When a thing is wick
And someone cares about it
And comes to work each day
Like you and me*

Kurt smiled. "Will it grow?" he asked. But he already knew the answer. Whatever the fight, no matter what happened, the two of them would work every day to make their love grow.

Blaine knew it too and his eyes sparkled. "It will," he promised.

*Then have no doubt about it
We'll have the grandest garden ever seen*

Blaine took Kurt's hand and they joined in harmony, their voices rising. They sang of themselves and of their love.

*You give a living thing
A little chance to grow
That's how you will know
If she is wick, she'll grow
So grow to greet the morning
Leave the ground below
When a thing is wick
It has a will to grow and grow*

*Come a mild day, come a warm rain
Come a snowdrop, a-comin' up
Come a lily, come a lilac
Come to call, calling all the rest to come
Calling all of us to come
Calling all the world to come*

But Blaine also sang of the hope he had for his father and himself. That somewhere there was still a streak of green between them. And even though it seemed dark now, that someday, when the time was right, their love and respect for one another would grow again.

*Oh, somewhere there's single streak of green below
And all through the darkest nighttime
It's waiting for the right time
When a thing is wick, it will grow!*

Kurt's voice rose to the rafters, his high soprano blowing away everyone in the room, and it erupted in applause. Rachel came out and hugged them both. Jesse shook their hands and as they both jumped off the stage, Cooper slapped both of them on their backs.

The rest of the show slipped by like background noise in Kurt's head. His grin never left his face. If he hadn't known before, he knew for sure now. This was what he wanted. Broadway. This community. These people that would love him and cherish him for the strengths he had. For the things that made him special. And as he turned his chair so he could lean back against Blaine's chest, he felt that he would be hard pressed to find a more perfect moment in his life.

Two standing ovations and encores later, Kurt was still glowing when he heard the clearing of a throat behind him. He turned to find himself staring at Harvey Fierstein. His eyes opened wide. His jaw dropped.

"You were very good young man. You and Blaine both have real futures on that stage. I'll be a lucky man when you both come back to New York," he said.

"I...I mean....thank you Mr. Fierstein..." Kurt stammered and Blaine turned back just as the man walked away.

"Kurt are you okay?" he asked.

"No...Harvey Fierstein...he just..."

Blaine grinned. "I know, it's crazy isn't it? Maybe some day Kurt."

"Excuse me," a man interrupted them and Kurt wondered if he would pass out when he turned around at whoever it was. When he did though, he didn't recognize the man holding out a business card. "Robert Howell. I'm with the Gersh Agency. Kurt, right?" Now it was Blaine's turn for his jaw to drop while Kurt's scrunched in confusion while he nodded. "I'd be interested in bringing you in to meet with some of our agents."

"Oh," Kurt said, his eyes opening wide as he realized exactly what he was being handed in the card. "God, I would...I would love to but, I live in Ohio. I go to school there."

"We have schools in New York," the man said. "And we have summers. If you're in the city a few more days then call to schedule an appointment. Don't worry about where you are at the moment."

Kurt took the card and turned it in his fingers. "Yeah, sure. I just...I have to check with my Dad and I'll give you a call."

The man smiled and walked away and Kurt, wondering if this was all just a ridiculous dream, slowly turned to Blaine. Blaine who looked a cross between shocked and elated. "Kurt...did you...the Gersh Agency..."

"Do you think I could really get signed Blaine?" he asked softly. "With a real Broadway agent?"

"I think when a thing is wick it will grow," Blaine said, eyes glowing with pride. "And I think that getting to watch you grow is going to be one of the most amazing things I ever get to do."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Round and Round and Back Where You Began

December 27, 2008

Kurt paced outside the twelve story gray office building that housed the Gersh agency. He wrung his hands and muttered to himself as both Burt and Blaine tried to get him to relax.

"Kurt, son, you know you don't have to do this," Burt told him for maybe the fifth time. "If you're not ready-"

"I'm ready," Kurt said firmly, though his nerves might have thought otherwise.

"He's ready," Blaine agreed and he caught Kurt by the shoulders stopping him. He waited as Kurt's eyes reached his and focused, and then he smiled softly. "You're ready. Just go in there and be yourself. They'll love you as much as I do."

"And if they don't?" Kurt bit his lip. He wanted to believe Blaine, but those negative voices in his head were shouting louder.

"If they don't," Blaine said honestly, "then there are others who will. Gersh isn't the only agency in town, but an interview with them means a lot. And besides, you're not even planning to come to NY for another two and a half years. What are you so nervous for?"

Kurt caught the twinkle in his boyfriend's eye and the smirk on his lips, and his body suddenly let go of its tension. "You're right," he said, taking a deep breath. He laughed and shook his head and laughed some more. "You're absolutely right. I'm being ridiculous."

"You're being adorable," Blaine said, kissing him on his forehead. Blaine looked up at Burt who just watched them with a look of wonder on his face. "Okay, he's all yours."

"Thanks," Burt smirked.

He hooked a finger beneath Kurt's chin and pulled him in for a quick kiss. "Break a leg. Love you."

"Love you too," Kurt said and he and his Dad walked inside.

The agent's office was smaller than Kurt expected. The walls were white and covered with headshots. Some of the actors Kurt recognized, some he didn't. As he sat on the rough upholstered couch, waiting for the agent to finish reading through his resume, part of him felt like he was in way over his head. But he also understood that this wasn't a meeting with the guy in the corner office. This was a first interview, nothing more.

"So tell me about yourself." The agent, Mr. Janson, reminded Kurt a bit of his father. On the shorter side, on the rounder side, on the balder side, Kurt thought, and the thought made him smile. Mr. Janson sat back in his leather chair, hands clasped on his lap and his knees brushing the desk. And much like his father, he had a way about him that put Kurt more at ease than he thought he would.

"Well, so I'm 15 years old, I'll be 16 in May." Kurt settled in, trying not to think too hard. He and Blaine had gone over how to interview. He knew he should tell the agent a little bit about himself personally, but focus mainly on his professional experience. "I was born and raised in Ohio. I used to go to public school but my dad transferred me to private school this year when the bullying got too bad. It's been great because I've been able to join Dalton's show choir, the Warblers. Blaine solos most of the time of course, but they're very focused on technique so I'm learning a lot. Before that I went to a performing arts school for years. Took voice, dance and musical theater. We did the Nutcracker every year. When I was 9 I played Winthrop in Music Man. I went to a performing arts camp in the summer too. Played Oliver there and a bunch of other roles."

"So your focus is on musical theater then?" Mr. Janson asked.

Kurt bit his lip. "Well, I hadn't really thought much about doing anything else," he admitted. "I met Blaine and Rachel when I was 8 and since then I've just wanted to do what they do."

"But you're getting older now," the agent pointed out and Kurt was suddenly worried he was giving the wrong answers. "You might want to consider looking into TV and movies. More shows are starting to add music. Look at the Disney Channel."

Kurt couldn't stop himself before scrunching his nose. "I don't think I'm really the Disney Channel type."

"Then how do you see yourself?"

Kurt was prepared for the question. He'd known for years what he wanted to do, how he saw himself. But he also knew that it was completely different from how Blaine saw him, and he was still trying to reconcile the two. "It's hard because as a kid, you think there aren't really choices or types, you just play the kid roles. But I learned quickly there's a difference." He and Blaine were very different. He'd come to understand that it would be rare for them ever to compete for a role. "I'm Oliver, not Dodger. I'm Colin, not Dicken. Glinda, not Elphaba," he laughed and the agent laughed too. "It's hard to come up with someone that I'm like, because honestly, there's no one like me. And I don't mean that in a *I'm unique and special* kinda way. I just mean, there are few to none openly gay teenage actors that want to play meaty roles. I don't want to be the punchline. I'd much rather throw the punch."

"So what are your plans?"

What were his plans? He wanted to be on Broadway. He wanted to spend his days singing and dancing and acting and making little boys and girls in the audience feel something, the way he had felt something. He wanted other kids to know that no matter what happened to them, who hurt them or what people said to them, they could have a beautiful and brilliant future. He wanted to be the someone to show them. "I plan to finish high school. I think that's important. And then I plan to come to New York and make it on Broadway. And from on that stage, I'm gonna make a difference in the world."

Mr. Janson smiled at him. "I believe you might."

January 15, 2009

Blaine, help me, this class is so boring. I know that I'm not supposed to know as much as the teacher because I'm just a public school kid but this is French Blaine. I didn't learn it in school I taught myself and I am apparently a better teacher than Mrs. Ardoin. I could talk circles around her. I should be in 11th grade French. Please come kidnap me and bring me to your class!

I wish we didn't have Warblers practice tonight. Not because I don't want to see you because I really do, but I also really wanted to go to the fashion show tonight over at Crawford. I want to be a part of the fashion show.

Why does Dalton not have a fashion design program, why?! If I'm gonna win a Tony someday the only name on the red carpet I want to be using is my own.

I think I'm losing my mind. Or should I say, Je pense que je perds mon esprit.

Maybe it was a mistake for us to come back from NY. Maybe if we didn't come back we'd be rehearsing for West Side Story at the Palace as we speak.

I don't even know what I'm saying. It's not like my Dad would actually let me drop out of High School and run away to Broadway.

Bell's gonna ring.

Kurt

January 15, 2009

Oh my gosh Kurt, it feels so good to be back. Back with friends, back with grass and trees and back with alone time with you if we ever make it out of these damn classes.

Who thought classes were a good thing at a private school? It should just be singing and dancing and hanging out with friends. Although maybe that's more like a resort. Which costs less I'm sure. Actually, it sounds like Broadway.

I shouldn't be writing notes. Pre-Calculus is easy but Mrs. Beixle is a hardass when it comes to people passing notes in her class and if I get detention instead of being able to go to Warblers practice, I am a dead man. Although technically I'm not PASSING a note in her class, I'm simply WRITING a note in her class, and I will PASS it in the hallway when I slip it into your locker. Which is totally okay.

WHY DON'T WE HAVE A SINGLE CLASS TOGETHER IT'S LIKE EVEN THOUGH WE GO TO THE SAME SCHOOL AND WE NEARLY LIVE TOGETHER I STILL DON'T EVER GET TO SEE YOU!

Ah well. I guess it's better that way. I can still keep SOME things a mystery. Like...like....well, you'll never know!

Blaine

From: SLOpez at yahoo dot com

To: banderbro at hotmail dot com

Date: February 2, 2009

Subject: Why do I suck?

Brittany broke up with me.

I don't know what to do?

It's almost fucking Valentine's Day and she breaks up with me to go out with some dumb boy.

What the fuck Blaine? You and Kurt just make it look so goddamn easy. I don't know how, but somehow this is your fault.

"Can you explain to me how in any conceivable universe, this could possibly be my fault?" Blaine asked.

"It's Santana," Kurt said. They walked hand in hand back to Blaine's dorm, finally together again at the end of a very long day made up of classes, split Warblers rehearsals, a special dinner for the yearbook committee Blaine was invited to, and Kurt trying desperately to drown out the immaturity of Nick and Jeff. This was the last thing he needed to deal with. "She blames everyone else for everything, which may explain why Brittany would rather be with someone else than her." Kurt shrugged. "I don't know what happened. Brittany just said that Santana doesn't always treat her right and she wanted to be with someone who treated her how she deserved. I know they're both my friends, but I couldn't disagree with her. Brittany shouldn't be okay with being Santana's dumping ground. And who knows, maybe Santana will learn her lesson."

Blaine sighed as they reached his room. "I should probably call her tonight."

"Tomorrow." Kurt grabbed his hand and smiled up at him, that coy flirtatious smile that melted Blaine's heart. Blaine closed the gap between them and wrapped an arm around his waist. "Call her tomorrow."

"Call who?" Blaine breathed before he leaned in and their lips met. It was gentle, loving. Blaine teased at Kurt's lips and slid his tongue between them when Kurt smiled.

Kurt laughed and mused at how far they had come. And how much further he wanted to go. He wanted to touch and he wanted to taste and he didn't know why, maybe it was because he'd started to feel older since New York, more on par with Blaine rather than still trying to catch up. Maybe it was just the thrill of looking forward to Valentine's Day or maybe it was just the joy in knowing that while some relationships didn't last, that he and Blaine were good. So good.

"Do you remember the first time we kissed like that?" Kurt wondered aloud.

Blaine nodded and moved from Kurt's lips to suckle at the skin beneath his ear. "Of course I do," he whispered, before nipping softly. "I loved it."

Kurt shivered beneath Blaine's ministrations and he slid his hand down Blaine's side, stroking ever so softly over Blaine's hip.

"You know you can touch me Kurt, it's okay," Blaine whispered. Kurt skated his fingers over the swell of Blaine's ass, flattening his palm, his breath hitching at the feel of Blaine's perfect curves in his hand. It wasn't the first time, but Kurt was still shy about it. "God that feels amazing," Blaine said and he pressed into Kurt until they discovered one another's hardness.

Blaine led Kurt back to the bed and laid down on his side, keeping his hand atop Kurt's so that it never strayed from where it made his heart leap and his toes curl and all the blood in his body flow with warmth. Kurt laid down next to him, his head resting on one arm while his other hand explored. He watched Blaine's face, lips curled into a satisfied smile, eyes closed heavily. And he couldn't help but wonder. "What do you think it feels like?"

Blaine's eyes fluttered open to a flush creeping across Kurt's cheeks. "What do I think what feels like?" Blaine asked.

Kurt's words escaped him. But he slipped his hand beneath Blaine's shirt and traced a finger from his hip to just beneath the button of Blaine's slacks. "If I kissed you here," he whispered. "Or maybe...maybe a little lower?"

Blaine's heart raced, his stomach suddenly fluttering with anticipation and nerves, but he forced himself to stay calm. Wondering and imagining didn't mean that they were ready. Still... "I think it would feel amazing." He brushed his fingers softly through Kurt's hair.

Kurt had no idea where his courage came from other than knowing that he loved Blaine and he wanted to be with him more than he was afraid of making a fool of himself. He leaned in and kissed the dip of Blaine's throat, his breath quickening as he felt Blaine swallow beneath him. He licked his lips and the taste of Blaine's skin, both salty and sweet, made him eager for more. He slowly unbuttoned Blaine's shirt, kissing gently down his chest each time new skin was revealed.

Blaine purred above him, head thrown back, his hips stirring reflexively with every press of Kurt's lips against him, with the cool breeze against damp skin each kiss left in its wake. Blaine swelled against the zipper of his pants and to keep his hands from interfering with whatever Kurt had planned, he stretched them above his head, grasping at his pillow.

Kurt's heart raced and his hands were trembling, but he wanted this. Every nerve in his body stirred, every hair on his arms and the nape of his neck awoke. He brushed his thumb carefully down the side of Blaine's zipper, sucking in a breath as he felt him hard beneath the fabric, felt Blaine reach for him. He wanted nothing more than to answer and he leaned down, pressing his lips to Blaine's length.

The room quickly spun in Blaine's head, his chest clenched and he flinched away without thought. Kurt immediately sat up to find Blaine's eyes opening wide, brow drawn, before his gaze shifted to Kurt's and softened. Blaine's breathing, which had grown quick, started to slow, and he gave a sheepish smile. "Guess I'm not quite ready for that," he said and he chuckled softly.

The look of alarm on Kurt's face transformed into a smile and he leaned up and gave Blaine a quick kiss on the lips. "Well, when you are, I'm more than happy to try again."

"Aw, I'm sorry," Blaine said, feeling bad. "I don't know what happened. Just a dizzy spell I guess," he laughed. "Blood rushing too quickly from my head to somewhere else."

"Well then if it's okay with you..." He pressed a kiss to the sensitive skin beneath Blaine's ear, where the musk of his cologne filled Kurt's sense, and he smiled at the moan that rumbled deep in Blaine's throat. "I'll just keep kissing you right here."

Blaine grinned and wrapped his arms around his boyfriend. "Totally okay," he said.

There were moments at Dalton that made Kurt want to go screaming for the hills. While the uniform looked amazing on Blaine, he felt trapped in it. And while the classes were definitely far better than at McKinley, he often felt buried beneath the homework. He missed his performing arts school. He missed his girls.

He didn't miss the bullying at all.

There were also moments at Dalton that made Kurt's heart sing. Like walking across campus hand in hand with Blaine, the day before the Valentine's Day dance, where the Warblers would be performing, and he would be dancing in the arms of the boy he loved.

But right now they were headed to rehearsal. A rehearsal that was likely to go on far too long worrying more about precision than artistic integrity. And Kurt would have rather done nearly anything else that evening than spend another three hours two stepping until fifteen boys were completely in unison.

"So after days of her not answering my calls, I finally talked to Santana last night," Blaine said.

Kurt side-eyed him. Blaine sounded guilty. He looked guilty. "And?"

"And she told me she was going to run away to New York and become a Broadway star."

"Shocking. And you told her...?"

Blaine looked over at Kurt, stern Kurt who was pressing his lips together as if he knew that there was more to this story.

Blaine sometimes wondered how Kurt was possibly younger than him. If there wasn't a birth certificate to prove it, he wouldn't believe it.

"I told her she was being foolish. I asked her where she would live. She said it didn't matter. She didn't want to be at McKinley anymore. I told her she'd end up homeless and begging on the street. She told me it was better than seeing Brittany every day at school."

Kurt rolled his eyes. "And they say I'm the dramatic one."

"She's lonely Kurt," Blaine told him and there was that tell-tale guilt in Blaine's voice again. "It's just before Valentine's Day and she doesn't want to be around Lima."

Kurt's eyes opened wide and he stopped just steps away from the music building. "You didn't."

Blaine scrunched up his face and shrugged slightly. "I maybe did?"

Hands flew to Kurt's hips. "You invited her to our Valentine's Day dance?" Blaine didn't say anything. He didn't have to. "Blaine," Kurt whined. There was the youth, Blaine quickly thought and he also had to quickly hold back his smile. "We're gonna end up babysitting her the whole night."

"You *are* the dramatic one," Blaine teased. Kurt gaped before turning and walking off. Blaine jogged up beside him laughing and he grabbed back Kurt's hand. Kurt didn't refuse but he didn't stop walking either. "We aren't going to babysit her Kurt. There are plenty of girls at Crawford who would be more than happy to show her a good time. I guarantee that she'll end up in the center of the gaggle of girls in the corner that don't mix with the Dalton boys."

"Promise? Because after we perform, I don't want to do anything but dance with you all night long."

Blaine pulled Kurt to a stop and wrapped his arms around his boyfriend's waist. "With that proposal, how can I do anything other than promise?"

Kurt was pretty sure there wasn't anywhere he'd rather be than in the Dalton ballroom, head resting on Blaine's shoulder, while they swayed in each other's arms. The lights were a dim romantic blue, the music was just the right mix of fast and slow and the room smelled of the chocolate fountains that flowed on the tables against every wall.

It was the most perfect Valentine's Day he'd ever had and even Santana hadn't ruined it for him. Blaine had been right. She had quickly become the center of attention of not only the Crawford girls but some of the Dalton boys, and he could see how her swagger and confidence had returned in just a few hours. The fact that Blaine had invited her, had thought enough of her to try and help, made Kurt love him even more.

"Can we just stay like this forever?" Kurt asked. His cheek brushed against the wool of Blaine's blazer. His smell infused it and Kurt couldn't get enough. But best of all was the feel of Blaine's hand on the small of his back, his thumb gently stroking back and forth. Kurt was pretty sure Blaine didn't even know he was doing it.

There was a little boy inside of him who had never believed that he would ever dance in another boy's arms, especially this ridiculously talented and handsome boy beyond Kurt's most vivid dreams, and that little boy was crying tears of joy. And if one of those tears just happened to find its way onto the lapel of Blaine's blazer, well, he knew no one could blame him.

"Forever is a long time," Blaine said, kissing him softly on the temple. "The music would end, everyone would leave. I think we'd get hungry, tired."

"Don't care," Kurt muttered.

"I do." Blaine pulled back just enough to urge Kurt's head up. His soulful hazel eyes shined. "Because there's so much more I want to do with you than just dance."

The room may have been filled with two hundred other teenagers, but to Kurt there was no one but Blaine and him, surrounded by darkness. "Do you..." His gaze fell to the ballroom floor. "Do you think we're too young to hope this is forever?"

"No," Blaine said, shaking his head. He remembered what Miriam had told Kurt at the nursing home. "I think we're still young enough to hope." Kurt smiled, but it was tinged with sadness. "What's the matter?" Blaine asked.

