

From the Love to the Lightning

by

knittycat99

Kurt/Blaine || AU || NC-17

Kurt and Blaine are the sons of rival Presidential candidates. There are so many complicated layers to each of their lives, but when they meet and fall in love on the campaign trail, things get even harder.

knittycat99.tumblr.com || www.fanfiction.net/s/8861647/1/From-the-Love-to-the-Lightning

eBook by klaineficspdfs || klaineficspdfs.tumblr.com

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

Genesis (1997-2011) - 4 -

PART ONE

Decisions/The Early Days - 14 -

PART TWO

The Primaries - 44 -

PART THREE

Dog Days - 133 -

PART FOUR

Conventions - 147 -

PART FIVE

The Fall - 153 -

PART SIX

November and Everything After - 181 -

Author's Note: This story is based on a this prompt from odd's tumblr (found on page 32 at [www dot oddarchives stuff dot tumblr dot com](http://www.oddarchives.stuff.tumblr.com).): *Has anyone written a nice, long AU where Kurt and Blaine are sons of the two leading presidential candidates and they have to hide their relationship from the press (and security details) after meeting on the campaign trail? Because I would really like to read that.* Thanks to Odd for planting the seed of this story, and for the beta.

There is another take on that same prompt, written by colferbabes. You can find her story on tumblr ([colferbabes dot tumblr dot com /post/33982004209/not-on-my-agenda-a-political-klaine-au-1](http://colferbabes.tumblr.com/post/33982004209/not-on-my-agenda-a-political-klaine-au-1)) or on fanfiction dot net ([www dot fanfiction dot net /s/8626803/1/Not-On-My-Agenda](http://www.fanfiction.net/s/8626803/1/Not-On-My-Agenda)).

I've played with the Glee timeline just a tiny bit, to make the boys the same year in school, and by necessity they are different boys than they are in canon. What I love about writing AU's is the way one little twist changes everything about a character, and that happened here dramatically with Kurt. Blaine's circumstances regarding his absent parents and his history with homophobic violence is still intact, which makes him a lot closer to canon!Blaine (or at least to my canon!Blaine). I like to believe that I've left Kurt's personality unchanged. He is still snarky and witty, but he is also so much more confident and stronger than the Kurt we know and love.

Now for the down and dirty details: some states (South Carolina and Maine, I'm looking at you) held their 2012 Democratic and Republican primaries and/or caucuses on different days. For convenience's sake in this story, I've made both parties vote on the same day. There is an excessive amount of politics in here. Lots of travel, some snarkiness, teenage panic, and lots of angst. Warnings for mentions of homophobic slurs and violence, suicide, gun violence, and hate crimes.

Glee isn't mine, and none of my original characters are intended to resemble any real people. That said, there *are* real people discussed in this story. They are Rachel Maddow, girl-geek and MSNBC news host extraordinaire, former Arizona Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, who was seriously wounded in a shooting at a public event in her district in 2011, and University of Wyoming student Matthew Shepard, who was killed in a hate crime in 1998.

I've also co-opted that leather cuff and silver Guardian Angelcharm that Chris Colfer wore last summer on the *Land of Stories* book tour.

I freely admit that some of my attitudes toward certain regions or political opinions or voter habits here might fall into stereotype. I am not Southern, I am not Christian, and I'm not Conservative. That said, I follow politics and GLBT-related news closely, and my writing is influenced by that. This is a love story, but it is also a political story: it is a story about the political process in the United States, about the issues that both unite and divide us, and about what I imagine might be the sacrifices people have to make all across their lives to succeed in a business like that. It is also perhaps an idealized story, but I'm an idealist to my core and I really want to believe that there are still good people out there who want to be politicians to do some actual good.

If you don't like politics, or don't like *my* politics, then this is not the fic for you.

This story is complete enough that I will be posting a chapter a week for each of the next 7 weeks. I will likely post on Sundays or Mondays.

PROLOGUE

Genesis (1997-2011)

Blaine should have known it was coming. His whole life, his mother had been climbing the political ladder one race and office at a time, ticking each victory off on a list only she seemed privy to.