"Summer is coming too fast," Kurt said.

Blaine sighed and pulled him into his arms, holding him tight. "We have three more months. And then we have letters and email and phone calls. Just like always."

"I always worry you'll find someone else," Kurt admitted.

"There is no one else for me." Blaine stepped back and lifted Kurt's chin before kissing him, soft and warm.

Kurt melted into it, not caring who would see and he felt his doubts fade away. When he pulled away, he bit his bottom lip, his eyes smiling. "I think I might need that reminder pretty often, you know," he teased.

Blaine laughed. "Anytime," he said before leaning in and kissing him again.

From Burt to Kurt: Your paperwork from camp came today. Should I send it to you?

From Kurt to Burt: I've been thinking...I don't want to go to camp this year.

From Burt: It wouldn't be the same this year, you'd be a counselor.

From Kurt: I don't want to go.

From Burt: Does this have to do with Blaine?

From Kurt: No. As far as we know he's going to LA with Cooper.

From Burt: Then what would you do? Work in the shop and do the summer programs at the performing arts school?

From Kurt: I want to go to NY.

From Burt: No.

From Kurt: WHY? I'll be 16 years old, I'll be safer in NY then I ever was in Lima.

From Burt: Where would you live? Even if I could afford to get you a place you're not old enough to live alone.

From Kurt: Maybe one of Blaine's friends would let me stay with them for the summer. Rachel or Sam or Jake?

From Burt: Alright Kurt, I know there's more to the story than this, so spill it.

Kurt looked over to Blaine, sprawled out next to him on the bed reading every word of the exchange. In front of them sat a notebook, one paper filled with very detailed information.

"You have to just tell him the truth Kurt," Blaine said. "He'll need to sign the contracts anyway."

Kurt sighed. "I was just hoping he'd say yes before I tell him I went behind his back."

"You didn't go behind his back. They called asking for an audition tape. You sent it in. You had no idea that they'd cast you straight from that."

From Burt: Spill now or I call.

From Kurt: I got cast in a show in NY if you let me go please let me go please Rachel already said I could stay with her and Blaine's mom will keep an eye out for me I know she will.

The phone rang. Kurt sighed as he stood up and answered it. Kurt's eyes begged Blaine to stay but Blaine knew this was between Kurt and his father. He went out into the common room and sat back on the sofa, wishing he was in his own dorm instead of Kurt's. He wanted a piano. He wanted to sing. He wanted to tell his brother forget it, he would spend the summer in New York if Kurt was there because really, hadn't they spent enough summers apart? He was pretty sure he could get work of some kind. He got emails all the time with offers. If only his father wasn't around, it would be simple. Spend the summer at home like any other kid. Kurt could do his show and stay with him. But as long as his father lived in that apartment, none of that was possible.

Kurt came out of the room, looking neither happy nor sad, and he sat down on the arm of the leather couch. "He's gonna call the agent. Find out more. Union status, per diem, that sort of thing."

Blaine nodded, impressed. "Your father's been reading up," he said.

"He's not happy I didn't tell him. Said he shouldn't let me go just because of that. But he also said that if it really was a good opportunity and if Rachel's parents really don't mind me staying there, then he wouldn't stop me."

Blaine opened his arms to him. "Well that's something," he said, and Kurt scooted down and rested his back against Blaine's chest. Blaine stroked Kurt's arm softly, up and down. He'd been where Kurt was at,

too many times. There was one difference though. "Your father's a fair man Kurt. Don't forget that. He'll decide what's right for *you*. Not what's right for *him*."

"I know," Kurt sighed.

"I'm jealous really," Blaine admitted.

Kurt lifted his chin to look over his head at Blaine. "Of my dad?"

"Well yes, but no. Of you. Getting to work this summer. I miss it so much."

Kurt sat up and turned around. "I thought you were going to try to book something in LA?"

Blaine stared down at his hands. That had been the plan, but something had stopped him. "I haven't let them submit me for anything."

"Why?"

He'd sat in his room at night asking the same question. Every time his agent in LA brought him a project he'd turned it down and even Cooper had been getting frustrated with him. But finally he'd figured it out. "I miss my friends," Blaine said. "I miss New York, so much. Being there this winter, it made me remember. I just..." His shoulders drooped, his voice broke. "I just want to go home, you know? I love Cooper and I love LA, but..." He looked up at Kurt. "But New York is home. And I hate that my Dad has taken it away from me."

"Come with me to New York then," Kurt said, unable to stop himself from bouncing in excitement. He took Blaine's hands and held them between the two. "I don't know what we'll do, or how we'll do it, but we'll figure something out, I promise."

Blaine didn't think it was going to be as easy as Kurt did. He had no place to live, no money coming in, and at least one parent he still had to answer to. But he would never want to disappoint the beautiful boy beaming in front of him. "I'll try," he said, kissing him softly. He'd do whatever he had to to try.

May 15, 2009

The Warblers sang for graduation. Kurt and Blaine kept glancing at one another with both tears and smiles. They were both all packed. Kurt would go home and Blaine would go to LA. And in July they would meet in New York. Blaine had managed to apply, interview and be accepted to the Stella Adler Advanced Teen Program. He'd gotten a union waiver for the performance and he was actually very excited to be forced to work on his acting skills without being able to hide behind his singing or dancing. It was time, he decided, to put all his cards on the table and see what he was truly made of. And besides, 5 weeks in NY, stress-free housing away from his parents, and weekends free to spend with Kurt – it sounded like the best summer ever.

Kurt was ready for adventures of his own. The show he'd been cast in was an experimental production of a new play off-off-Broadway. It wasn't glamorous by any means, but it was his first professional New York City production and he couldn't have been more thrilled. Truth was, in the moments he let himself think about it, he was terrified. But then he would remember he would have Blaine and Rachel by his side, and he knew that everything would be okay. Better than okay.

After the graduation ceremony was over they kissed goodbye, promising to write.

"It's just 6 weeks, and then we'll be together," Blaine reminded Kurt.

"In New York City," Kurt grinned.

Blaine winked. "Without our parents."

Kurt raised a brow. "With roommates," he gently reminded.

Blaine gathered Kurt in his arms. "I just want to spend all the time I can with you," he said. "All that other stuff, it can wait. I just want to be able to walk through Central Park hand in hand, go to a Broadway show together, just you and me."

"I want to meet for coffee, every morning before rehearsals," Kurt said.

"I want to hear about your rehearsals every night. Study our lines together."

"I want to pretend, just for 6 weeks, that we're all grown up, done with school, filling our days with rehearsals, our nights with shows-"

"It isn't pretend Kurt," Blaine said. For Kurt this was all new, but Blaine had lived that life for much of his childhood. Only now, he wouldn't be alone. "This is it. This is what the rest of our lives could be like."

Kurt kissed him, soft and slow. "It sounds absolutely perfect."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

So Dark and Deep, The Secrets You Keep

July 8, 2009

From Blaine to Kurt (12:20pm): Okay, this girl in my class would totally be Straight Blaine's future wife.

From Kurt to Blaine (12:22pm): *Does Straight Blaine's future wife have a name?*

From Blaine to Kurt (12:25pm): Her name is Shaina. She's beautiful. Filipina, beautiful dark hair, dark eyes, a quirky smile.

From Kurt to Blaine (12:30pm): *I'm sensing a bit of a pattern here mister. Santana better watch out.*

From Blaine to Kurt (12:33pm): She's much sweeter than Santana. And Rachel. I think I might have found my new best friend.

From Kurt to Blaine (12:36pm): *Okay, now I'M offended at that one. She can be Straight Blaine's future wife but I don't know about gay Blaine's best friend.*

From Blaine to Kurt (12:39pm): Then tell me again about that tall, blonde, and handsome leading man you've been drooling over?

From Kurt to Blaine (12:44pm): *He's very tall, very blonde, very handsome, very straight and very much older than me. And he's certainly not going to be my new best friend. I have my very own little Filipino for that.*

From Blaine to Kurt (12:49pm): See? Filipino's make the best best friends.

From Kurt to Blaine (12:52pm): *5:00 cannot come fast enough.*

From Blaine to Kurt (12: 55pm): But 1:00 has come too fast. Lunch is over for us both. Meet you at the coffee shop?

From Kurt to Blaine (12:58pm): Are you bringing Straight Blaine's future wife with you?

Blaine didn't answer. There were some things he wasn't even ready to put into writing yet. But every single part of him screamed with the hope that he was meeting gay Blaine's future husband.

If someone had asked Kurt Hummel at the age of 8 what *Perfect* would look like, it would have been these five weeks. Five weeks in New York working on a professional production. Five weeks in New York living with three Broadway Stars, one of whom was quickly becoming a best friend. And of course, five weeks in New York with his favorite Broadway Star, who he already could call best friend *and* boyfriend. Maybe someday would call even more than boyfriend.

It seemed completely surreal, like he was living in a dream world. Like soon he'd wake up and find that Karofsky had just thrown him into a locker and cracked his head open and this had all just been in his imagination. But he decided that if it was, he was going to enjoy every single piece of it that he could.

Between Blaine, Rachel and Rachel's dads, they could pretty much see any Broadway show they wanted to for free. The three of them would walk down the sidewalk holding hands, to *Billy Elliot* and *Shrek*, *Next to Normal* and *Rock of Ages*. But Rachel wouldn't let them ignore the classics. *West Side Story* and *Hair* were incredible and *Waiting for Godot* was, well, it was an ongoing argument between Kurt and Rachel for about a week about what exactly it was, before Blaine forced an end to it.

But even Broadway wasn't the best part of the five weeks. No, lying in the sun at Central Park, running lines with Blaine, forcing memorization with the mark of kisses on his body, a technique he was more than happy to learn and reciprocate...that was the best part.

"Rachel's dads invited you over for dinner tonight," Kurt said, looking up at Blaine from where he lay on his stomach, chin in his hands, the ground tickling at his thighs. Blaine, who was sprawled out, leaning back on his hands, like he was sunbathing at the beach.

"Rachel's dads invite me over for dinner every night," Blaine replied. He nudged Kurt's elbow with his toe. Blaine always liked to take his shoes off and feel the blades of grass beneath his feet. He had ever since he was little, when Central Park had been some of the only grass he'd ever seen. "Come on, keep going."

Kurt sighed. He looked back at Blaine's script. "Do you really believe that someday the stars will swallow us up and lead us on adventure beyond our wildest imagination?" Kurt read.

Blaine smiled. He lay back on the ground, clasping his hands beneath his head and he squinted into the sun. "I believe that there's life out there," he performed wistfully. "And I believe that someday I will see it. Whether the stars swallow us up or we just fly straight through them." Blaine paused. He bit his lip. Kurt waited, but Blaine sighed. "Shit, line."

"Don't you want to-" Kurt started.

"Don't you want to see the stars with me Jackie?" Blaine finished. "Don't you want to walk amongst the souls of the dead?"

"That's so stupid," Kurt said.

Blaine sat up, his forehead creased. "That's not the line Kurt."

"But don't you think it's stupid? To think that the souls of the dead walk amongst the stars?"

Blaine pulled his knees up to his chest and hugged them as he shrugged. "I don't know. Wouldn't it be nice? If when they died the people we loved were still out there?"

Kurt didn't think so. "Doesn't do us any good. They're still gone. We still can't hear them or see them. We still forget, what they even looked like or sounded like."

Blaine took the script from Kurt's hands and pulled him up, kissing his fingers softly. "Sometimes I think even the things we forget stay with us. They're still there, inside us, even if we don't remember them. They're still a part of us. They still changed us, even if we don't remember how."

Kurt looked up at him and smirked. "How very philosophical."

"Well, I can be known as a deep thinker sometimes," Blaine teased. "Or a deep kisser even."

Blaine moved in for the kiss, but Kurt ducked and looked around. "Blaine," he protested. "We should not do this here. And we should actually probably go. It's getting late."

Blaine sat back with a playful huff. "Fine. But I'm not forgetting where we've left off."

"In the script?" Kurt asked.

"No, in the kiss."

Blaine loved learning. He always had. He'd always been jealous of Rachel and Kurt and Santana and Britt for being able to take a hundred acting and dance and voice and musical theater classes while he had to beg for vocal training and hide in the shadows backstage to learn how to dance. But now, he was in the thick of it, working with some of the best in the business, finding parts of himself he had never even known existed.

It was exhausting in the best possible of ways and what he loved more than anything was being able to relax with his new friends at the studio and of course, his oldest and dearest friends.

He knew that he'd have to accept the Berrys' invitation at some point, so on his third Friday night in the city he politely declined to join the rest of his classmates at the local teen dance club they'd been going to all summer, and he headed over to Rachel's. It wasn't that he didn't like her fathers. He truly did. Every evening he'd ever spent with them over the last four years had been delightful, ending in an evening of Broadway crooning.

But despite himself, there was always that feeling of defiance when he was with them. A skin crawl that felt like his dad was watching him, disapproving. And he hated that he felt that, he hated that he still let his father's prejudice influence the things he did and felt. After all, if it weren't for Hiram and Leroy he didn't know how long it would have been before he and Kurt had finally gotten together. Maybe never. He owed them so much. He owed them so much more than he owed his own father.

And maybe that was some of what bothered him too.

"Hey," Kurt said, grabbing his hand. Blaine blinked and looked up at him, his eyes refocusing. "You look like you were far away."

Blaine looked around. The rest had gotten up and cleared their dishes from the table but somehow Blaine was still sitting there, held in place by memories. His cheeks flushed and he gave a shy, embarrassed smile.

"Sorry," he said and he got up to clear his own plates to the kitchen. Kurt walked with him. "Just remembering the Bat Mitzvah." He put his dishes in the sink and turned around. "Seeing them kiss. Knowing, for the first time."

Kurt smiled and snuck his arms around Blaine's waist, pushing him back against the sink. He didn't say a word, but his eyes fell to Blaine's lips. Blaine's heart began to race, like it was their first time all over again, and then Kurt leaned in, kissing him with a tenderness they hadn't remembered in a while. Blaine inhaled, his breath caught in the beauty of it, and he pressed his hands to the small of Kurt's back, pulling him toward him, pulling them together. Kurt's stomach fluttered as he smiled beneath Blaine's lips, and Blaine took the opportunity to deepen the kiss, bringing his hand to the back of Kurt's head, holding him in a way that felt intoxicatingly possessive. Kurt moaned into him, wanting everything Blaine had to offer and more, before he remembered where they were and reluctantly ended the kiss. Blaine was still breathing heavily. Kurt pressed his forehead to Blaine's. "Still feels like coffee," he whispered. "Maybe espresso."

"I love you so much," Blaine said and he gave Kurt one more quick kiss before they took hands and walked back into the other room.

"Ah, there are the lovebirds," Leroy smirked, sitting at the piano with Rachel and Hiram around him. "Rachel wanted to go after you but we were a little afraid of what she might walk in on."

"Just putting my dishes away," Blaine said with a blush that gave his not whole truth away.

"Hey, don't you worry, there's absolutely nothing wrong with kissing your boyfriend in this house," Hiram said. Blaine froze. The words were meant as harmless but as soon as they hung in the air, the implication behind them was felt by everyone, and their breath caught in their throats. "Blaine, I'm-"

"It's okay," Blaine said, though it was obviously anything but okay. "I just..." he looked around the room, avoiding every eye but seeking somewhere he could go to regain his composure. The glass door to the fire escape stood across the room. "I'm just going to get some fresh air."

He didn't wait for an answer. He walked over and pulled the door open, wishing the air was cold on his face instead of warmer than inside. Still, the breeze was fresh, as fresh as it ever got in New York, and he took a few deep breaths. He leaned against the railing, staring out at the skyline. The patio door slid open and closed behind him. But it wasn't who he thought it would be.

"You know, your father always loved you," Hiram told him. "More than anything in the world."

Blaine scoffed, shaking his head. "Everyone says that," he mused. "Wait for him Blaine. He'll come around Blaine. He loves you Blaine." Blaine turned, his nostrils flaring, hands flying to his hips. "Why should I even believe that just because he loved me once he can't still hate me now."

"He doesn't hate you," Hiram said, taking one step towards the boy. "Things aren't always as black and white as they seem to be. There aren't always easy answers."

Blaine was sick of that though. He was so sick of all of it. He pressed his lips together and turned back out to the city. "But there is an easy answer. He loves me. Like Kurt's dad loves him and supports him. He didn't kick Kurt out or stop talking to him just because he loves boys instead of girls."

Hiram walked over and put a hand on Blaine's shoulder. "I'm not trying to excuse his behavior Blaine. There's no excuse for the way he's treating you. I'm just saying, he has his reasons and they're not that he hates you."

His mother and Cooper had basically told him the same thing. "Why does everyone seem to know what those reasons are except me?"

"I don't. Okay?" Blaine looked at Hiram. He looked sincere. "I just know your mother and I trust her. And all those years he didn't let you visit, she promised he had his reasons. And we could have chosen to be angry about it, but instead we chose to respect it."

"Well I won't," Blaine said. He couldn't even imagine a reason that would make any sense to him. "Not now, not blindly. Maybe someday, if he explains and apologizes..."

"All anyone can ask is that you listen. The rest is up to you." Hiram patted him softly on the shoulder and went back inside.

Blaine stared out. The lights shined in his eyes, the cars echoed in his ears, and somewhere out there was his father. What was he doing now? Was there any possibility he was staring out, looking for him? He knew very well that Blaine was in the city. Why couldn't he just say, "Come home."?

He shook his head and closed his eyes. "*So dark, so dark and deep,*" he sang. "*The secrets that you keep.*"

"In my life..." Blaine turned to see Kurt singing, a soft smile and a twinkle in his eye. "There is someone who touches my life."

Blaine reached out to him. *"Waiting near..."*

Kurt pulled Blaine into his arms, holding him close, and he sang softly in his ear. *"Waiting here."*

From: RBerry at yahoo dot com

To: banderbro at Hotmail dot com

Date: September 29, 2009

Subject: Who's going back to Broadway?

ME! Me and Jesse! Spring Awakening is going to Broadway Blaine! I can't even believe it, I'm so excited!

We start rehearsing next week. Previews in November and we open December 16! You need to be there opening weekend Blaine, I need you to see it! Bring Kurt, or your Mom, bring anyone you want, but promise me you'll be here!

From: banderbro at Hotmail dot com

To: RBerry at yahoo dot com

Date: September 29, 2009

Subject: RE: Who's going back to Broadway?

Apparently I am going back to Broadway to see you! Rachel that's incredible, you guys have worked so hard for this, I'm so excited. Convenient that it opens right after your 18th birthday, huh? ;P

I don't know if Kurt will be able to come, he spent pretty much every last penny he had this summer, but I'll definitely make sure Mom and I are there. I'll let you know if I need a place to crash. Or I can ask Sam if you're not available.

You are amazing Rachel. I'm so proud of you.

Blaine and his mom sat side by side in the center orchestra, watching, entranced, by every word spoken, every lyric sung. Every tear of pain and smile of triumph. The show was absolutely extraordinary and Blaine felt the power of it rush through his veins. He'd read the script for Spring Awakening years ago when it had been in workshop, but the masterpiece it had become since then was just breathtaking.

*Listen to what's in the heart of a child,
A song so big in one so small.
Soon you will hear where beauty lies -
You'll hear and you'll recall...*

*The sadness, the doubt, all the loss, the grief,
Will belong to some play from the past;
As the child leads the way to a dream, a belief
A time of hope through the land...*

At the curtain call Blaine was on his feet in a second. He didn't care what anyone else around him did, he applauded for every single cast member, his friends in chorus, his friends who starred. He teared up when Rachel took her bow and he was sure that she did too.

When the lights came up on the house, Blaine and his mom gathered their things and slipped out the side door to head backstage. Blaine was nearly bouncing with excitement, but when he finally took a second to look at his mother, he realized she had a haunting look on her face, irises circles of a blank stare.

"Mom?" Blaine laid a gentle hand on her arm. "Are you okay?"

She blinked as if coming out of a dream and her gaze slowly shifted to her son. She looked at him differently. It sent a shiver down his spine. It scared him. "Go upstairs to Rachel," she said, voice nearly trembling. "I'll wait down here for you."

Blaine frowned with worry. "She'll want to see you," he said.

Teresa shook her head and tried to smile. "She wants to see you. Go ahead, take your pictures and tell her congratulations for me."

Blaine left his mom with a squeeze of the hand and he rang the buzzer. He said hello to the security guard and followed his directions up to Rachel's dressing room. He knocked on the door and she immediately opened it, screaming when she saw him, jumping into his arms. Blaine couldn't help but laugh. All thoughts of his mother instantly vanished.

"Oh my god Blaine, I'm so glad you could come!" Her eyes gleamed and she practically bounced. "Tell me what you thought. Be honest. I know there are still some rough points we're working on and Jesse's voice was a little tired tonight, but-

"Rachel." Blaine put his hands on her shoulders to stop her. "It was amazing. You were amazing. I can't even believe..." He looked at her. Really looked at her and he wondered when she had stopped being that little girl with ratty hair backstage with him at Les Mis. "I am *so* proud of you," he said with all sincerity. "I couldn't be prouder."

Rachel's eyes welled and she quickly wiped at her eyes. "You can't make me cry," she scolded with a chuckle. "We have to take pictures."

They went back with the rest of the cast and took pictures together and with Jesse and then with everyone. Blaine knew a few other people in the cast and he congratulated them wholeheartedly. It felt amazing to be backstage. No matter where he went, backstage always felt like home.

"Where's your Mom?" Rachel asked, grabbing his hand with a grin and dragging him back to her dressing room. "I thought you came with her."

Blaine had been so excited he'd completely forgotten about his mom downstairs. "I did. She's waiting outside. She didn't want to come up." He shrugged, trying to play it off. "I think she wanted to give us time alone. I should actually get back down to her. I don't want to leave her alone all night."

"Yeah, of course," Rachel said and flipped her hair. "I need to go out to stage door anyway. I'll talk to you later? Call me when you get back to Ohio."

"I will," he promised, kissing her on the cheek. "You really were incredible tonight."

They started walking back to the apartment. The darkness surrounded them, but it wasn't even the fact that night had fallen. There was a shadow hanging over them, hovering there since the moment the curtain fell. Whatever had happened, Blaine's mom hadn't shaken it.

"Mom, please," he said gently. He reached out to her and made her stop. She stared up at him, as if for the first time realizing how much taller than her he was. As if for the first time she was seeing him as a man and not a little boy. "Mom, please tell me what's wrong."

"There's something..." She stopped, eyes falling to the ground.

Blaine looked around and led her to a bench. It was late and the streets were quiet. "Mom, whatever it is, you can tell me."

She looked at him, her eyes boring in to him as if trying to decide if what he said was really true. "Your father..." She took his hand, keeping her eyes trained there, where their fingers laid side by side. "He never wanted you to know. But I think..." She looked out into the city but Blaine knew it wasn't what she saw in front of her eyes. "I think you have a right to know about your own past. *Spring Awakening*...the show..." She met his gaze again and Blaine's heart beat fast. Something in her eyes told him that his life would never be the same. "I think a mother has a responsibility to tell her child the truth about his own body."

Blaine went to Rachel's. He couldn't go home with his mom, even with his father away on business, and there was no way he could go to Sam with this. He needed time. To process. He needed someone to make everything okay again. Rachel saw his face the moment she opened the door and they went up to her room. He curled up with her in her bed like a little boy in the safest arms he knew. And in the dark he whispered to her the secrets his mother had told.

They were quiet for a very long time.

"Are you going to tell Kurt?" she finally asked.

He'd asked himself the same question over and over as he'd raced away from his mother blindly toward Rachel. He'd thought of calling. Texting. But his fear had kept his phone in his pocket. "I don't know if I

should," Blaine admitted. He clutched a throw pillow on her bed and twirled a pink tassel around his finger. "What if he looks at me differently?"

"You're already looking at yourself differently. He'll want to know why."

Blaine tried to wipe away his tears, but they wouldn't stop. His throat felt raw. "It happened so long ago," he whispered.

"It happened today sweetie," Rachel said. She combed her fingers through his mussed hair. "For you it happened today."

"Blaine are you okay?" Kurt asked, his brow scrunched with worry. Blaine had gotten home from New York late the night before. They'd texted a quick goodnight, but that was all he had heard. "You don't look too good. Are you sick? Do you need to go to the infirmary?"

"No I'm fine," Blaine said feebly. His eyes were glossy and there were dark circles underneath them. He'd been up all night, plagued with nightmares. "I just didn't sleep too well."

Kurt was unconvinced, but he ignored the twisting in his stomach that told him something was very wrong. "Okay," he said. "But please go to the nurse if it gets worse. Okay?"

"Yeah," Blaine muttered. The bell rang, and Blaine pulled Kurt close, Kurt's messenger bag stuck between them. Tears came to Kurt's eyes, but he didn't even know why. "I love you," Blaine whispered. He pressed a kiss to Kurt's forehead, letting it linger, as if letting his lips gather one final taste, just in case.

Kurt's chest clenched with worry. "I love you too," he said. A reminder. A reassurance. "I'll see you later."

Blaine pulled away and Kurt watched him walk down the hallway before he turned and went to his own class. He sat down at his desk and pulled out his textbook. An envelope fell out of his bag, fluttering to the ground.

Kurt glanced around before he bent over to get it. Blaine had left him notes in his bag before, love letters adorned with hearts and kisses. This envelope was blank, save for his name *Kurt* written in Blaine's handwriting. Kurt's hand shook. So many scenarios went through his head; Blaine had gotten cast in NY

and was leaving Dalton, Blaine had gotten into a fight with his dad and was being withdrawn from the school. Blaine had cheated on him. Part of him didn't want to know but the rest of him couldn't wait another second to find out, to at least start dealing with whatever waited for him inside. Pulling the letter from the envelope and hiding it inside his textbook, he discreetly opened it, his heart racing.

Dear Kurt,

It's funny how your life can just change on a dime. One minute you think you know who you are and then...

The first time my life changed like that was the best moment of my life. I looked out from the stage and I saw you and somewhere in my heart I knew...I wasn't just me anymore. My heart belonged to you.

But then...sometimes it turns your world upside down again. And everything you thought you were and thought you knew about yourself...you just don't know if it's real anymore.

Do you think a person is born gay? Or do you think the things that happen to them when they're young can make them that way? Do you think that at two years old, something so horrible can happen that it changes who you are?

I don't think my spring awakening was meant to be this.

They'd left me with a babysitter, me and Cooper. A chorus boy from my mom's show. I guess he'd babysat before. She hadn't wanted to go out that night, she said she knew she shouldn't have left me, she just felt like something was wrong. But my dad insisted, told her she was being silly. Told her I'd be fine.

Cooper couldn't sleep that night. Mom said that sometimes when he couldn't sleep he would come into my room to sit in the dark, listen to my music box and watch me breathe as I slept in my crib. But when he walked in that night, I wasn't in my crib. I wasn't alone. I was with him and he was...

I'm angry. I'm angry that my mother and Cooper and my father all knew and no one told me. But I'm also angry that now I know. I think it might have been better, if I never did.

But I guess just like being gay, there was a tiny part of me that has always known. The part that was too young to tell, too young to cry, too young to know that no one should do the things that Cooper saw him do to me.

My head spun. That day that you and I...I told you it was just a dizzy spell, blood rushing from my head too quickly. But I don't think it was. It felt like a jolt through time.

I'm scared Kurt. I'm scared you'll hate me. I'm scared you won't want me anymore. I'm scared you will and I won't be able to. But most of all I'm scared to not because I need this image in my head to go away Kurt. I need you back there instead where you belong.

I'm not ready to talk about this. Not out loud. But if you want to write me back, I'll read it.

I love you.

Blaine

Blaine let the Warblers know that he wouldn't make rehearsal that day. He was exhausted. He'd avoided Kurt. He'd moved through his classes like a ghost, wishing he was invisible like one. He had no idea what was taught that day. He didn't know anything. It was like walking through a skyway full of clouds except the clouds were dark and angry.

He wasn't even sure how he made it back to his dorm room but he did. All he wanted to do was sleep so he let his messenger bag fall to the floor, kicked off his shoes and climbed up onto his bed. He went to pull the covers back when he finally noticed the letter, sitting on top of his pillow. He took it carefully between his fingers. His name was sprawled in Kurt's handwriting. He opened it, most of him scared to death of knowing what was inside. But there was a small part of him, the part that remembered that there was good still left in the world, *that* part had hope.

He put the envelope aside, he crawled beneath the covers lying on his side, the pillow pulled snug between his head and his hand. And with the other, he held up the letter, started to read, and began to cry.

Dear Blaine,

I love you.

I love you.

[illegible]

There is so much more I need to say, but that is what you need to hear. I am SO sorry that somebody hurt you like that. But I love you. All of you. And nothing, NOTHING, is ever going to change that.

The rest I will hold in my heart, until you're ready. I am here. Whatever you need. Whenever you need it.

I love you.

Kurt

Blaine clutched the letter to his chest. He closed his eyes on his tear-soaked pillow, and he fell asleep.

He woke at 3am, his heart pounding in his chest, his breathing shallow, certain he was having a heart attack. He managed to sit up and grab his phone.

From Blaine (3:06am): Kurt. Help. Pls.

The phone rang only a second later. "Blaine." Kurt's voice was shrill with alarm. "What's the matter?"

"Can't...breathe..."

"Okay, I'm coming." Blaine could hear the sheets rustle as Kurt slipped out of bed, pulling pants on and throwing a sweatshirt on over his head. "Can you get downstairs? Outside?"

"I don't know," Blaine said, but he tried and getting up helped the air fill his lungs a little bit more. But he still shook so hard his teeth chattered. He was freezing and burning up all at the same time. "I'll try."

"I'm gonna stay on the phone," Kurt said, breathless himself now as he snuck out of the dorm and ran across campus.

"I don't know where to go Kurt," Blaine cried, his mind spinning. Was he making his way downstairs? Was he floating? Was this dying? "I don't know what to do."

"Just get outside Blaine, get a breath of fresh air."

"So cold," Blaine shivered, nearly dropping the phone. "I can't...I can't stay on the phone."

"That's okay honey, just put it away. Put it in your pocket, I'll be right there," Kurt said.

In an instant Blaine's phone was gone from his hand. He didn't know if he dropped it or put it in a pocket. His hand touched the cold glass of the front door and he didn't remember getting there. He stepped outside, the wind hitting him like a wall and he was hurled back against the bricks.

"It's okay," Kurt said, grabbing him before he crashed, pulling Blaine into his arms. Blaine's knees buckled and they both fell to the ground, Blaine curled up in a fetal position, head resting on Kurt's chest. "It's okay," Kurt soothed. "It's okay. I'm here. No one can hurt you."

"So real..." Blaine breathed.

"It was just a dream Blaine," Kurt told him. Just his imagination. It couldn't possibly have been memory, he'd been too young. "Real is me and you, and this ground beneath us. Real is the stars above us. Open your eyes Blaine, look at them."

Blaine blinked open his eyes and did as Kurt told him. So many flickering lights, on and off, blurring together and then separating.

"That's it," Kurt continued gently. "Breathe with the stars as they twinkle. As the clouds move along the sky. Breathe with me, in and out. Up and down."

"Sing to me?" Blaine asked.

Kurt kissed his head, squeezed him in his arms, and let his voice surround the boy he loved with the first song that came to mind.

*There is a castle on a cloud
I like to go there in my sleep*

*Aren't any floors for me to sweep
Not in my castle on a cloud.*

Blaine's breathing finally slowed, his eyes fluttering closed, lashes falling softly against his skin. Kurt brushed his fingers through his hair, and rocked him gently to the words.

*There is a lady all in white
Holds me and sings a lullaby
She's nice to see and she's soft to touch
She says, Cosette, I love you very much.*

Kurt started to wonder what to do next. Who to call. They couldn't spend the night outside and if they were discovered together in Blaine's room in the morning, there could be trouble. But he couldn't leave Blaine alone, not like this. He wouldn't leave Blaine alone.

*I know a place where no one's lost
I know a place where no one cries
Crying at all is not allowed
Not in my castle on a cloud.*

"It's cold," Blaine complained, and Kurt softly laughed. Because it *was* cold, but Blaine had stopped shivering, the cold in his bones coming now only from the chill in the air, and not the ice trying to form on his heart.

"Let's get you back inside," Kurt said.

They stood up together, opening and closing the door as quietly as possible. They tiptoed like mice up the stairs, Kurt's eyes alert to make sure that no one saw. At Blaine's door he turned the knob carefully, silently, and together they slipped inside. Blaine crossed immediately to the bed and sat down on the edge, hands gripping the comforter, gaze firmly on the ground.

Kurt didn't think. He knew he didn't have that luxury. All he could do was follow his instincts so he sat on the floor at Blaine's feet, legs crossed beneath him. Kurt gazed up at him. He laid his hand cautiously on the back of Blaine's calf, promising himself he'd move at the slightest twitch. But Blaine didn't move.

"What are some of the things you need to say?" Blaine's voice was thick and low with the question. Kurt couldn't quite tell what was behind it.

He didn't think that Blaine was ready to hear. "We don't need to talk about all that now. That can all wait until later."

"Please...I promise it can't be worse than the things I've imagined. The things I've said to myself."

"Blaine-"

"Please. Kurt. I need to know what you're thinking."

Kurt lowered his head, his finger softly caressing the fabric of Blaine's jeans. "You asked if I thought that what happened made you gay." He felt Blaine shift and he looked up. Blaine was gazing back at him, almost begging to know the truth. "When it happens to a straight girl no one asks if she became straight because of it. But when it's a boy or a girl who's gay? Immediately people ask if it made them that way."

"My dad thinks it did," Blaine muttered. "My mom didn't say it outright, but she didn't have to. Everything he's ever done or said, it makes sense now. His guilt. His fear. His overprotection. Everything except walking away from me..."

Kurt reached up and took Blaine's hands and held them between his. He didn't know anything about Blaine's dad, but he did know one thing. "You're gay because you were born that way. Because it's who you are and always have been. Just like me. And if you weren't, you wouldn't love me. So I'm really glad you are."

Blaine started to laugh and cry at the same time. "I don't know what life would be without loving you."

Kurt pulled up onto his knees, pressing his forehead to Blaine's. "Well luckily, we don't have to find out." Blaine just nodded, tears falling between them. And even though Kurt knew that he couldn't fix it, he needed to wipe the memories of the dream away. "Would it be okay if I kissed you?"

Blaine pressed his lips together and looked at Kurt. The words echoed in his ears, déjà vu. And just like the first time Kurt had asked, all he could do was nod his consent.

This time though his heart didn't beat with excitement and anticipation. This time he reached out to Kurt's lips, begging them to melt the cold that was threatening his heart. He thought he would be scared but he was anything but. He needed it, like he needed air and food and water. He and Kurt stood up together and without breaking apart they shifted on to the bed, Kurt lying down and Blaine, taking what he needed almost violently. He lost himself in the anger, the anger he felt toward his father and mother and Cooper, but most of all he lost himself in the anger that he felt toward the nameless faceless animal who had stolen from him so much more than he ever could have imagined.

"Blaine," Kurt mumbled unheard beneath his lips, but the mumble grew and grew until finally the voice he loved broke through the rage and Blaine pulled back. Kurt was staring at him, eyes wide, lips red and swollen. His hair was a mess and his chest rose and fell with the desperate need for breath. Kurt sat up, and Blaine recoiled, almost jumping off of him, realizing what he'd done.

"Kurt, I'm so sorry-"

"Shhh..." Kurt reached toward him and gently stroked damp cheeks, even though Blaine never realized he was crying. "It's okay. I want you to get it out if that's what you need. You're not hurting me, I just needed to breathe, I promise."

"I don't ever, *ever* want to hurt you Kurt," Blaine cried. "Never. You are the most precious thing in the world to me and I just hate what he took from me. From us."

"He took nothing from us. Do you hear me?" Kurt had plenty of his own anger, and for a moment he let it slip. "Of everything he took, none of it was from you and me."

Kurt gathered the boy he loved in his arms and let him cry, holding him, soothing him. This time it wasn't panic, this time was grief, and Kurt knew from the days after his mother, from the days spent thrown in a dumpster and pressed up against the lockers at McKinley, he knew that Blaine needed to get it out. He wasn't sure how long they stayed that way, but when Blaine's tears finally slowed, Kurt handed him some tissues, brushed his fingers through his dark wet curls, and raised Blaine's chin to his.

"I need you to listen to me Blaine, okay?" Blaine sniffed, wiped his face and nodded. "There are things that are so important, so precious and private, that they can't ever be taken. They are yours and yours alone to give. Okay? It's called making love for a reason," Kurt said. "Our firsts can't be taken. Love can't be taken. Love can only be given."

"After she told me, I was so afraid..." The pain in Blaine's eyes almost broke Kurt's heart. "I was so afraid you wouldn't want me anymore. That you'd leave me."

"Never. I am never going anywhere." Kurt pulled him once again into his arms. He kissed Blaine's head, held him tight, and whispered in his ear. "Trust Gavroche. Have no fear. You can always find me here."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Bring Him Home

January 5, 2010

Dear Cooper,

I know. Mom told me.

I don't blame you for keeping it a secret. I'm sure you wanted to forget as much as I had. Thing is though, I keep having these dreams. And I don't know what's real and what's my imagination.

But you do.

And I just keep thinking that maybe if I knew, maybe they would go away.

I understand if you don't want to talk about it. Hell, I don't want to talk about it. But I also don't want it to take any more control of my life than it should.

I won't let it define me.

Blaine

"What would be your dream role?"

Kurt and Blaine walked hand in hand across the Dalton Campus. The trees were bare, what little snow that had covered the branches more than a week ago had melted in the unseasonable warmth of 50 degrees. The two had taken to walking together after Warblers rehearsal. There was still so much of the expansive campus that neither had explored. The rolling stream just inside the grove of trees behind the science center had become one of their favorite spots.

Blaine let go of Kurt's hand and turned to face him, walking backwards with a grin. Kurt had to stop himself from imagining his boyfriend tripping over some tree root and falling backwards into the stream.

"Che Guevara in Evita."

Kurt's lips quirked in a smile as he tilted his head sideways. They reached the small cluster of logs, no doubt arranged by students long ago, and Kurt took a seat. "My little revolutionary," he quipped.

Blaine wrapped a hand on the tree trunk and swung around it to the other side. *"At the risk of seeming ridiculous, let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by a great feeling of love,"* he recited. *"It is impossible to think of a genuine revolutionary lacking this quality."* Blaine smiled, leaning back against the trunk with his arms folded across his chest. "Che said that."

Kurt looked impressed. "Smart man," he acknowledged. "And I imagine Rachel would be your Evita?"

But Blaine shook his head. "Nope. I have someone much better in mind," he said with a sparkle in his eye. "A certain Latina spitfire."

Kurt arched his brows. "Rachel will kill you."

"Yes, but Santana will love me," he grinned. "What about you? What's your dream role?"

Kurt didn't know. There was little on Broadway for a countertenor and most of the roles that fascinated him were written for women. "I don't think it's been written yet," he mused. He picked up a rock off the ground and tossed it in the water. Blaine went to sit down next to him. "It's like I told that agent back in New York. I want to make a difference. Show the world that guys like me matter just as much as the rest of them."

Blaine took his hand and Kurt blinked up at him with vulnerability. "You will you know. Show them." Blaine tucked Kurt's hair behind his ear and brushed his cheek with his thumb. "You've already shown me." Blaine leaned in and Kurt closed his eyes. The sound of the water trickling and the wind rustling through the branches filled his ears but it all went silent the moment their lips touched. They'd been together now for years, Kurt had kissed him hundreds of times, and yet every time Blaine felt like it taught him something new. He sighed into it, cradling Kurt's face in his hands and he deepened the kiss, reminded for some reason of the first time, back at Kurt's camp. Not even out, so scared. Kurt had been the brave one then. Kurt had always been the brave one.

A chill rushed through his blood and he felt cold even before he lost the heat of Kurt's body when Kurt pulled back. He kept his eyes closed, wanting to stay in that moment but at the same time afraid to truly feel everything he wanted to feel.

Kurt's hand pressed against his cheek. His thumb brushed lightly at his skin. "What's the matter?" Kurt whispered.

But Blaine shook his head. "I don't know," he said. It was a shiver in his skin. A skip of his heart. A weight pressing against his belly. It wasn't a panic attack, though his hand shook. He reached up to Kurt's hand, folding his own around it. He turned his head and pressed his lips into Kurt's palm. "I don't know."