Blaine had a list, too, but his was from both of his parents. His *Expectations* list included but was not limited to being on the honor roll and playing a sport and not getting into trouble. By the time he was twelve and understood that the things he was feeling about Brian Cavanaugh who played on the 8th grade soccer team were more than just friendship, well. He suspected that those feelings fell firmly into the camp of something that could get him in trouble.

He kept his own secret, which was easy in his silent and empty house. It was easy, until he got paired up with sweet, quiet Daniel Morey as writing buddies in Freshman Honors English, and they started meeting after school once a week to work on their stories and essays. One afternoon, warm cookies and milk at the Morey kitchen table and Daniel's sister turning cartwheels in the leaves on the back lawn, Daniel leaned in close to Blaine and whispered so softly that Blaine almost didn't hear him, *I like boys*.

Blaine sighed. *Me too*, he replied, and that was the only thing they ever said about it until Blaine decided to see if Daniel wanted to go to the Sadie Hawkins dance. *It's not, you know, like **that***, he reassured Daniel. It was just the two of them, friends and secret keepers, and it was fun and surprisingly uncomplicated.

Until it *wasn't* fun or uncomplicated, Daniel huddled against the wall behind Blaine outside the Kennebunk High School gym as some varsity lineman and his friends drew blood and broke bones. The last thing Blaine was able to do before he blacked out was to stare at Daniel through the blood dripping down his face and plead with him to *just lay still*.

When he came to, he could hear Daniel outside screaming *he saved my life, you assholes. Just let me fucking see him*. When the door opened, the light was too bright and his father was too big, too silent, too *wrong*.

"Who is that boy?" his father said, a finger gently poking at Blaine's left eye which was partially swollen shut.

"Daniel. He's a friend." Blaine's voice was hoarse. "Please, let him come in."

"Is it true?"

Blaine closed his right eye and leaned back into the stupid hospital bed, which was oddly stiff and *really* uncomfortable, and sighed. "You don't need to worry about it," he said, leaving off the *about me* that he really wanted to say, but his dad heard it anyway.

"You have a concussion and a facial fracture, and your hand-" his dad broke off, rubbed at his face. "Don't tell me that I don't need to worry, Blaine."

Blaine looked down to where his right hand was encased in some kind of elaborate splint. He couldn't feel anything. He squinted at his dad with his good eye. "What about my hand?"

"Shattered," his dad said, like it was that easy. "God, Blaine, don't you get it? It could have been so much worse."

"Yeah," Blaine said, bitterness curling behind his teeth. "They could have gotten *both* of us. But I couldn't- I couldn't let that happen to Daniel."

His father rose from his seat, stalked across the room. "Do you realize, if this gets out? Your mother, all the plans . . . you could have been *killed*, and you're concerned about some *boy*?"

"He's the best and only friend I have. Please let him in." He couldn't handle his father in that moment, so he did the coldest thing he could think of. "Go back to work, Dad. I've taken care of myself since I was little. I don't need you here."

His dad was clearly taken aback, but he nodded slowly and moved to the door. "Your mother's on the first flight out in the morning. You can- the nurse can- if you-"

"Just go," Blaine sighed, suddenly exhausted.

After his father was gone, the door creaked slowly open and Daniel poked his head around the corner. "Blaine! Are you-?"

Blaine nodded carefully. "I'll be okay. You found your voice," he said with as much of a grin as he could muster.

"They didn't want to let me see you." Daniel was pale, and he had a bruise darkening under the red scrape on his cheekbone, but he wasn't otherwise physically hurt, at least not that Blaine could see.

"You're okay," Blaine said, sleepy and satisfied.

"Because of you. But Blaine, you didn't have to *do* that."

"Yes, I did." He didn't know how to explain it to Daniel, what it had felt like seeing those guys coming. Thinking about the hours Daniel's dad worked on the lobster boat, and his mom working nights as a home health aide, and his little sister. They were a real family. They needed Daniel like he needed them, but Blaine needed nobody because he was always alone anyway. He had nothing to lose by giving himself up, but Daniel had everything. "Will you stay, till my mom gets here?"