"That's okay," Kurt told him, slipping his fingers under Blaine's chin, hoping to nudge his eyes open. Blaine bit his lip, but he opened his eyes and he lost himself in the overwhelming kindness emanating from Kurt's gaze. "It's okay Blaine, you don't have to know."

"I wish I could go back," Blaine admitted. "Go back to when things were easy. But when I try to think of a time that they were, I can't remember one."

Kurt smiled softly. "Me either. But when I look forward, with you by my side? The future seems a whole lot easier. No matter what happens."

Blaine found truth in what Kurt said, and with a sigh he fell back against Kurt's chest, melting into the warm embrace of Kurt's arms. Neither one of them spoke for a long time. Kurt kissed him atop his head, Blaine rested his hand on Kurt's thigh, and they spent the rest of the afternoon listening to little but the beating of their hearts.

"Blaine, we understand you wanting to do a musical, we really do," Wes told him. The audition sheet had gone up on the activities bulletin board in the student center that day and Blaine had quietly signed up. An emergency meeting of the Warblers was called as soon as Wes saw it. "But Regionals are coming up and you're our lead vocalist."

"I can do both," Blaine told them, and he looked at each and every one of the Warblers sitting around the leather couches. Some of his friends were nodding, seeming to support him completely. Some were

shifting uncomfortably in their seats with their thoughts of his betrayal. Blaine's gaze landed on the only one whose opinion truly mattered to him; Kurt's. "You think I can do this, don't you?"

Kurt sighed and he stood up from where he'd been perched on one of the arm rests. "I think you can do whatever you set your mind to, you know that. And I also get Wes' point that Regionals is coming and it's likely that doing a show will interfere with your ability to rehearse. I mean..." Kurt looked around quickly. He hated being the one to say it, but he was the only one who could without Blaine getting upset. "We all know that for you the show will always come first."

Blaine sighed. He couldn't tell if the room was heating up because of the fire in the fireplace or the heated stares from his friends. "Look guys, it's not like it's Broadway. It's just the school musical, I'm sure they'll be flexible." The truth was, he wanted it to be so much more, but the only waiver he could get from the union was for educational purposes.

"Blaine," Wes said, his face a picture of sympathy. "I understand but I don't think-

They were interrupted by a knock on the door, which startled everyone. The Warblers were never interrupted. The door opened and the school counselor cautiously walked in the door. She looked around slowly until her eyes fell on Kurt. "Kurt," she said gently. Her face said clearly that Kurt wasn't in trouble, but something was wrong. "The headmaster and I would like to see you."

All eyes turned to Kurt but he didn't notice because for a minute time stood still and he was 8 years old again being called to the Principal's office to be told his mother was sick. He tried to shake away that awful feeling of déjà vu, but he couldn't. "What is it?" he asked, standing up. His knees were trembling, his hands too until Blaine squeezed them tightly in his own. "Just tell me."

"Kurt why don't you come with me-"

"Just tell me!" he yelled.

Blaine's hands were immediately on his shoulders, massaging them gently. "Shhh, it's okay," Blaine tried to comfort him, but the school counselor's eyes said it all.

"Your dad's in the hospital. He had a heart attack."

"No." Kurt shook his head, tears falling, body shaking. "No, no," he said and he turned to Blaine, grasping his shirt sleeves in his fists. "You have to take me. Now."

Blaine looked up the counselor then back to Kurt. "Let's just go see the Headmaster, okay? We'll hear what he has to say and then I'll take you, I promise."

Blaine sat in the chair at the little writing desk across from Burt's hospital bed. Kurt still had his hand in his father's, refusing to let go. Had there been no beeps and buzzes of the machines, it would have been quiet. As it was, they'd been there long enough that it all was white noise.

They'd been brought to Burt's room as soon as they'd arrived and Blaine found it very hard to see the man he admired so much lying so helpless. At first Kurt was all over the doctors, getting as much information as he possibly could, but eventually he accepted that there was no more. His Dad was unconscious and there was nothing they could do. The fight remained in Burt's hands.

Carole and Finn had come and gone. Carole would be back later, but one look said she knew that Kurt needed time alone. He'd sat down by his father's side, taken his hand in his. Blaine offered to go too if that's what he needed but Kurt had asked him to stay. So Blaine sat back, watching. Praying even though Kurt didn't really believe in that anymore. And he couldn't help but think. What if this were his Dad? What if their last moment had already come and gone?

Kurt's whispered voice broke the silence. Blaine listened as Kurt spoke to his Dad, just in case he could hear. "There are so many things I wish I'd said. I don't want to leave any of them unspoken."

Blaine smiled sadly as Kurt spoke, so softly it blended into the hum of the machines. The words weren't for him though and he turned around, looking in the desk drawer for some paper. He pulled out a sheet and a pen, and he took a deep breath.

Dear Dad,

I'm at the hospital in Lima. Kurt's dad had a heart attack. He's not awake. They don't know if he'll make it. Kurt's still talking to him though. Telling him everything he thinks his father needs to know.

And I decided not to wait until you and I were in the same situation. So here are the things you need to know.

It wasn't your fault.

Everyone will tell me it wasn't my fault and I know that. But I know you blame yourself. You shouldn't. There's only one person to blame, and we aren't him.

And I forgive you for being overprotective. I understand now. It's funny how Mom and Cooper always told me I would someday. They were right.

But I won't forgive you for thinking that because you were to blame for what happened that you were also to blame for me being gay. Because how dare you think that that is something in which lies any fault to blame?

I am gay. I was born gay. He didn't make me gay and you couldn't make me not gay. I know you don't believe that, but I believe it with every fiber of my being. I was gay before he hurt me, and I am still gay after.

And the fact is, that even if it was something I could change, I wouldn't. Because I love who I am. I love Kurt. And I can't imagine life without him.

And I wish I didn't have to imagine life without you too.

Kurt lost his mom when he was 8. Soon after we met. It wasn't long after 9/11. And back then I felt invincible, climbing the barricade on Broadway every night. Only in my dreams I was fighting on the front lines of New York City and not Paris. I knew if I told you that you'd make me leave the show, so I kept it to myself. But you were having nightmares too, weren't you? So scared of losing me? Like Kurt lost his mom.

Thing is, you're losing me anyway. Pushing me away. Maybe that's easier for you than standing by my side. Knowing that you can't protect me from being hurt. Because you can't protect me from that, no father could. The only thing a father can truly do is hold their son when they cry.

The boy I love is holding his father's hand, so afraid of losing the only parent he has left. And it hurts. And you can't protect me from that. And that's okay.

The only thing you can really protect me from is losing your love. And it's the only thing you won't even try.

That's your fault.

Kurt lay on his back on the mattress on the floor, staring up at the same ceiling he'd stared at so many years ago. The house still smelled of the same spiciness that matched Santana's personality. The décor had changed, but Santana was still curled up in her bed. Last time he'd been there waiting for his Mom to die. This time it was his Dad. Last time he'd wished that Blaine was there with him. This time he was, right by his side. He felt so numb though he didn't even realize that Blaine's hand was holding his.

"It's gonna be okay Kurt," Blaine whispered.

Kurt blinked back tears he refused to let fall. "You don't know that," he said flatly.

"I do." Blaine rolled over leaning up on his elbow to look at Kurt. "Whatever happens, it's going to be okay. You told me that with me by your side the future seemed easier. No matter what happens."

"Nothing makes this easy Blaine," Kurt said and he got up and stormed out of the room.

Blaine started after him but Santana stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. "Let me go," she said gently. Blaine could do nothing but nod silently.

Santana found him sitting in the dark living room, curled up on the couch staring out the window. The stars were bright in the sky that night and Kurt seemed to be watching them.

"My mom says that when the people we love die they become stars in the sky," she said, sitting down on the other side of the couch. "Looking down on us."

"The sky doesn't need another star. Not as much as I need my dad," Kurt said.

"Do you remember what you told me after Blaine called you that first time? You said that he made you smile for the first time since she was gone." Kurt didn't move. "He's right. Whatever happens, whatever has ever happened to either of you, it's been easier by each other's sides."

"When can it start being easy just because it's easy?" Kurt asked. His gaze finally shifted to her. "When do we just get to live happily ever after?"

Santana laughed lightly. "I remember when you used to swear up and down that Blaine wasn't your Prince Charming."

"I'm not."

Kurt and Santana looked up to see Blaine at the bottom of the stairs.

"I'm not his Prince Charming," Blaine said again, coming toward them. "He's mine."

Santana smiled and got up, kissing Blaine quickly on the cheek before heading back upstairs. Blaine took her spot on the couch.

Kurt let a small smile slip. "So are you Cinderella or Rapunzel?" he asked.

"Neither. I was thinking more like Ariel." He reached out and took Kurt's hand. "Being a part of your world has changed everything for me. I know it's not the same, but when my dad took theater away, when the bullies put me in the hospital, when I was sent to Dalton, none of it was easy. But all of it was easier, because of you."

As hard as it was, Kurt understood what he meant. "I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't made me smile that day after my mom died. But you did." Blaine pulled Kurt to him and held him close. Kurt rested his head on Blaine's chest and they nuzzled together. "I can't lose him," Kurt whispered.

"You won't lose him. No matter what happens, you'll never lose him."

"Blaine would you please take my kid back to Dalton," Burt pleaded from where he lay on the couch.

Kurt was hovering over him with a blanket and a bowl of bland soup, as he had every day for the week since his Dad had come home from the hospital. "I'm not going anywhere Dad. Even if I have to go back to McKinley, I'm staying to take care of you."

Burt sat up slightly. "Okay, no offense kid, but I think I will enjoy my convalescence a whole lot more if I have Carole nursing me back to health rather than you."

Blaine snickered. He'd been coming out to Lima every other day since Burt had come home to make sure Kurt got his work and didn't fall too far behind. It was easy to forget how brutal the work at Dalton could be until you missed a week. "Kurt," he said delicately. He understood how difficult it would be to leave. But they all knew he had to. "I think it's time to come home."

Kurt felt a sudden flutter in his belly and he stared at Blaine, the world feeling like it had just shifted. He looked back at his Dad who had brows raised nearly to the ceiling in anticipation of his agreement. He turned back to Blaine once more, his soft golden eyes calling to him. And he wondered when Blaine had become home.

"Yeah," he said and he felt like he was suddenly discovering a new world beyond the horizon. "Yeah, okay."

"Oh thank god," Burt sighed, leaning his head back in relief.

"Don't go getting too comfortable Dad," Kurt reprimanded, the spell broken. "I'll be on the phone with Carole every day to make sure you're taking your medication and eating right and getting enough rest."

"Kurt." Burt reached up a hand. Kurt looked down at him. He looked stronger now than he had in the hospital, but he still looked weaker than before. "Kurt, I'm going to be fine. I'm gonna be around for a long time. You can't get rid of me this easily."

Kurt shook his head, unshed tears shining in his eyes. "I don't ever want to get rid of you."

"And I don't want to get rid of you," Burt said. "But I do want you to go back to Dalton with Blaine. And I want you to study hard and sing with the Warblers and not worry about me. Because if you spend your life worried that something bad's gonna happen to someone..."

Burt trailed off, his gaze turning to Blaine. And Blaine didn't know how Burt knew, but somehow he did. "It's hard to breathe," Blaine said quietly. That's how it had felt. Smothered, like a flower in a too small pot, unable to grow. "When someone is always on top of you, trying to control every little thing you do. It's hard to breathe. Even if their intentions are good. And for them I think..." He had never really thought about what it must have been like for his Dad. But he could imagine. "I bet it must be exhausting."

Memories of Blaine tiptoeing, running away, lying, sneaking around behind his father's back all ran through Kurt's mind. And he never wanted to make his Dad feel like he had to do those things. "Okay," he said, nodding, acknowledging that his Dad and Blaine were right. Whether he stayed in Lima to care for him or constantly called to check up on him, worrying like that about his dad wouldn't be good for either of them. He looked up at Blaine. "Let's go home."

Kurt walked into Blaine's room, his bag slung over his shoulder. "Hey, you ready for dinner?" Blaine turned slowly from where he was standing by his desk, a letter twirling in his hand. "What's that?" Kurt asked.

Blaine looked up at him, his eyes heavy, his movements seeming almost like slow motion. "It's from Cooper," he said. He folded the paper up as small as he could, then unfolded it again. The wear and tear made it obvious it hadn't been the first time and Kurt wondered how long Blaine had been standing there. "It says...it says what he did to me."

Kurt suddenly felt like the world had stopped turning. "Did you read it?" he asked.

Blaine took a deep breath. "Yeah."

Kurt pursed his lips as he nodded. He looked down at the floor, a million thoughts and feelings running through his veins, but this wasn't his moment to let emotions run away with him. "What are you going to do with it?" Kurt asked, squinting back up at him.

Blaine folded it once more, stood up straighter, and took a deliberate step toward Kurt. From the moment he read it, there was only one thing he wanted to do. "I'm going to burn it. And then I'm going to forget about it. And then I'm going to hold you for a very long time. If you let me."

Kurt reached over and took his hand. "You can hold me forever," he said, right before Blaine pulled him into his side with a sigh of relief.

Kurt had taken him to the empty Warbler room. The fire still burned in the fireplace from rehearsal, the heat pressing against their faces as they stood in front of it.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Kurt asked. His mouth was turned in a frown, his eyes heavy with worry.

But Blaine nodded. "Absolutely." Looking up at Kurt he felt the pieces of his heart lock back together. He knew the question that Kurt would not ask him and he knew the answer. "I'm glad I know Kurt. It's better knowing. Because now I can reclaim the things he took from me." He reached out for Kurt's hand, his fingertips brushing Kurt's before they threaded their fingers together. "With you," he said, his voice low over the crackle of the fire. "If you want to."

Kurt was having trouble breathing, much less talking, so he just nodded. Blaine smiled, kissed him softly on the lips, then turned to the fire. With one last flip of the letter, he threw the paper into the fireplace and watched the things that had been done to him melt into nothing but ashes that flew away up the chimney. He struggled to take his eyes from the sight of the flames and he sat down before it on the floor. Kurt sat down beside him, and Blaine took him in his arms.

They sat like that for a long time, Blaine's eyes blurring before the glow, feeling Kurt breathe in his arms and matching his own breath to Kurt's. He remembered everything from the moment they met, from seeing him in the audience to dancing with him in Ohio, to lying on the floor of a bathroom knowing that Kurt would be proud.

"What are you thinking about?" Kurt asked quietly next to him.

"Us," Blaine said softly. "Our first kiss was sitting on the floor of a hotel. Our first *French* kiss," he said, a playful lilt sneaking in, "was on the floor of the forest."

Kurt looked over at him, Blaine's face lit bright by the fire and the joy in his eyes. "I don't think it was a forest Blaine. It was more like a small grove of trees on an expanse of campground."

"Not the point," Blaine teased, but it turned quickly to shyness and he lowered his eyes. Kurt followed his gaze and saw Blaine trailing his fingertips along the expensive Oriental rug on which they sat. "This floor is nice too," he said coyly.

"Blaine-"

"I want to," Blaine said. He sat up and looked back up at Kurt. His lip was bit beneath his teeth but there was no doubt in his eyes.

"I want to too Blaine." Kurt was a little breathless when he spoke. "But here?"

Blaine nodded. It seemed fitting. "Do you see that flame? It takes. It gives. It turns things to ash while it gives off light and heat. Heat can burn or heal. I think..." He took Kurt's hand. He knew he wasn't explaining it very well, but the feelings inside his heart didn't have words. What he needed wasn't words. "I think, this time, it'll be a little bit of both."

Kurt brushed his thumb along Blaine's palm with a gentleness his voice reflected. "Does that scare you?"

"Not with you," Blaine said, his eyes glowing with sincerity. "Nothing scares me when it's with you."

They both moved as if drawn together by a force far greater than themselves, and their lips pressed together like a promise. Kurt carefully lowered Blaine to lie back on the ground, pressing his weight atop him. "You tell me what to do," Kurt whispered above him. "Whatever you want. You take. I give. If it's burns, I will heal you. I promise."

Blaine's heart swelled. "I love you," Blaine breathed.

"No matter what," Kurt answered.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

A Life About to Start

March 2010

Blaine sat at his desk frowning at the open email on his computer screen, sent by his agent. Kurt was lying atop his boyfriend's bed on his stomach, feet crossed in the air, fingers steeped beneath his chin.

"He says Broadway is looking like a bust for me for the season, but Papermill is doing Les Mis in the fall," Blaine read. "I could maybe do Marius."

Kurt understood how the idea of coming full circle was appealing. "What about college?" Kurt asked pointedly.

It was an ongoing discussion. Kurt knew there was no chance that Blaine would go to college in Ohio. He knew that no matter what, they'd have to deal with another year apart. But for some reason he felt less left behind with the idea of Blaine at school rather than out in the real world, performing.

It was selfish. He knew it. But he couldn't help it.

Blaine's mother must have agreed because despite not letting Blaine's relationship with his father affect her decisions, she had agreed wholeheartedly with the man that Blaine was going to apply for college, do whatever auditions he needed to, and then seriously consider attending.

Blaine intended to seriously consider attending. And then he intended to hit the audition circuit and get back out into the real world as soon as he could.

Cooper of course was pulling for him to head to L.A. for pilot season and if Blaine was honest with himself he thought that his brother had a point. He had a face for television. He was known, if not for himself than as Cooper Anderson's little brother. But there was one thing that a television series didn't allow for.

And that was Kurt. Kurt who would be 2,257.1 miles away until he graduated Dalton, according to Google. Kurt who had no real interest in moving to Los Angeles after high school. Kurt who could put up with a lot of separation, but years and years of a bi-coastal relationship wasn't something that either one of them really wanted to put into motion, no matter how remote the possibility was.

They wanted to be in New York. Together. They just had to get through one more year apart.

"I won't hear from colleges until April and I have to plan for the summer anyway," Blaine said. "We both do."

Kurt let out a huff and sat up. "Well unless I get another job I won't be headed to New York. I am as broke as the Phantom's chandelier."

"And it's not like I have a place to stay if I don't get work or do another program," Blaine said. "Apparently your father almost dying wasn't reason enough for mine to start to talk to me again so..."

"Come here." Kurt opened up his arms to Blaine. He knew how much it hurt. Blaine liked to make light of it and pretend it didn't matter, but how could it not matter that his father hated who he was so much that he wouldn't even speak to him? Everyone had told them it would hurt less once he understood but in a lot of ways it hurt more. Even if there was something to blame, which there wasn't, and even if they understood that Blaine's father was blaming himself, which they did, it sure as hell seemed like the only one suffering was Blaine.

Blaine shut down his computer and walked over to the bed, climbing up and into Kurt's arms. No matter how much tension he had in his muscles trying to make sense of a future after Dalton and a father who for all intents and purposes had abandoned him, the feel of Kurt around him always made it disappear.

Especially now.

Blaine would never forget what he knew happened to him. But he also didn't have to remember it anymore. It was a part of him, like it was before, settled in his skin and his heart and in his soul and he had let it go that night in the flames and in his love. He had released it in every way and just like he promised his brother, he wouldn't let it define him. He wouldn't let it hold on to him or change him or make him feel like someone he wasn't.

He was Blaine. A revolutionary. Onstage, if he couldn't be one off.

"Do you think if I did a show this summer that Santana would sing with me? *A Waltz for Eva and Che*?"

"I think she would do anything for the opportunity," Kurt said.

Blaine grinned. "Well, all she has to do is say yes," he pointed out. "What about you? Will you sing with me?"

"I'll always sing with you, you know that," Kurt said. "Whether it's this summer or while you're living the life in New York in the fall."

"You're very calm about this," Blaine commented.

Kurt peered up at him. "What am I going to do?" he asked. "It's not like I expect you to stay in Ohio. There's nothing to do here."

Blaine was leaning over him in a second, straddling him, eyes twinkling. "There's you to do here," he said.

Kurt grinned. "Mr. *I want to wait* now can't get enough," he teased.

"I was waiting for the right time," Blaine said. "Now it's always the right time."

But Kurt had to adamantly disagree. "It is *not* always the right time Blaine. The middle of Warblers practice is *not* the time."

Blaine just shrugged, his smile bright. "What can I say, I have good memories in that room."

Hard as he tried to stop it, a blush blossomed on Kurt's cheeks. "Well for that," he said, giving Blaine a quick kiss, "I am grateful. But just maybe you should try to have a little self-control. You are the older one in this relationship after all. You should set a good example."

Blaine gasped and gave a mock frown. "I thought I was setting a good example. But if you think I need more practice," he smirked. "Or a demonstration..."

There was nothing Kurt could do but laugh. "Oh my god, you are impossible."

"Impossibly in love with you," Blaine said.

Kurt sighed, his smile quickly growing nostalgic. "I'm going to miss you so much."

Blaine wrapped him in his arms and held him close. "I'm going to miss you too. But we'll have email and Skype and texting and phone calls-"

"And letters," Kurt reminded him. "We will always have letters."

March 29, 2010

Dear Blaine,

Today I was walking down the hallway at Dalton, the one that leads from the science wing to the cafeteria, and I had to stop and catch my breath. This feeling came over me, this wave of...what's the opposite of déjà vu? Anyway, it was like I was making the same walk only it was a year from now and you weren't at the end of the walk waiting for me in the cafeteria.

I try to put on a brave face. After all, if you think about it, we've spent more time apart than we have together in the last nine years. One last year should be nothing. But it's different now. Because I'll be the kid still in high school and you'll be the adult, out in the world, in a dressing room full of guys who are just wishing to get their hands on you and I know you love me but sometimes love isn't enough. Even if you were in college it would be hard to tell them no, I have a boyfriend back in Ohio in high school. But on Broadway, working, a real adult. I'm not naïve. And it's not that I think you're not willing to wait for me because I know you are. It's that I worry what temptations there will be while you wait.

And I guess I worry that I'd be holding you back. Childhood sweethearts are cute and all once they're married, but before that, this year apart that I'm sure so many people have to go through...

I don't know what I'm saying. I guess I've just always hated that I'm younger, that it feels like you're miles ahead of me in life and I'm always running to catch up.

You're staring at me, from across the room. Even though I try to pretend I'm just doing homework, you know it's a letter I'm writing and I know that you're worried, I can see it in your face. Every time I've let you go it's been hard, but I just feel like this time it's going to be so much harder.

We need to spend the summer together. I don't know what we should do or where we should go, but I know that I need that. I need that time together. We need it.

I'm sorry. I don't mean to be so pathetic and I certainly don't mean to say I don't trust you because honestly I do. I just wonder if part of my job in September is to set you free. Then come spring if you fly back to me, we'll know it's meant to be.

Love,

Kurt

The note came flying toward Blaine in the form of a folded paper airplane.

"Good aim," Blaine said with a grin when he caught it in the air.

He'd watched Kurt writing while they were supposed to be studying history. Blaine looked at the clock. Curfew was inching up, and now that the airplane was out of his hand, Kurt was packing up, both actively avoiding his gaze while at the same time trying to catch a glimpse.

Kurt threw his backpack over his shoulder. "Love you," he said casually, no nerves in his voice. He leaned over the bed and kissed Blaine quickly on the lips, a kiss that Blaine wanted to hold on to, so he threaded his fingers through the hair on the back of Kurt's head and pulled him forward. Blaine deepened the kiss. He didn't know what the letter said, but letters like he knew this one was always needed extra reassurance.

"I love you too," he said, smiling up at the love of his life. "Have a good night."

Kurt waved at the door with a smile before walking out to head across campus back to his own dorm room. Blaine put the airplane down and took his toiletries bag to the bathroom, brushing his teeth before bed. Back in his room he undressed and pulled on his t-shirt and pajama pants and sat down on the edge of the bed. He unfolded the paper.

Top drawer. I'll give it a 7 or 8 on the angst scale. Read at your own risk.

There wasn't a risk Blaine wouldn't take when it came to Kurt and he retrieved the letter from where Kurt had slipped it inside. He climbed into bed, got comfortable and read the thoughts that had been plaguing his boyfriend.

It was early the next morning when a knock sounded on Kurt's door. He usually met Blaine at the cafeteria for breakfast, but sometimes Blaine showed up first, uninvited but always welcome. Kurt hadn't showered yet, but his hair was a beautiful mess and he'd chosen pajamas well the night before. He opened the door to a serious looking but absolutely gorgeous Blaine and he could see plain as day that Blaine had read his letter.

"Hi-"

"We need to talk," Blaine said. He walked in and closed the door behind him, then grabbed Kurt's hand. A wall length mirror, once belonging to Kurt's mother, had been carefully transported to Kurt's Dalton bedroom and Blaine pulled him in front of it, standing behind him. Kurt looked through the mirror up at Blaine, but Blaine put one hand on either side of his face and urged him to look straight. "What do you see?"

Kurt shrugged. He wasn't insecure, he knew he was good-looking, especially when he had the time to truly put himself together. He didn't know what Blaine was getting at. "I don't know."

"You know what I don't see?" Blaine said pointedly. "I don't see the little boy I fell in love with before I even knew what love was. And I don't see the eleven year old who kissed me for the first time and showed me what love was. And I don't even see the teenager who was my light when everything else was dark. Who was my anchor when the world seemed to be moving too fast."

"Then what do you see?" Kurt asked quietly.

"I see the man I have loved, through the hardest times of my life. Across distances large and small. No matter the time we spend apart or the time we have together. I see the man that I can't imagine my life without. I see the man that I hope someday will stand by my side and make vows and make me his husband."

Kurt turned, brushing his thumb against Blaine's cheek. "I see that too. Those aren't the things I doubt in my letter."

"You're talking sex," Blaine said.

Kurt's gaze fell to his fingers. "It's Broadway. It's a large number of gay men and Blaine, I don't know if you understand exactly how fucking hot you are." Blaine chuckled and lowered his head with a blush. "And those other guys back there, they're fucking hot too, I mean we drool over them now online all the time. And I am certainly not saying I want an open relationship Blaine because I don't, but I also don't want a moment, whether it's of weakness or desire, to end everything that we've worked so long for."

"Then what are you saying?"

Kurt led Blaine by the hand to his bed and they sat down beside one another. Kurt turned with his knee on the bed, looking Blaine clear in the eye. "I'm saying I want honesty. Like when I was in camp and you were in Boston. If someone interests you, you tell me. We talk about it. No jealousy, no cheating, open communication. Neither of us will have to worry about what ifs because we'll talk about everything."

"Kurt." Blaine moved closer to his boyfriend and squeezed his hand harder. "You know I don't want anyone but you."

"And if your Boston boyfriend, now Broadway star, wanted to kiss you again, would you still not want anyone but me?" Blaine sighed. Kurt knew that the thought had crossed Blaine's mind as much as it had crossed his. "I'm just trying to be realistic here. The worst possible thing we could do is keep each other guessing the entire time. If someone new comes into my life and I'm tempted, I'll tell you. If you meet someone who tempts you, you tell me. And we deal with it."

"How?"

"Whatever way is right. We won't know how unless the time comes. But I'm not losing you because we didn't prepare for this. Okay?"

Blaine looked at Kurt. He was serious, full of that maturity that Blaine could never quite muster for himself. And as much as he wanted to tell Kurt he was full of crap, that he'd never be tempted by anyone but the man in front of him, he wasn't naïve either. "Okay," he said. "It sounds like a good plan. On one condition."

Kurt raised a brow. "What condition?"

Blaine smiled and he reached beneath Kurt's t-shirt, slowly slipping it off over his arms. "You show me right now what those guys would all be competing with, because if I remember correctly, they'd have a pretty high bar to reach to even hold a candle to you."

Kurt pushed Blaine down on the bed and straddled his hips. "Well that is certainly not an invitation I can say no to."

"I think that you're crazy to stay."

Brittany's house smelled of cotton candy and lilacs, her room was as pink as it ever had been as a little girl, and Kurt was curled up on her bed reading Vogue and listening to Santana rant at him.

Basically a sleepover as typical as every other one they'd had for the past 8 years.

"I left McKinley for a reason, Santana," he argued. He'd been arguing it a lot with her over the past few weeks. No matter what he said, she didn't seem to get his reticence. "A reason that doesn't change just because Blaine isn't at Dalton anymore."

"You left because Karofsky and his idiot friends wouldn't leave you alone. But you're going to be a senior Kurt, and they are up for football scholarships and the last thing they need is to be suspended or worse, kicked off the team, just for roughing you up. They'll leave you alone."

Santana had a point, Kurt had to give her that. But there were other ways to hurt people. More subtle ones. "The stares and the sneers are enough Santana. I'm safe at Dalton."

"You're trapped at Dalton," Santana snapped. A soft hand pressed to her shoulder and Santana looked up to see Brittany staring down at her in disappointment. It made Kurt wonder if the two were back together or not as Santana sighed and turned back to Kurt. "We miss you."

Brittany was better at the gentle approach. "We need you back in Lima," she said, sitting down next to him. "Or at least close enough for you to come back to the performing arts academy. We're seniors! We started there together, we have to end together."

"What will there be for you at Dalton?" Santana crossed her arms and leaned back against the wall. Her stare was piercing but so were her words. What would there still be for him at Dalton once Blaine was gone?

"You can write to him from anywhere," Brittany reasoned. "Doesn't matter if you're in Westerville or Lima, Dalton or McKinley. "Unless you have friends better than us-"

Kurt's smile was soft. "I do not have friends better than you there. No one other than Blaine knows me like you guys do."

"You know the problem Blaine had with performing at Dalton, you wouldn't have that problem in Lima. Think of the resume you could build your last year before New York. At Dalton you'd get, what, one good show? At ACPAA, you could get four or five. Plus masterclasses, a trip to New York-

"You're very convincing," Kurt said, rolling onto his back. He stared at the ceiling. He planned to go to college, but where he wanted, moving back might be a better move than staying at Dalton. Even with the Warblers and the better academics, it wouldn't be enough for a performing arts school. "Okay, I'll talk to my Dad and Blaine about it. See what they think."

"Fabulous," Santana smirked. She crossed the room and flopped down on the bed. "We better get you caught up on all the gossip." She took Brittany's hand. "Starting with us."

"The apartment in midtown would be perfect for us Blaine," Rachel told him over the phone. He was sitting in his dorm room, moping because Kurt had gone home for the weekend to visit with his family and the girls. Sure he had the Warblers he could have gone and hung out with, but thinking about Kurt giggling with Santana and Britt, he'd missed Rachel. He'd missed home. "One of my costars lives at The Wellington and it's beautiful Blaine; stone countertops, hardwood floors, fitness center, laundry and a doorman."

"It's also \$5,000 a month Rachel," Blaine sighed. He had to admit it was hard to say no. He'd grown up with money. Hell, he knew if he asked Cooper for it he'd get it in a second. It was the life he was accustomed to. But he had to be practical.

"It's \$1700 a month between you, me and Jesse, and in a year we'll have Kurt and it'll be down to a more than reasonable \$1250."

"You're assuming I'll have that Rach," Blaine said. "There's no guarantee I'll get work and if I go to college-

"I don't even understand why you applied to college Blaine, there are people here just waiting for you to get back so they can hire you," Rachel said.

Blaine doubted that was true. "That's very nice of you to say, but the truth is I'm out of practice-

"You're selling yourself short Blaine," Rachel argued. "You have fans, your Warbler videos are spread all over, there are countdowns online to your graduation and return to New York. There are producers with whispers of your name on their lips-

"But what happens if I'm accepted to Juilliard or NYADA or Columbia?"

"Then you defer." Blaine could hear the exasperation in Rachel's voice. She didn't understand. He didn't know if she could. "College will always be there, but do you really want to set your return to the stage back another 4 years? Haven't the past 4 years been long enough to be gone?"

Blaine was quiet. She was right, he knew she was. College wasn't what *he* wanted. But still... "I'm not sure I can say no," he said, voice heavy.

Rachel let out a breath and with it he knew she understood what was holding him back. "You can't live your life for him Blaine," she said gently.

"He's my dad Rach." Blaine closed his eyes, pressing his hand to his forehead. His stomach tightened as it always did when he talked about him...with Cooper, with Kurt, with Rachel. Even with his Mom. "I just want him to be proud of me. That's all I've ever wanted."

"He left you Blaine. When you needed him most, he left you. Why do you care?"

"If one of your dads left you, wouldn't you do everything you could to bring him back?"

Rachel though wouldn't even entertain the thought. "My dads would never leave me."

"What about your Mom?" They rarely talked about her. From the moments that they did, he had early on realized that one of the reasons Rachel pushed herself so hard was in the hopes of grabbing her attention. "You have wanted her to be proud of you your entire life, even though she was never there for you. If

anyone should understand this Rachel, you should. He's my dad. He always will be and I will always want nothing more than for him to love me and be proud of me."

There was silence, but Blaine knew she was still there. He could hear her snuffle and shuffle. He'd gone too far. "Rach, I'm sorry-"

"Your job is to do what you love. To love who you love. To be the person you truly are. It's not to be the person he wants you to be. His job is to love you for you. To be proud of the things that matter to you. I love being on Broadway and I love that she's proud of me for that, but I don't do it for her Blaine. I do it for me. Would you be going to college for you, Blaine?"

Blaine picked up one of the catalogs that was sitting on the bed beside him. The classes sounded amazing, but the thought of being there, it made him feel trapped. "No," he admitted. "Not without trying to get back on stage first."

"So over Spring Break you'll come look at the apartment with me?"

He shouldn't. It was too expensive and he had reservations about being the third wheel for a year before Kurt could join them. But it was also everything they'd been dreaming of since they were little kids backstage at the Imperial Theater.

"Of course I will," he sighed. "You always knew I would."

Cooper had promised himself he would remain calm. He kept his promise for about sixty seconds until he was pacing back and forth on the deck outside his house in Los Angeles.

"What do you mean you're not going to his graduation?" Cooper ran a hand through his hair. His heart was pounding with his fury and he knew it was a good thing that his father was a thousand miles away.

His father's voice was tired. "I can't Cooper."

"Yes you fucking can," Cooper snapped. "You get on a goddamn flight to Ohio, you sit in the stands and you clap for him when he gets his diploma."

"It's not that simple."

"The only one making it hard is you."

"I'd ruin his day," John Anderson said. "It would end up being a scene and he wouldn't want that, not in front of all his friends."

"The only way it would become a scene is if you made it into one." Cooper clenched his fists. Yes, his father was incredibly lucky he was a thousand miles away. "All Blaine wants, all he has ever fucking wanted, is for you to be proud him. And now you have a chance to attend probably the only graduation he'll ever have-"

"He'll have college," John muttered.

"No, Dad, most likely he won't. I know you'd rather he go to college than become a star in the big gay world of Broadway, but I'll be damned if he makes a decision to follow your dreams instead of his own."

John was quiet. Cooper fell into one of his lawn chairs.

"He wouldn't want me there," John finally whispered.

"He wants you there more than anything," Cooper corrected him. "All he has ever wanted is for you to be there for him. He treats your silence like some endearing quirk you're too stubborn to change rather than the hateful, intolerance it truly is. He and Mom both do." Cooper scoffed and shook his head. "Maybe you're not afraid of losing him, but you better fucking be afraid of losing me. Because if you don't show up, this will be our last phone call ever."

"You don't understand Cooper-" John protested

"I understand that it shouldn't matter whether Blaine loves boys or girls. The only thing that should matter is whether Blaine loves you. And it's only because he's a far better person than me that he still does. This is it. You throw his love away and you can throw mine away too." The line was silent, but he knew his father was still there. "June 5th. Goodbye Dad."

June 5, 2010

The entire campus was abuzz with the excitement of graduation. Family was all around, being introduced to friends, being shown around campus. Trunks were being dragged down stairs and loaded into cars. Boys too tough for emotions tried to hold back their tears and resist reaching out. The rest cried with a mix of happiness and nostalgia as they hugged one another, possibly for the last time.

Kurt had fretted over how he looked for an hour before it was time to go, which he knew was unnecessary given that it wasn't *his* graduation. But he was leaving Dalton and he wanted his hair and his uniform and the pale skin around his eyes to be just right. Sure they were red from crying the night before, a pathetic mix of missing Blaine months before he was gone and leaving a school that had likely held him back more than pushed him forward. But there were so many memories at Dalton, he'd told Blaine. Blaine reminded him that there were memories everywhere.

A little touch of makeup and some eyedrops banished the sadness from his face and he raced out to catch up to Blaine, Cooper and their Mom. Blaine's father hadn't come. No one had been surprised by that. But the strange thing, Kurt realized as the day went on, was that Cooper was far angrier about it than Blaine was.

"Hey. Hummel." Kurt startled from where he was staring out into nothing to see Cooper snapping his fingers in front of his face, smirking at him. "Do I even want to know what thoughts had you so distant?"

Kurt blushed even though sex had been the farthest thing from his mind because now it was not. He looked over at Blaine. Blaine looked incredible. He always did in his Dalton uniform but there was something about today that made him just glow. Blaine looked up at him from where he was talking with his Mom and smiled. "You have a dirty mind Anderson," Kurt replied with fake reproach. "Always have. I'll have you know I was just thinking that it feels like my own graduation even though it's not."

"Always trying to steal my spotlight," Blaine joked, grasping Kurt by the hand. "I suppose it's inevitable."

"I think the word you mean is impossible," Kurt corrected. "Your spotlight is brighter than a thousand suns."

"And big enough for the both of us," Blaine added.

Kurt just smiled. He couldn't argue with that.

Cooper laughed. "Okay, you two are cute, but I'm pretty sure you both need to get to the staging area because you have Warbling and graduating to do."

As if right on cue, *and of course he was*, thought Kurt, the loudspeaker blared: "All graduating seniors and undergraduate performers, please come to the staging area."

Blaine's mom took Kurt and Blaine's hands in hers and squeezed them tight. "Remember this day," she told them. "It only comes once but the memory can last forever."

Blaine looked to Kurt with love overflowing, then back to his mom. "We will," he said. He kissed her gently on the cheek. "We promise."

A hint of perfume tugged at Kurt's senses and for just a moment he wondered what his mom would have said at his graduation. He knew though that his father was sure to talk enough for the both of them.

"Come on," Blaine said, tugging at his hand. "Wes would kill us if we're late to our last Warbler performance."

But Kurt didn't budge. "Is this our last song together? I mean, with us both moving on, nothing is certain."

"I am certain," Blaine said, his eyes strong. "This doesn't even come close to our last song together. Now come on."

With a smile Blaine pulled him and Kurt couldn't help but laugh. The Warblers were in high spirits. They'd practice the graduation song for weeks, idea after idea thrown around until Blaine had dropped the only song they could possibly sing on the Council's desk. One look at Blaine and Kurt and the vote had been unanimous.

"You better put on your robe," Kurt said, holding the cap that had been waiting backstage for him. Blaine draped the black graduation gown over his shoulders and zipped it up. Kurt straightened his tie, then set the cap upon his head. "So handsome."

"Yes you are," Blaine replied and not even Wes could stop them from kissing.

"Alright places everyone," Nick called and he slipped in between the boyfriends. "Sing your faces off today you two," he said.

"Our faces are too beautiful, but we will sing our hearts out," Blaine said.

With controlled chaos and too much chattering in the excitement of the day, the boys arranged themselves on the risers next to the stage, Blaine and Kurt front and center. They squeezed each other's hands.

"Ladies and gentlemen, good morning and welcome. It's my honor as Headmaster to welcome the graduating class of Dalton Academy."

"Do you wish you could have walked in with them?" Kurt whispered as they watched most of the class file onto the stage and take their seats.

"I'm happy to just be standing by your side," Blaine whispered back.

The Headmaster introduced the faculty and staff and the concert choir, who sang the National Anthem. The Assistant Headmaster gave his speech, and then it was their turn. "Ladies and gentleman, it is my pleasure to introduce to you, the award winning Dalton Academy Warblers."

Blaine and Kurt gave one last look to one another. Behind them their friends, those graduating with Blaine and those to whom he would pass the torch, began the melody. Kurt nodded. And Blaine stepped forward and sang.

I am unwritten, can't read my mind, I'm undefined

Breaking himself from the ensemble, Kurt stepped down to join Blaine.

I'm just beginning, the pen's in my hand, ending unplanned

The Warblers had been searching through pages and pages of graduation songs, but one Google search, one look at the title, and they both immediately knew. There was no other song they were meant to sing together.

Staring at the blank page before you

Open up the dirty window

Let the sun illuminate the words that you could not find

Reaching for something in the distance

*So close you can almost taste it
Release your inhibitions
Feel the rain on your skin*

But the Warblers weren't defined by their lead singers, it was the comradery of brothers, the harmony of voices, the way their sound rose up and out to the entire crowd. That's what made them special.

*No one else can feel it for you
Only you can let it in
No one else, no one else
Can speak the words on your lips
Drench yourself in words unspoken
Live your life with arms wide open
Today is where your book begins
The rest is still unwritten*

As Blaine sang alone again he looked back on his childhood, never following the traditional path, coloring outside the lines. From Broadway to Dalton he'd made mistakes but he couldn't regret a single one because each one had brought him closer to the man he was today. And closer to the man who stood next to him.

*I break tradition, sometimes my tries, are outside the lines
We've been conditioned to not make mistakes, but I can't live that way*

Joining in, Kurt remembered the first words he'd written on a blank page to a boy far away in New York City. Words that had opened up a world to him, let him see and understand and find the words for things he had never before been able to express. And he knew that writing had done the same for Blaine.

*Staring at the blank page before you
Open up the dirty window
Let the sun illuminate the words that you could not find*

The truth had always been easier from a distance, their love had been safer. But it was there, from the start, so close they could almost taste it. Until they both came here, to Dalton Academy. And they learned that they didn't need the distance to be safe or loved. All had they had to do was let it in.

*Reaching for something in the distance
So close you can almost taste it
Release your inhibitions
Feel the rain on your skin*

Everyone joined in, clapping, smiling, and celebrating their past, their present and their future. Every one of them would take next steps, separate and together.

*No one else can feel it for you
Only you can let it in
No one else, no one else
Can speak the words on your lips
Drench yourself in words unspoken
Live your life with arms wide open
Today is where your book begins*

Blaine and Kurt reached out to one another, closing any distance between them, singing hand in hand. Neither of them knew what would be written in the future. But they did know that Blaine's graduation wasn't the end. It was only the beginning for both of them.

The rest is still unwritten

June 5, 2010

Dear Blaine,

My father was always very quick to anger and even slower to forgiveness. Maybe that's why it's been such a hard thing for me to learn.

I never could forgive myself for letting someone hurt you. What I could do was vow to protect you. And I tried, your whole life. 9/11, theater, NYC itself. Being gay was something that I knew put you at more risk than everything else combined, and I couldn't protect you from that. So in my fear I tried to prevent it. And in your bravery, you wouldn't let me prevent it or protect you. So all I had left was to protect myself. Because you see, you were always a survivor. Born six weeks early, you fought your way out of the NICU and home. You

survived him hurting you, you survived 9/11, you survived living in an adult world and when I took that from you, you survived growing up without a father. You were always a survivor, but when you were hurt, it nearly killed me. And I couldn't bear it again. So I pulled away, to protect myself.

I'm not asking for your forgiveness. I'm not even asking for your understanding. I just wanted to explain why I couldn't be there today. At Dalton, you were safe. That campus gave you the love and protection that I never could. It was strong where I was weak. And I didn't want to bring my poison into your safe place. Maybe it would have been fine, but I didn't want to risk a scene or upset you. Your high school graduation is far too important. And I am very proud of you.

I'll be spending the summer in London for work. Your mom will be pretty lonely in that apartment all summer. I'm sure she could use your company. I think she'd like to get to know Kurt better too.

Don't try to smooth things over between Cooper and me. You don't need to get in the middle. He has every right to the anger he feels. As do you.

I do love you. I guess I have a terrible way of showing it. But I have always loved you. And I have always been proud of you.

Someone once said, "Sometimes the one thing you need for growth is the one thing you are afraid to do."

It must seem so ironic, but my biggest fear has always been letting you go. But I shall try. And I hope that in letting you go, we can somehow find our way back to one another.

*Love,
Dad*

Kurt walked in from the bathroom in his pajamas and hung his towel up next to Blaine's cap and gown. The campus was half empty, no one was watching the dorms. Tomorrow they would leave for Lima for a week and then...

He turned to see Blaine leaning back against the wall, a letter in hand dangling by his thigh, a small smile on his lips. Kurt's brow quirked in curiosity. "That's not from me."

"It's from my Dad," Blaine said. His eyes shimmered gold, even in the evening light. "Mom gave it to me earlier."

Kurt would have expected anger or sadness, but Blaine's voice was full of wonder. He wasn't sure he'd ever understand how Blaine gave his father chance after chance. He knew that he never could have been that strong. But it was one of the things that Kurt loved most about him.

"You can read it." Blaine held the letter out to him. "If you like."

Whether Kurt really wanted to or not, he knew Blaine wanted him to and he took it and sat down on the bed. He was still as he read, taking in each word, trying to see it through Blaine's eyes instead of his own. And he knew that among all the things that hadn't been said, the two most important things had been.

Blaine's dad loved him. He was proud of him.

He'd invited Kurt to stay with Blaine in the apartment for the summer. Even if he wasn't ready to be there himself, Blaine's dad had welcomed him home.

"Well," Kurt said, looking up at his boyfriend. Blaine was watching him intently. "I think we have our summer plans set. Don't we?"

Blaine could hardly breathe. "If it's okay with you. I thought you'd want to talk about it."

"Oh there's a lot I want to talk about." Kurt tossed the letter aside on the bed and stood up. He closed the gap between them, wrapped his arms around Blaine's waist and held him tight. "But not now. I don't want to take that look off your face."

"What look?"

It was a look that Kurt used to see in a child on a barricade. "Hope. Peace. Relief. Freedom. I'd go anywhere with you Blaine. Anywhere with you is okay. New York City though, is the best."

The relief in Blaine's eyes glistened gold and he let out a small laugh. "Kiss me?"

Kurt smiled. "I thought you'd never ask."

CHAPTER THIRTY

Born To Be With You

June 26, 2010

Dear Kurt,

Rachel and Jesse are just finishing up moving into our new apartment. Even after my years at Dalton, it feels so grown up to have my own place, even if I'm not really staying there yet. We've let Rachel decorate, which was probably a mistake. You'll have to add your touch when you help me move in at the end of the summer.

I can't wait for you to come to visit.

I have an audition in the morning and part of me is hoping that I don't get it just because I don't want us to lose any minute we have together this summer. I wish that you could just stay and go to school here, but I know how important it is to you to spend your senior year with your Dad and Santana and Brittany. To prove to the bullies that they can't hurt you anymore.

I wonder when we'll finally be able to stop proving to people they can't hurt us.

It feels strange living in the city again without Cooper. Sometimes I walk by his old apartment and I think of how much I've changed since the days I sought refuge in his guest room. But then sometimes I feel like I'm still just hiding.

Living with mom again is strange too, even if I'm not spending most of my time here. She and I agreed to have dinner together at least twice a week. She says my dad asks about me. I told her that if he wants to know something about me he can ask me himself. She says that he's scared. Embarrassed. Doesn't know how to mend fences in person. And part of me, the part that wants to please, thinks that I should just take the first step. After all, he wrote to me. Told me he loved me and was proud of me. He gave me the best graduation present I could have hoped for. But I know it won't work between us until he knows how to do it himself. I don't want to feel like I'm chasing him. You know? Maybe once he gets back from London we can finally start again.

I miss you. Every night, every morning. I miss you with every breath I take and every touch. In the darkness I close my eyes and think of you. In the daylight I imagine you by my side, sharing everything.

There's no chance I ever want to live my life without you. You are my everything.

Hurry home.

Blaine

There were so many places that Blaine and Kurt could have gone on their first day together. But the sun was shining, the breeze was perfect, and even if the birds chirping in their heads were merely the echo of their happiness, they knew where to find the sound for real. It was too beautiful a day, too perfect a day, to spend a second of it inside. So before they even unpacked Kurt's things, they headed out into the city toward Central Park.

"God, it is so nice to just be with you and not have Santana and Brittany squawking over me as if all of a sudden I needed a mother after ten years." Blaine looked over at him and offered him an amused smile. "And you'd think I'd rather they just get wrapped up in themselves, but seriously, you have no idea how insufferable they are when they're together." Blaine's hand felt good finally back in his again. Like they were made to hold each other. He never wanted to let go. "Brittany curled up in Santana's lap, whispering to each other, hands roaming, it's awful."

Blaine gave his hand a squeeze. Kurt knew Blaine understood. After all, he'd spent far too much time with Rachel and Jesse lately. "You're just jealous you know," Blaine pointed out.

"Of course I am," Kurt said. He wondered why he couldn't just stay there forever with Blaine, in the beauty of Central Park. There was something so perfect about how handsome Blaine looked, the flowers in the Central Park Shakespeare Garden surrounding him. He looked like he belonged in a Shakespeare romance. Kurt stopped and stared down at the plaque on the wooden bench beside them. *25 years of growth...Bloom where you are planted.* That's what he wanted. To finally be able to *plant* themselves. "I don't know if I can make it a year apart from you."

"It's only 9 months," Blaine said. "And we've been apart for longer than a year before."

Kurt plopped down on the bench and pouted. "That was before I loved you," he said.

Blaine sat beside him, wrapping an arm around his shoulder. "I don't believe you," he said with a smirk.

"Well, it was before I *made* love to you," Kurt quipped back with a blush.

Blaine had to concede that point. "Well that is true," he said and he kissed Kurt softly before pulling him back up and along the path. "But we really shouldn't spend the summer focused on goodbye."

"I'm never saying goodbye to you," Kurt said.

Blaine smiled. "See? Problem solved."

Kurt quickly turned around and grabbed him by the waist. "Oh I think your problems have just begun."

The long, hot weeks of August almost seemed like their last vestiges of childhood and nowhere was that more true than the brand new Luna Park on Coney Island. They vibrated with excitement at the sounds of people talking and children happily screeching. They swayed to the deep and sultry music of a jazz band performing in front of the swings. The mouthwatering smells of hot dogs and French fries and fried dough filled their senses. And the way Blaine held him as the terrifying rollercoasters came to their end made Kurt feel safer and more loved than he had in a long time.

They walked along the pier and took off their shoes to feel the beach's sand between their toes. They didn't hold hands, there was still too much risk in the air, but shoulder to shoulder they imagined what their life could someday be.

And when night fell, they gazed up in wonder at the fireworks that painted the sky.

"They're beautiful," Kurt said when they were done, his face still aglow with the lights of the Ferris Wheel and with the love he felt.

Blaine gazed at him, a longing in his eyes Kurt understood. "You're beautiful," he said

Kurt grinned and turned to lean back against the railing. "Always with the line," he teased.

"I'm an actor," Blaine said matter-of-factly. "I always know my lines. Come on, let's go home."

They took the subway back to Manhattan, back to Blaine's mother's apartment where once again childhood clung tight. And Kurt couldn't help but think of the last time he'd watched the fireworks, he and his dad on the same hill where they'd sat for probably 17 years before. Kurt barely remembered seeing them with his mother, but with his father, that was something he'd never forget.

It made him sad that Blaine wouldn't have those same memories.

When they arrived back home, they didn't go inside. Instead, as if by instinct, they made their way up onto the roof.

Looking out amongst the lights, feeling the cooling breeze on his face, Kurt looked over at Blaine, so perfect and full of love. He didn't understand how anyone could walk away from that. "Do you think your father will ever come around?"

The question surprised him, but Blaine answered. "I don't know. Why do you ask?"

"My dad and I watched the fireworks together this year, just like we did when I was a kid. And it felt so safe. I felt so loved. At peace." Kurt reached out and took Blaine's hand. "I wish you could feel that too."

"I do." Blaine brushed his fingers against the soft skin on Kurt's face. "With you."

Kurt gave a faint smile and leaned in to Blaine's hand. "I mean with someone other than me. I mean with your dad."

"I used to watch the fireworks with Cooper. My dad was never around and even if he was, fireworks weren't his thing. This year, Rachel and Jesse and I sat on the roof of Sam's apartment building. We had a blanket and a picnic and champagne. And I thought that if I couldn't be with you, at least I could be with them." Blaine could see the sadness in Kurt's eyes and all he wanted to do was take it away. "It's okay, Kurt. I will miss you but please don't think I'm all alone because my dad isn't a part of my life. I know how important yours is to you and I understand you wish I had that too. But I don't and I never did and that's okay because I have my mom and Cooper and my friends." Kurt glanced away with worry still painted clearly on his face and Blaine suddenly realized what this was about. "I'm not looking for someone to fill a void."

Kurt blushed and lowered his gaze. "That isn't what I-"

Blaine lifted his chin. "Okay," he acquiesced.

But it was what Kurt meant and they both knew it. He looked back out on the great expanse of New York City. The sky was dark but the ground was lit, and with it, every person.

"Millions of people," Kurt said softly, almost to himself. "How can I possibly think that out of all of them you'll still choose me?"

He felt Blaine's fingers slip between his, Blaine's hand squeezing his palm. And he felt Blaine's presence, his warmth, his body, standing by his side. "Because you're the one," he said. Kurt looked over at him and Blaine was watching him, his gaze serious. "Imagine the stars Kurt. There's millions in the galaxy. And yet the earth will always revolve around the sun." Kurt blinked, his eyes watering. "Your warmth. Your light. Your life. My world revolves around you Kurt. And it always will."

Kurt choked back tears. "How do you know?"

"I just do," Blaine said.

He reached out and cupped Kurt's face, caressing over trembling lips before leaning in. His kiss was sweet and sensual and Kurt thought he might drown in it. Wrapping his arms around Blaine, Kurt deepened the kiss, not wanting to let go, not wanting the night to end, not wanting to go a moment without the feel of Blaine in his arms, without the touch of him on his skin. He knew he was crying, he could feel Blaine's finger wiping his face, he could taste the salt mingling on their tongues, but he didn't care. Soon there would be miles between them, so many miles, but today, there was nothing but them and the stars.

"I want you," Kurt whispered.

Blaine held him closer, trying to stop the trembling, but he knew only one thing could. "You have me," he whispered back and he led Kurt off the roof, back to his room. "You always have me."

September 6, 2010

Dear Blaine,

The thought of starting school tomorrow without you is unnervingly terrifying. Which is why I think I'm glad you're not here. I don't want to go through life needing you by my side in order to have courage against the demons that plague me. I need to know I can face them on my own.

I need to know I can face him on my own.

I haven't seen Karofsky since I left. Do you think he's grown up? Do you think he's changed? Or do you think a bully is incapable of change?

Do you ever think about the bullies that hurt you? Do you wonder if they regret attacking you in that bathroom that day?

Do you ever think of him?

Okay, for fuck's sake Blaine, we need to change this no erase rule because, well, because. So please don't answer that, forget I asked, forget I'm such an idiot sometimes.

How 'bout them Mets! J

(Did I do it right? The sports thing? I really tried.)

Do you realize that for the first time since the first time we met, I'm starting school and you're not?

What an old fogey you are! Big adult out there on your own in NY City.

Are you as unnervingly terrified as I am?

Love,

Kurt

September 11, 2010

Dear Kurt,

Yes. I think about him all the time.

Does he regret it? Has he done it to anyone else? When I look across the table at every audition and every reading, is he looking back at me?

But you know what scares me more? As a child actor, you're one in a hundred. As an adult, I'm one amongst thousands.

Yes. Being an adult is unnervingly terrifying.

So, you're wrong. I'm going back to class today too. Dance and voice and acting. It's time to grow up. I can't get by on my adorable face and my amazing ability to cry on cue anymore.

I need to up my game. And by the time you get come back here in June, we will both be ready to go.

And Kurt, we are not getting rid of the no erase rule. Because I don't ever want there to be something you can't ask me or tell me. No secrets, no matter how bad it is. We can get through anything as long as we do it together.

Please don't ever forget that.

*Love,
Blaine*

It had been over two months since school began, and other than a sneer here and there and the sense that eyes were on him every time the football players were in the room, Kurt thus far had had a pretty uneventful senior year at McKinley. Fiddler on the Roof was the fall show at their performing arts school and he'd been cast as Fyedka opposite Brittany's Chava. Between his tenor and her ballet, he was certain they'd be the best couple, but Santana most adamantly argued that as Tzeitel, she and Motel would be.

He would have let Blaine decide. If Blaine had been able to come.

Being an adult was not only terrifying, it was extremely annoying. Turns out that friends were more than happy to take over shifts to allow for classes and auditions, but to visit boyfriends still in high school ten hours away was an entirely different story.

Which left them nothing but phone calls and Skype sessions, and letters and email of course, but certain things were better left for seeing each other in person, especially when one still lived in their father's home.

Watching Brittany and Santana kiss goodbye at their lockers every morning didn't help. But it didn't stop him from leaning back against the wall and watching them like an envious voyeur.

From Kurt to Blaine: They're at it again.

His eyes turned wistfully toward the pictures of Blaine in his locker; the little boy that played Gavroche, the teenager he'd kissed for the first time at Rachel's Bat Mitzvah, and Blaine's graduation picture from Dalton Academy, his blazer hugging his gorgeous frame with pride.

From Blaine to Kurt: Our time will come. In the meantime...

Kurt opened the picture Blaine had sent and laughed. Lips puckered, eyes full of hearts, it made him miss Blaine more, but also a little less.

Kurt wasn't the kind to take selfies but he also wasn't going to be outdone by his boyfriend. He raised his phone, puckered up next to Blaine's two-dimensional glossy lips and snapped the picture.

From Kurt to Blaine: You're ridiculous. And adorable. And I'm kissing you back.

His smile was wiped off his face though when a hand, Karofsky's hand, grabbed him by the scruff of his neck, slammed Kurt's locker shut, and pulled him into the empty locker room. Kurt wasn't sure if David had pushed him into the lockers or if he'd pressed himself back on his own to get away, all he knew was that his grip on his phone was solid and the lock was grinding into his back. Adrenaline pumped through his veins and a part of him told him to run, but he'd come back to McKinley with no intention of letting any bully, least of all Karofsky, get the best of him.

"I don't know what you're trying to-"

"How do you do it?" Karofsky almost growled, baring his teeth. His eyes raked over Kurt's body from his feet to the top of his head. "You go around in your tight pants, flying your rainbow flag high and you make it look so goddamn easy."

Karofsky slammed his hand against the lockers right by Kurt's head and Kurt flinched but did not waver. Kurt took a real look at his attacker. And yes, there was hate and anger in his eyes, but even more so, there was jealousy. Longing. Confusion replaced Kurt's fear. And then something clicked in his mind.

"Courage," Kurt told him, head held high. "Courage to be myself."

Kurt's heart beat fast in his chest as their eyes remained locked, David scanning Kurt's face, and he was wondering if David was trying to decide where he could get his best shot. But then Dave leaned in. Instinctually, Kurt squeezed his eyes shut, held his breath and waited for the inevitable punch.

There was no punch though. Instead he felt lips, forced onto his in a kiss. Lips that were not Blaine's.

Kurt's eyes opened wide in shock and he pushed Dave off of him. Words raced through his mind, words filled with anger and violation and disbelief, but he stood speechless. The boys stared at one another, Dave's hands clenched in fists.

"Kurt-"

"I have a boyfriend," Kurt said, the only words that spilled from his mouth.

And it was like a spell was broken. "I know." David's hands flew to his eyes, his fingers pulling his hair, gripping it as if it was the only thing keeping him together. "God, I know Kurt, I'm so sorry."

Sorry was the last thing Kurt wanted to hear though as shock subsided and anger boiled to the surface. "So all this time, all those years of attacking me and calling me names, was that your version of pulling my ponytails? Or was it just jealousy-"

"It was always so easy for you," David yelled before turning his back on Kurt and created a divide between them as he walked to the other side of the room. "So fucking easy for you to just be yourself. And I just wanted..." His voice cracked as he leaned one hand against the lockers, resting his head against his forearm.

"Are you-" Kurt couldn't believe what he was hearing. "It wasn't easy at all! People like you made it almost impossible. Is that what you wanted? To make it harder? To prove to yourself why you couldn't come out? Did you want me to leave so you wouldn't have to confront your own cowardice every day?"

"Maybe," David whispered. "I don't know. Maybe I was just so angry at you for doing what I couldn't. And angry at myself for being so goddamn weak." Karofsky looked back at him. Kurt had no idea what he must have looked like but he could see the tears in David's eyes. "How do you do it? Get that kind of courage?"

Kurt knew where he got it. He got it from his mother and father always believing in him. He got it from Santana who taught him not to care what anyone thought and Brittany who taught him to be strong. And he got it from Blaine, always being there for him, even before Blaine could find the courage to be there for himself.

But mostly, it had been inside him all along. "You just have to believe that the things people hate you for are the best things about you. That love is never wrong." He thought of Blaine. He thought of the father who had walked away from him. And he wondered what David thought he risked by coming out. "You have to know that the people who truly matter are the ones who stay by your side, no matter what."

"I'm sorry. I really am Kurt. For kissing you just now and for everything."

Kurt nodded. But forgiveness wasn't that easy. "Your words don't mean anything David. You can't just tell me you're sorry. You have to show me."

"How?" Dave took a step toward him, then stopped. "How do I show you?"

Kurt knew there was only one way. "Be yourself. Have courage."

November 9, 2010

Dear Blaine,

Karofsky kissed me today. And no, I'm not going to wait until you get this letter before I tell you, I'll call you as soon as I'm done so by the time you're reading this you'll already know everything. But I needed to write it down to work it all out in my head.

What do you do when you find out you changed your whole world for a bully who was jealous and hating himself far more than he ever hated you?

But without him, I don't think I would have transferred to Dalton. I don't think I would have had two amazing years with you.

I don't know how to act toward him now.

I guess I didn't really work much out in this letter. Because it's you I really need right now.

Luckily I always know where to find you.

Love,

Kurt

"Blaine?"

Kurt bit his lip as he curled up on his bed, phone tucked under his ear. It had been harder than he thought to get the words out. *Karofsky kissed me*. But it would have been even harder if he hadn't written them first.

He pulled the phone away from his ear to make sure they were still connected, but the seconds were still counting. "Blaine are you there?"

"You don't sound angry Kurt, so I'm trying to let mine pass before I say something I regret," Blaine said.

That didn't help Kurt's nerves. "Are you angry at me?" he asked.

"No." Blaine's answer was quick, but the raw tension in his voice only grew. "I'm not angry at you at all. I'm angry at that asshole for putting his hands on you and his lips on yours and I'm angry that he let his own fear hurt other people, and most of all I'm angry at this fucking society that makes people think that being gay is so awful that they have to hide it and it's okay to beat up anyone who's out and it's okay to walk out on your own children."

Kurt's heart beat in his chest, his own deafening silence filling his room.

"I'm sorry," Blaine sighed.

"He didn't hurt me," was the only thing that Kurt could think of to say.

"This time," Blaine said. "But I don't think pulling you into an empty locker room and kissing you without your consent gives him any points for forgiveness."

"No, it doesn't," Kurt agreed. Blaine remained quiet. "I'm okay Blaine. I really am. If he'd done this earlier before you and I...well, that might have been different. But I'm okay."

"I'm glad you're okay," Blaine said. There was still residual anger, but there was relief too, in knowing Kurt wasn't hurt and was likely safe for the rest of the year. "If something happened to you-"

"Nothing is going to happen," Kurt promised.

"I hate being apart," Blaine said. "I miss you so much and knowing you went through that and I wasn't there-"

"You were there," Kurt said. "In my head. In my heart. You were the first thing I thought of. You always will be."

"Ugh," Blaine growled and Kurt could hear him flop down on his bed. "How are we going to get through another seven months?"

"We've made it through more than seven years Blaine. I think we can handle seven months."

In his time at Dalton, Blaine had nearly forgotten the grind of auditions. Or maybe it was just that his opportunities had been so much greater when he was young. His competition so much less.

He found himself doing little other than working odd jobs, taking classes, and auditioning. He got opportunities to sing for budding composers or at cabarets with friends, but Casting wasn't as charmed by him as they used to be and weeks turned into months without a solid role.

He'd thought about giving up. About throwing in the towel and joining Kurt at NYADA or going to Columbia to become a teacher or a doctor. He could make art on the side, help people for a living.

But he knew, he'd known his whole life, that it was through his art that he wanted to help people.

Like he'd done for Kurt.

He had to remember that it didn't matter how famous you were, everyone had dry spells. He had to believe that soon it would rain again.

He hadn't meant literally though, he thought as he shivered slightly in his still damp clothes. It was a bit of an ominous way to begin an audition but he was determined to prove it didn't mean he was all washed up.

"Blaine Anderson!" he heard behind him in one hot stuffy hallway as he read over his script for his next audition.

Blaine turned and broke out into a smile. "Andy!" he said and the two hugged. They hadn't truly seen each other since doing *Oliver* together in Boston as kids, though they followed each other's careers online. Or lack thereof, Blaine thought to himself. "Fancy meeting you here."

"Well is it really?" Andy laughed. "A workshop for a musical about a young gay couple in the city? I guess I would have been surprised if we hadn't both turned out."

"I guess I'm more surprised that you needed an audition," Blaine said. Andy had been doing really well throughout the years. Far better than Blaine.

"Maybe I didn't." Andy winked, putting his hand on the door knob. "Maybe I'm your scene partner," he said before disappearing inside.

"You're enjoying this," Kurt accused.

Blaine paced in the living room of his apartment. "Well, if I wasn't scared to death of you I might be," he admitted.

"You're scared of me?"

Blaine couldn't decide if Kurt sounded offended or amused. Amused seemed much more likely. "Terrified," Blaine said. "I've seen your wrath directed at other people and I don't want it directed at me."

"So don't kiss him like you kiss me," Kurt said.

Flopped down on the couch, Blaine's hand landed on the script that lay there, menacingly. The fact was, he wouldn't be worried about it at all if his co-star wasn't his ex-boyfriend. "The last thing any actor wants to be known as is a bad kisser, Kurt. Besides," he teased, "I don't even know if I'm capable of kissing badly. I just don't want you to hate me for it."

"And what if my hate comes out in hateful, wrathful sex?"

He rolled his eyes. "Wrathful isn't a word, Kurt."

"Blaine-"

"Then I will take all of your hate and...wrathfulness...and do everything I can to turn it back into love."

"Kiss the boy," Kurt ordered.

Blaine smiled and relaxed into the couch. "Now who's enjoying this?"

"Don't push your luck Anderson," Kurt warned. "Tell Andy *you're welcome*. And he owes me."

"Oh, I think paying you back is what he's looking forward to most about all of this."

"It was beautiful, Blaine" Kurt told him after he was led backstage to Blaine's dressing room. Blaine looked at him, unsure and Kurt never wanted him to feel that way. "I never thought I'd want to see you kiss another man, but with tears running down my face I was practically begging for it." He wrapped his arms around Blaine's waist and pulled him close. He'd almost forgotten how good he was up there. He'd almost forgotten that he'd fallen in love with him up there. He had almost forgotten that when Blaine was on stage, there was nothing but magic. "Absolutely beautiful."

The pride Blaine felt at Kurt's words stripped away every worry he'd had. "Thank you, Kurt." His voice was quiet, the pink in his cheeks glowing as he leaned in until their lips brushed. "That means everything to me," he whispered before kissing him softly.

"So this is the infamous Kurt Hummel."

Blaine chuckled against his lips and Kurt pulled away in surprise to see Blaine's co-star leaning against the doorframe with an amused smirk and a confident swagger. Kurt looked to Blaine, but his boyfriend said nothing, merely turning to pretend to clean up his space. This time it was his turn to enjoy the show.

Well, Kurt would give him one if he wanted it. "Infamous implies something bad, so I think I'll just go with famous, thank you very much," Kurt said.

"Ah, you're right Blaine, he does bite." Andy laughed and walked in, leaning against the dressing room table.

Kurt glanced over to Blaine who was not so successfully hiding a grin. "Telling my trade secrets?" Kurt quipped.

"Merely showing you off," Andy answered before Blaine could. "Your boyfriend is quite fond of you. Always has been. Makes it hard to compete."

"I try to tell you Andy, there is no competition," Blaine said lightheartedly.

"Would be easier to know for sure if I got to kiss him myself," Andy said to Blaine. Kurt raised a curious brow and Andy shrugged. "Blaine told me that I owed you. What better way to pay you back than with a kiss. It's the least I can do to thank you for letting me borrow your boyfriend."

Kurt opened his mouth to protest, then closed it. Because a part of him found the idea intriguing. And fair. And for whatever reason, Blaine was not objecting. In fact, he seemed to be challenging Kurt to say yes.

Kurt decided that two could play at that game. "Well, I remember Blaine once telling me your kisses were mindblowing," Kurt said, stepping closer. "It doesn't seem fair that I just have to take his word for it, does it?"

Andy tucked his grin between his teeth. "No, it doesn't."

He closed the gap between himself and Kurt and they both leaned in, eyes closing, lips barely touching.

Until Blaine stepped between them. "Alright, fun's over, he's all mine now." Andy and Kurt laughed as Blaine closed the door in his face. Blaine turned to look at Kurt across the small room.

Kurt crossed his arms and jutted out his chin. "You enjoyed that," he said.

Blaine didn't answer. Instead he stepped closer, driving Kurt back against the dressing room wall. Hazel eyes were gleaming with mischief, softening with desire, and then Blaine's lips reached his, pressing against him, his tongue warm, tasting like mint and coffee, and Kurt melted. Blaine's arms wrapped around him, holding him up lest his knees buckled beneath him. Suddenly the world was gone, the thought of any other kiss washed away, and there was nothing and no one but him and Blaine.

Kurt sighed as Blaine's lips left his but he kept himself in the darkness for one second more, holding on to the shadow of the kiss. "Now that's what I call mindblowing."

Blaine ran his hand over Kurt's hip. "I think I was promised hateful and wrathful sex."

"Interestingly enough, I'm not really feeling particularly hateful or wrathful." Kurt raised a brow. "Are you?"

"I'm an actor," Blaine said. "I can be anyone you want me to be."

Kurt smiled. "What if I just want you to be mine?"

Blaine leaned in and kissed him again. "I am yours." He pressed their foreheads together, his breath tickling Kurt's. "Always."

May 3, 2011

Dear Blaine,

Is it okay that I'm a little mad that you won't be here for my senior recital? I mean, I get that you're like an adult and you have to work and rehearse and you're already taking the time off for my graduation, but it's literally THE DAY BEFORE! I mean, come on.

Okay, by the time you get this you'll know I'm not really mad, just incredibly disappointed, but I had to get it off my chest and I didn't want to really make you feel guilty.

Maybe just a little guilty.

Love,

Your selfish boyfriend,

Kurt

He didn't usually get nervous before performances. Kurt was confident on stage, of his voice, of his song. He didn't know why this time it was different. He just knew it was.

Maybe it was because it was his last song in Ohio, his last song with the people he'd grown up with since he was in kindergarten. Maybe it was because tomorrow he was graduating from high school. Maybe it was because he and Blaine would be moving in together in the loft they'd share with Rachel and Jesse and for the first time Kurt would really be on his own. Maybe it was because he knew the next performance he would give would be at NYADA, where the audience would judge him far more than they would tonight.

It would have been easier if Blaine were there. But Blaine had to work and he wouldn't be leaving until 9am the next morning, cutting it far too close for Kurt's comfort to making it in time for the graduation ceremony. And the idea of graduating without Blaine...

"Quit shaking the table." Santana smacked his arm and Kurt realized that his leg was bouncing, his fingers were drumming, and he was not paying any attention to the girl on stage.

"Sorry," he whispered. Santana and Brittany had already sung. He was last. Waiting to sing was agony.

The girl finished and everyone clapped. The singer before Kurt was introduced.

"I have to go to the bathroom," Santana whispered, getting up discreetly.

"Now?" Kurt asked. "You're going to miss my song."

Santana looked at him like he'd been replaced with some skittish doppelganger. "How long do you think it will take me to pee?"

Not waiting for an answer, Santana snuck out and Brittany grabbed his hand. "Everything's going to be great," she said with a smile. "You'll see."

From Kurt to Blaine: I should not be freaking out like I am.

From Blaine to Kurt: No, you shouldn't. You'll be great. And I'll be listening.

Knowing Blaine would be listening and there in spirit did help. And the moment Kurt was introduced, Santana safely back in her seat, Kurt dialed Blaine's number and walked to the front of the stage.

"Hello everyone." Kurt smiled nervously at the crowd. Fifteen tables of four or five stared back at him. "My name is Kurt Hummel, and I'm gay." The crowd chuckled and Kurt felt his nervousness start to slip away. "I say that only because I have my boyfriend on the phone here," he said, holding it up to the microphone, "because he's stuck in NY and couldn't leave to see me graduate until tomorrow. Say hello to everyone Blaine."

"Hello, everyone," Blaine called through the speaker and Kurt put the phone on a stool beside him.

"Lots of you know our story, but I'll share it again. Blaine and I met when I had just turned eight years old. He was playing Gavroche on Broadway and I was just a silly little kid seeing my first Broadway show with my parents. Not exactly the most appropriate, but I begged and I was a hard kid to say no to." The audience laughed, but Kurt was lost in the memory. "Anyway, at the stage door it was love at first sight. Neither of us knew it then of course. Well, maybe we did and just didn't want to admit it. But he invited me backstage. My teacher that year had us write to kids in New York and I wrote to Blaine almost every day at the Imperial Theater. And then we kept writing. And years of writing and talking and emailing and visiting and then going to school together at Dalton Academy has led me to here. I've tried to be strong and not let him know just how much I missed him. But today is hopefully our last day apart for a while and I needed him to know. So, Blaine, this song is for you. Ten Hours by Warren Barfield."

Kurt took the microphone off its stand and gripped it in his hands. He rarely sang anything other than Broadway, but he'd had trouble finding a song that said what he wanted to say. Until he found this one. He nodded to his accompanist, closed his eyes, and sang.

*There's ten hours between us tonight
And I feel like my heart will break
'Cause it's been way too long
Since I've last seen your face*

*What I'd give if you were here with me now
And I was lost in your touch
If I know my heart there's nothing
I've ever wanted so much*

*But to love you
Just to love you
It's all I wanna do*

Kurt was a romantic, everyone knew that. And there was so much he wanted to do with his life; go to NYADA, make it to Broadway. But he knew that with Blaine by his side, every accomplishment he had would be that much better.

*There's ten hours between us tonight
And I feel like I could die
But all the pain would just
Go away if I could look in your eyes*

*And love you
Just love you
It's all I wanna do*

Tomorrow he would graduate from high school. End one chapter and start another. Tomorrow he and Blaine would go through his things and decide what to bring and what to leave behind. As he looked out into the audience of people he'd grown up with, as he looked out at Santana and Brittany, he knew he would miss them horribly. But his life was out there. It had always been out there. On the other end of the phone, behind the letters, behind the emails, across campus. Without Blaine, his future just wouldn't make sense.

'Cause I know you're the one

*That I've been wishing for
And I could love you for a thousand years
And wish for a thousand more*

*There's ten hours between us tonight
But tonight can only last so long
By twelve o'clock tomorrow baby
You'll be here in my arms*

*And I'll hold you close to my heart
And I hope you feel my love
Until that day when time or space
Will never again separate us*

Kurt heard the guitar behind him first, before he heard the tenor of the boy he'd loved nearly his whole life. He turned and Blaine smiled at him, slipping through the slit in the curtain. Kurt nearly dropped his mic. His eyes welled up in surprised tears, his voice gave out. But it was okay. Because Blaine was there, to keep singing for him.

*And I'll love you
Oh, I'll love you
It's all I'll ever do*

Kurt glanced out and Santana winked at him. Blaine kept strumming his guitar and drew as close to him as he could. Kurt turned, his full attention to Blaine. And together they sang.

*'Cause I know you're the one
It just feels so right
Would it be okay with you
If I loved you for the rest of my life*

Dropping his mic to his side, covering his mouth as the tears started to fall for real, Blaine gathered him in his arms, where he belonged.

Where he would always belong.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

A Single Look and Then I Knew

"Come on Blaine," Kurt said. He still couldn't believe that Blaine was there, had showed up at his senior recital. That everyone had known about it but him. He should have guessed that Blaine wouldn't miss it, but he knew that things were different now, with adult responsibilities coming first. "We'll bring your bags up to my room."

Burt whisked Blaine's bag out of Kurt's grasp and handed it back to its owner. "You'll be bringing them up to whose room?"

Kurt rolled his eyes. "Dad, we're moving in together in New York in less than a week."

"Yes, the key words there are *New York*. Last I checked, this was Ohio and this is my house. You're not living together here."

Kurt started to protest, but Blaine reached out to soothe his boyfriend. "Kurt, it's fine. I can bunk with Finn now that the guest room is gone. He and I should probably get to know each other better anyway."

Kurt wasn't placated by Blaine. He still glared at his father. "Well he can still come to my room to help me pack, right?"

"Hell yes," Burt said. He crossed the room and settled onto the couch, grabbing the remote. "I certainly don't want to get sucked into that abyss again. Good luck, Blaine."

Blaine raised a brow but didn't say anything as Kurt led him upstairs. He dropped his bag outside of Finn's room and followed Kurt to his bedroom. His eyes widened as he stepped inside.

"Um, Kurt. I hate to be the one to tell you this, but I think a gremlin broke in and covered your room with post-it notes." He slowly walked around. Through the years Kurt had collected new things and discarded the old, but Blaine could still see the bedroom of the little boy he'd first met. Many of those reminders were labeled with a yellow note that said 'stay'. The rest had green notes to 'go' or empty red ones. He picked one off to look at it. "Or did you hide me little love notes on the back of each one?"

"No, sadly I didn't think of that. I was too busy dealing with the fact that packing is hard, Blaine," Kurt pouted, dropping onto the end of his bed.

"Kurt, it's not that hard."

"Don't you even think of lecturing me. When you moved into the loft you were able to do it in incremental steps. First you had everything you brought from Dalton, then you could gradually bring things during the summer from your house to the apartment. I have to bring it all at one time and decide what's going to fit into your already established, though slightly drab, décor."

"You mean decide what things are going to be a sign of our new life to come instead of the childhood you're leaving behind?" Kurt nodded and Blaine sat down beside him, taking him in his arms. "There's nothing of yours that would be out of place Kurt. Whether you brought your stuffed elephant, the picture of us at Dalton, or your mother's perfume bottle-"

"That's a definite," Kurt said.

"I know. The loft will feel like home in no time, I promise. Just remember, I know from the rent it seems like it must be enormous, but it's still a New York City apartment that we're sharing with two other people. There isn't room for everything."

"I have been there before, remember? Honestly Blaine, I really don't need much. As long as there is room for you and me and a closet full of my clothes, we'll be good."

Blaine winced. "Um, yeah Kurt, about that closet..."

Blaine ducked Kurt's playful swing and he wasn't sure he could run out of the room fast enough. It was a blessing really that he was being forced to room with Finn. Otherwise he was pretty sure he'd be spending the evening getting a lesson in redecorating.

May 30, 2011

Dear Kurt,

If you've found this note, then I must offer you my most heartfelt congratulations on finding our bed. I hope you have also found the rose that I laid so romantically beside this missive. I thought about spreading rose petals all over the floor as well but it seemed like overkill. Besides, Finn and Burt would stomp all over them moving you in and then you'd bitch at me about cleaning up our bedroom before you'd even been here 24 hours, and I know there will be enough of that coming, so I decided on the reprieve for now. Anyway...

Today is the happiest day of my life. From now on, I get to go to sleep every night and wake up every morning with you by my side. With many, many kisses in between. And you know how I love your kisses. We have to make up for almost a whole year apart.

Today we are officially grownups, moving in with one another. So there are some promises I wanted to make to you. Full disclosure, selfishly I hope you'll make the same promises to me in return.

- 1. I promise to always sing in the shower if you and I are the only ones home.*
- 2. I promise to make breakfast for us if I'm the first one up in the morning.*
- 3. I promise to never go to bed without kissing you, even if it's an angry, wrathful kind of kiss because we're fighting.*
- 4. I promise to always have a place for you – in my heart, in my home, in my life.*
- 5. I promise to never forget that once upon a time, you were that boy who was proud of me before you ever even knew me.*

*Love,
Blaine*

** X * X * X **

May 30, 2011

Dear Blaine,

It was a delight to receive your missive and your rose. You were absolutely right, the petals would have been overkill. Romantic, but overkill.

While this day is a happy one, I do hope we will find even better days to come as our life goes on. After all, we are way too young to have already plateaued.

I accept all your promises and make them in return, with my own replacement for number five of course.

5. I promise to never forget that once upon a time you were that boy on the barricade who showed me how to live life with fight in his eyes and love in his heart.

"Kurt. Kurt!"

Kurt went running into the living room afraid the loft was on fire. Which meant that the theater history books he was studying would likely go up in flames, which would give him a good excuse for failing his first NYADA exam.

Instead he found Blaine standing in the middle of the living room, phone in his hand, face gleaming. And Kurt knew there was only one thing that could make him look like that.

"You got the part," he said, holding his breath.

Blaine bounced up and down grinning from ear to ear. Parts, Kurt, Plural! I am officially the new swing for *Newsies*. I'm finally going back to Broadway!"

June 11, 2012

Dear Blaine,

Your mother tells me that you and Kurt still write letters to one another because sometimes the things that are hardest to say are easier written.

Things like, I'm sorry.

Things like, I know I've hurt you, though I can't even imagine how much.

Things like, I never wanted to be the father I became. I wanted to be there for you. Protect you. Keep you safe.

The world made that impossible. Before you were 2 years old, I'd already lost that fight.

I tried to keep you on a leash, tuck you under my wing in sight at all times to be sure that no one could ever hurt you again.

And then the planes hit.

I saw them. Did you know that? Did you know I walked across the bridge to get away from the danger, knowing I was a coward leaving you and your mother and brother behind?

Did you know I had nightmares for weeks?

Did you know I could never watch your barricade scene? I couldn't watch you die night after night because it came far too close to my nightmares coming true.

I was harsh with you the night you ran away. Maybe harsher than I should have been. But I was so scared. You took my ability to protect you out of my hands. And I knew that that time, I would never truly get it back.

You were always so independent. Chose a life beyond your years in a business where parents can't really follow behind. You always fought with me for your freedom.

There are things I know I did that upset you. But my regrets fall below your count. Sometimes as a father you make unpopular decisions, but it doesn't mean they were wrong.

But forcing freedom and independence on you before you were really ready was wrong.

Forgetting the love I had for you during those years was wrong.

Losing myself in anger and self-pity and resentment and most of all fear throughout those years was wrong.

But I'm a man of honor. How do I come back from that?

How do I come back to you from that?

Tell me the answer and I will try.

Dad

** X * X * X **

June 14, 2012

Dear Dad,

Walk through the door.

Love,

Blaine

It was a wedding a year in the making. Kurt had insisted on planning every detail, which Carole was more than happy for and Burt dreaded. It wasn't that the groom was worried the wedding wouldn't fit them. Kurt knew his father better than almost anyone. But Kurt had expensive taste and he and Carole, well, they didn't have a lot of money to spend on a spectacle.

Blaine thought Kurt was crazy to want to plan his father's wedding in Ohio all the way from New York City, but he was happy to look through the wedding magazines and the photography and florist and DJ websites with Kurt.

After all, he had plans of his own.

Your dad and Carole's wedding is beautiful. You did a great job.

They sat at the dais, Burt and Carole insisting that this wedding belonged to Kurt and Finn as much as themselves. As the letter was slid across to his place setting, Kurt tilted his head toward his boyfriend in amusement. The excitement of the day was still flush on his face and twinkled in his eyes. Blaine handed him a pen.

Thank you. Why are we writing?

Because some things should be remembered forever.

Well, this certainly is beautiful stationery to remember a beautiful wedding on.

Thank you. You know, we should have a wedding like this someday.

Kurt laughed.

Why Blaine Anderson, are you asking me to marry you?

Yes.

Kurt quickly stopped laughing and stared at Blaine. His boyfriend had a small smile on his lips. A very nervous smile. Kurt turned back to the stationery.

Wait, now?

Yes.

For real?

Yes.

On paper?!

Incredulous, Kurt slapped the pen down on the table and turned to his boyfriend. In Blaine's hands was a small box, the lid up, a gorgeous diamond engagement ring gleaming up at him from inside.

"In real life too," Blaine said sheepishly. "Although I will say it's a lot more nerve-wracking to ask out loud than it is on paper."

Kurt was breathless. "It always is."

"So?" Blaine asked. "What do you think? Will you marry me?"

"Blaine, don't you think we might be stealing Burt and Carole's thunder a little bit here?"

"You think I didn't ask your dad's permission to marry you first?"

Still stunned, Kurt turned to his father and new bride. They were both watching, smiling. Kurt shook his head with a laugh.

He was silent as he picked up the pen and wrote his response.

Yes. I would love to marry you.

Blaine loved performing on Broadway. But if he was honest with himself, the thing he loved more than anything was performing in cabarets. Over the years he'd become a regular in the city, whether it was with Rachel or Jesse or on his own and he loved being able to give Kurt the opportunity to make a name for himself, even while he was at NYADA. The great thing about it was no matter what else was happening, no matter how auditions were going, that stage was always there for them, and so was the audience.

There was a rhythm to Blaine's shows. He mixed it up, but he always started with sharing about himself and ended with sharing his and Kurt's love. In the middle though, in the middle he would always sing for his dad.

Kurt could never understand why he continued year after year, but he always supported Blaine. It had started at graduation but whenever he was able to make it a part of his show he did. Maybe it helped him keep the feelings from bottling up inside. Maybe he just held out that hope.

There are words he doesn't say, softly in your ear.

There are words he doesn't say, words you need to hear.

There are places where he doesn't go that he used to go before.

There are words he doesn't say and you miss them more and more.

He always looked out in the streets, wondering if his father was there. At night sometimes, he would wonder if his father was thinking of him. And every performance during his song, he wondered if his father would finally walk through the door.

Until the day that he did.

*There are words he left behind as the years went by.
There are words that come to mind, words that make you cry.
You have seen the gap between you grow, it gets wider every day.
And you wonder what's behind all the words he doesn't say.*

Perched upon his stool, microphone in hand, it was just a regular day when Blaine looked up to see his father stepping inside the doorway. Blaine's voice cracked.

*There are words he doesn't say though he knows he should.
There are words he doesn't say in the way I would
For the truth is you deserve them so and they're long past overdue.
All the words he doesn't say are the words I'd say to you.
To you.*

He managed to thank his audience and make it off the stage, hands shaking, heart pounding. He sat down next to Kurt while one of his castmates sang.

Kurt took his hand with worry. He still loved seeing his wedding ring circle his finger. "Are you okay?"

"My dad's here," Blaine whispered.

Nothing more was said. Nothing more needed to be said until the final bow and the houselights came up. His father hadn't moved. Blaine watched him from across the room.

"You don't have to talk to him," Kurt told him.

Blaine knew that Kurt believed that, meant it with all of his heart. But he also knew Kurt was wrong.

"Yes, I do."

He waited for the theater to clear, the only ones left were the staff cleaning up. Kurt helped them. Blaine sat down at a table, his hands clasped tight in front of him. His eyes were low, but he could see the shadow of his father approach, could see his hands rest on the chair across from him.

"I walked through the door."

"Yes. You did." Blaine tried to breathe. He tried to steady his shaking voice and tried to calm his frantically beating heart. Still, his fingers began drumming the table nervously. "Why now?"

Blaine's father took a deep breath as he sat down. "Every time you have a performance in the city, your mother leaves me a ticket. There was a long time where I wouldn't touch it. Would just leave it for her to throw out later. I hoped that would make her stop, but it never did. Then, one day, I started putting them in my pocket. I'd walk uptown from my office, trying to gather the courage to at least go to see you, sit in the back and disappear before you even knew I was there. I never did though. There was one day when I got all the way to the marquee, then walked away. That's when I wrote to you. It was as if you knew when you told me to walk through the door."

"I didn't know." Blaine rubbed his hands over his face, trying to wrap his head around what his father was telling him. But he'd never understood. "What were you so afraid of?"

His father looked away. "I've never been very good at admitting my mistakes." John paused. Blaine waited. For what he wasn't sure. He knew there would be no apology. "But I want to be a part of your life."

Blaine could almost feel Kurt's eyes bearing down on him from a distance. Conversations over the years came back to him. "Everyone always wondered why I never got angry at you. But you weren't there and I guess I figured it wasn't worth taking my feelings about you out on the other people I loved. The people that were there for me every day. But you...you want to be a part of my life?" Blaine shook his head, his voice rising. "You always have been! Every day, every minute. Walking away didn't change that. Walking away didn't make you any less my father. You say I wanted independence and freedom and I did, most especially from someone who hated who I was. But you forced me to grow up with a part of myself always missing. And for what? For loving a boy instead of a girl?"

"I didn't...I wasn't..." John struggled.

"Then why?" Blaine yelled.

"Because when I saw that bastard...I let him steal you from me that day. And fourteen years later...I couldn't just sit there and watch him take you again."

Blaine's eyes darkened. "You mean Kurt." John was silent. Blaine flew out of his chair, his blood grown hot with rage. "Kurt is not him! Every boy or man I chose or choose to be with is not him."

"I know." John put his hands up in surrender. "It's not going to make sense to you. Apologies won't mean anything. "The world is changing Blaine. And I want...I want to change with it. I just want to move on from here."

Blaine gripped the table. This was what he wanted. What he had asked for and hoped for, for years. He had in front of him everything he'd always wanted and he wasn't going to let the anger rushing through his veins take that from him. He was better than that.

"This won't change overnight," he said, forcing his voice to remain steady and calm. "I can't just forget everything and let you in. I'm grateful you took the first step. I just..."

John slowly stood up, wringing his hands self-consciously. "I'm not expecting the world today Blaine. Just tell me what the next step is."

Blaine lowered his head, then looked around for the first time since he'd sat down. Kurt stood on the other side of the theater, leaning his shoulder against the wall, watching carefully. Their eyes met. John's gaze followed his son's, and then the two looked back at one another. "You go up to Kurt and you offer to shake his hand. That's the next step."

John nodded and shoved his hands in his pockets. For a minute Blaine thought he was going to walk out. But then he slowly made his way over to the boy, the man, who had been there for Blaine when John had not. And he watched as his father held out a hand and met Kurt's eyes. "Thank you." His voice trembled. "For loving my son when I couldn't."

Blaine knew it wouldn't be easy for him and he didn't want Kurt to do anything he didn't want to. So it filled him with pride when Kurt reached out and shook his father's hand. "I will always love him."

October 22, 2016

Dear Kayleigh,

Blaine and I met when we were just about your age and we started writing each other letters. Little did I know then that I would some day write to our own child, but here I am.

See, you are our child. Mine and Blaine's. We know that nowhere you've stayed so far has been for long. But we want this to be forever. If you want it to be.

Honestly, I can't even imagine what you're going through. What you've been through. I can imagine you're sad and confused and angry and scared and I bet there are more feelings that probably don't even have names.

When my mom died, it kind of felt like that too.

I know it's not the same. I don't mean to compare your life to mine. I just...

When Blaine and I started writing one another we had one rule. You can't erase anything you write. Because if it meant enough to you to write it down, then it must matter an awful lot. And anything we said would be okay.

It's the same for you. If you want to.

I know you may think that it's better not to get attached. After all, we're just a foster home.

But anytime you want to just call this home...that's okay too.

Love,

Kurt

** X * X * X **

October 22, 2016

Dear Kayleigh,

Kurt said that since you wouldn't talk to us we should write to you instead because that's what he and I used to do when it was too hard to talk. Well, truth is, we still do it. We write down anything that's going through our heads or anything that's happening to us and we don't have to see the reaction of the other person right away. It sometimes makes it easier to say things. Hard things.

No one has a perfect family. Believe me, you live here long enough and you'll know that for sure about mine. My dad and I barely talked to each other for years. And he hid from me things that I couldn't remember. Things like you've been through.

And we don't expect you to be perfect either. All we want for you is for you to be safe and happy enough to follow all your dreams. And we'd like to be by your side while you do.

It's okay to be mad and sad and it's okay to pound your pillow or even slam your door (don't tell Kurt I said that). But both Kurt and I have been hurt by people pushing and kicking and hitting and we know sometimes it's hard to find other things to do with those feelings, but we'd like to help you try.

So, whenever you're ready, you can come talk to us. Or...if you look in your desk drawer, there's paper and a pen and you can write to us. You can leave it on the banister for us. I promise you we'll read it. I promise you we will listen.

*Love,
Blaine*

** X * X * X **

Dear Kurt and Blaine,

I'm sorry I hurt you. This is my fifth foster home. No one has really listened before.

I'm glad that you will listen.

*Love,
Kayleigh*

Kurt walked through the door exhausted. He'd had two auditions plus classes today, not to mention running Kayleigh around to ballet and voice and soccer. All he wanted to do was curl up on the couch and watch his favorite reality shows.

Blaine had other ideas. "Come on, I need your help packing for LA."

"LA?" Kurt fell back on the couch, staring at the ceiling. "Oh god, is it pilot season already?" It had snuck up on him. Because after last year, he really thought that Blaine would stop chasing a dream that wasn't even really his.

Blaine hadn't made that promise though. "Kurt, I don't want to fight about this. I thought we'd decided."

"You'd decided."

"Come on Kurt." He pulled his husband off the couch and onto his feet, but Kurt was just a reluctant ragdoll in his arms. He waited for the roll of his eyes, the huff, the standing on his own and finally the eye contact, an agreement to talk Blaine had learned over many years. "Kurt, if I can book a TV show then I can keep affording your shopping sprees down 5th Avenue. Maybe even buy us a house with closets big enough to hold it all."

"No, don't make this about me." Kurt walked away, arms crossed. "This is not about my dry spell Blaine, I am doing the best I can. The roles just aren't there."

"Kurt, that's not what I meant at all."

"Blaine, you chose to take time off when Kayleigh first came to us. She needed someone at home and I was already in the middle of a year-long contract. Yes, it was a sacrifice. But I still don't think that means that every year I owe you a two month trip to California to party with your brother and shoot some pilots that may or may not get picked up."

Blaine threw his arms up in the air. "Well what do you want from me?"

"I want you to stay home. I want us to stay home." Home. Since Kayleigh had come Kurt had missed the kind of home he'd grown up in. The kind with grass and trees and a backyard to play in. The kind of home that let a kid just be a kid. Instead of New York City, where kids grew up way too fast. Especially kids like her. "Remember how you used to talk about a house in the suburbs."

Blaine's forehead scrunched. "You hated that idea."

"Well, that was before we had a vulnerable, beautiful daughter to take care of. She's been through so much Blaine. Maybe she deserves to just live as normal people do for a change. Maybe we all do."

Blaine went to him and rubbed his shoulders. "You're just frustrated Kurt, and I totally get it. But I'm not going to let you give up on your dreams. That Tony Award is in your future. I know it is."

Kurt scoffed. Blaine always said that, but he'd been in the business long enough now to know how things worked. "If it's in anyone's future it's in yours."

"Oh, you want to bet on that?" Blaine laughed. "100 bucks says you get it first."

Kurt learned long ago that craziness ran in the Anderson family. "100 bucks says you get it first. But I think...I think for either of us to win that bet, we need a break to rest and rejuvenate. Let's find a house in the suburbs we can rent to own. It'll be an experiment. If we like it, we'll stay. If we don't, we'll come back."

"Normal people huh? I don't know if any of the three of us know what that even is."

"Well, I think that we should find out. Together."

February 19, 2020

Dear Dads,

I am pretty sure that in the whirlwind of red carpets and opening nights and voice, dancing, and acting lessons, you neglected to teach me about life.

I got into a fight today at school. Apparently in all the glitz and glamor you forgot to tell me that stuck up kids in the suburbs wouldn't like me because I was adopted. From foster care. By two gay dads.

So we can move back to the city any time now.

I know you wanted to trade in your tiny apartment for this big house with a yard that both of you can argue over who has to take care of it.

I know that you were tired of the hours and days and weeks and months spent apart and all the times that each of you had to be a single dad for a while and you thought it would be better for us to be together and "normal" (whatever the hell that is).

I know you thought it would be safer for me out here in the middle of the suburbs without the echoes of my old life trying to pull me back.

Well guess what Dads...you were wrong.

I have in-school suspension tomorrow and detention the rest of the week for the fight and yes I know that means I'm grounded.

But after that, can we please just go home? I promise I won't say I told you so. I promise I won't point out how you two have been moping since we left last June. I promise I won't tell either of you that both of you have been searching Backstage and other casting sites for the past three months and trying to surreptitiously call your agents (good word, I know, yes I'm taking a spelling bee bow).

You said moving here would be an experiment. Well, experimenting is okay...as long as you can admit when your experiment fails.

It's time to go home.

Love,

Your Daughter,

Kayleigh

Kurt had been willing to admit that he missed chasing his dreams. Blaine had been willing to admit that the rest and rejuvenation was exactly what Kurt had needed to relax enough to come back to the city for the role of his dreams. And Kayleigh, well she was willing to admit that maybe some of the people she had started to hang out with after school in New York were maybe not the safest of people.

All three of them were more than willing to admit that they missed the glitz and the glamour and the red carpet like the one they'd walked down earlier that night where Kurt was interviewed and asked more times than they could count how it felt to be Tony nominated as Best Actor in a Musical. He answered with

the obvious. It was an honor just to be nominated. The actors he was up against were all incredibly talented. The greatest joy is to just be recognized for the work.

Still, the minute they called Kurt's name from the front of that stage, he was pretty sure his heart stopped beating. Pushing him to get up and accept his award, Blaine's eyes were glowing with pride. Kayleigh was bouncing in her seat, barely able to contain her excitement.

"Oh my god," Kurt said, breathless, taking the statue, and dear god it really was heavier than he could have imagined. "Blaine and I had a bet on who would win this first and I thought it would be him but he bet on me and never did I think..."

Kurt shook his head, trying to clear his mind. "Um, there are so many people to thank. Jordan and Hurst for writing this incredible story. Matthew Warcus for your inspiring direction. Our producers, Norton and Elayne Herrick and of course our amazing cast and crew, I love every minute I get to spend with you, you are the best that Broadway has to offer.

"Oh Gosh," he laughed. "Kayleigh, my darling daughter, thank you for being you. Thank you for accepting us and making us a family. Thank you for making us move back to New York."

His eyes starting to tear, he knew he had to finish before he fell apart. "Blaine, love of my life, you have been my partner, my best friend, since we were 8 and 9 years old. Broadway brought us together and at times I know we've both wondered if this business might tear us apart. But we aren't us without the stage and the lights and music. This award belongs to both of us. You are my greatest star and I will love you forever. Thank you."

Kurt wiped his eyes as he left the stage, running immediately into well-wishers and interviews. One of the production assistants somehow managed to make her way to him. "Mr. Hummel?" She held out an envelope. "This letter is for you."

Kurt didn't need to look inside to know it was from Blaine and he placed it in his inside jacket pocket until he could get away from the press pool. He finally made it to one of the quiet rooms and sat down to read.

June 12, 2022

My Dearest Kurt,

You should know by now never to bet against me. There was never a doubt in my mind that your moment was out there. I knew it the first time I sat in the audience and saw you up on that stage.

And after all – if you win, I win. And if I win, you win. That's the way our life has always been and always will be.

So I am more than happy to collect my winnings tonight. I hope you'll have some stamina left after all those parties. I believe you're going to need it.

*Love,
Blaine*

September 17, 2051

Dear Blaine,

My teacher thought it would be a good idea if we wrote letters to kids in New York so they know they aren't alone after the terrible things that happened. She had a list from local schools but she also said if we knew someone we could write to them, and the only person I wanted to write to was you.

I don't know if you remember me. I'm Kurt. I'm the boy you brought backstage.

And you're the boy who made me smile after my mother died. And you're the boy that made me discover who I really was. You were the boy I chased, the one that made me want to grow up faster just so I could keep up.

You're the first boy I kissed. You're the boy that gave me the freedom to find my own way. You're the boy who helped me learn what love truly is.

We have been writing to each other for fifty years now. And one would think that after fifty years of letters I would have run out of things to say to you, but I don't think I ever will.

You're the man I married. The man I share a child with. And a shelf full of Tony Awards. You're the man who leaves his clothes on the floor and bakes me way too much dessert and forgets to put the dishes in the dishwasher. You're the man I love to cuddle with, to laugh with, to hold hands with. You're the man who went

strolling for eye-candy with me in Provincetown and made candy with Kayleigh and me in Hershey, and ate ice cream with me at 3am while watching Strangers With Candy. You're the man who held me at the Hollywood sign and promised that whatever happened, you would always put me first. You're the man who gave up everything to hold me when my father passed away. Jazz clubs in Montreal and the Boys & Girls club in Manhattan and club sodas as we watched our daughter graduate from college, and midnight arguments in the backyard or the steps of our apartment or face-timing from miles away. And all the times we made up. I remember each and every time we made up.

Every kiss. Every I love you. Seared into my memory so strong that I know when I remember nothing else I will still remember that.

You are my coffee. My favorite thing in the whole world. The one thing I want to wake up to every morning.

Thank you for writing me back fifty years ago. Because I can't even begin to imagine my life without you.

With all my love,

Kurt