"Of course," Daniel nodded, and settled into the chair next to the bed.

When Blaine woke up in the morning, Daniel was gone. Nobody else was there either.

He lost the rest of the school year. Between surgery and all the time in the cast, then physical therapy and the stupid blinding headaches that took till the spring to go away, it was just as well. He went down to D.C. with his mother once he could travel, spent his days at the museums and in the library and wandering around the city while his father pulled strings and got him a spot at Andover for the fall. He was going to have to repeat ninth grade, and while *he* didn't care if he stayed at Kennebunk, apparently his parents thought that it was better for him to have a fresh start, someplace where *nobody knows, Blaine*.

The night before he left for school his dad took them all out to dinner in Kennebunkport. It felt strange, eating among the tourists at the Arundel Wharf, and after dinner they walked through town and went for ice cream at Cape Porpoise like they used to when Blaine was a kid, before his mom got elected to the Senate and they actually did things together instead of being strangers. They didn't talk, really, except for his mom asking questions about what he wanted to get involved with because *Andover has so many more opportunities for you*.

Blaine didn't care about opportunities, he just cared about being able to be himself, but that was its own problem because his father told him in no uncertain terms as they drove down 95 through New Hampshire that *you shouldn't flaunt yourself, Blaine, it wouldn't be good for your mother if this gets out*.

Blaine just stared out the window and tried not to feel hurt. *He* knew that being gay wasn't anything to be ashamed of, why didn't his parents?

Sometimes, once he'd settled in at Andover, Blaine thought that getting bashed was the best thing that had happened to him because it was what allowed him to be *there*. He *loved* school, loved his little house where he lived with five other Freshmen and their house advisor. He loved water polo, and his English and History classes, and choir. On weekends he'd walk into town and have coffee and sit for hours in the bookstore just looking at all the books. In the winter he tried out for the musical and got a small part in the chorus. He wasn't a star, but he finally felt welcome somewhere.

He didn't go home much at all, after that. Camp in the summers, school the rest of the year, and breaks meant choosing between the vacant house in Kennebunk or his mother's vacant apartment in D.C. He finally just started going home with friends, instead, because it was easier than feeling like a burden to his parents, and they made even less effort than he did.

He really hardly gave them -politics or any of it - a second thought.

He was happy, and everything outside of his daily life was just all so far away.

Kurt Hummel felt like he lived his life in pictures, literal snapshots that faded but never really disappeared. He was three, having a tea party with his mom in the garden. He was six, sitting on the hood of a Subaru watching his dad change the battery. He was eight, standing with his father at his mother's funeral. Ten, watching his dad stammer and shuffle his feet when he met Carole, whose son Finn was new to Kurt's scout troop. Eleven, standing next to Finn, the two of them awkward and itchy in rented tuxes as their parents married at city hall.

He was twelve, being shoved hard against the bike rack outside of Lima North Middle School, the 8th grade culprit sneering at him with a growled *fuckin' fag*.

Kurt rode home the back way, that day, shedding all his tears in the woods so that there would be no evidence when he walked in the door. But his dad had known anyway, his dad *always* knew, so Kurt let him fix toast and milk and then they sat carefully at the table and his dad asked him what happened to make him so upset.

"This kid at school," Kurt began, and then swallowed. He knew it was true. He'd known since he was a little boy, but it felt *real*, now, in a way it never had before, because knowing and understanding were two different things. "He shoved me against the bike rack and called me a name."

"What did he call you, Kurt?" His dad's voice was level and serious, but not mad at Kurt. He was *never* mad at Kurt.

"He called me a fag."

His dad flopped back in his chair and sighed, tugged off his cap and rubbed his hand over his head. "Yeah. I've been waitin' for this. Your mom and I talked about this day, I just didn't think it would be happening yet."

Kurt looked at his dad. "I don't think I understand."

"You remember your third birthday?"

Kurt nodded, because he did remember. "I got those sparkly red shoes." He sighed happily. "They were awesome."

"Yeah," his dad choked. "But you might not remember, when your mom asked you what you wanted as a present, you told her a pair of sensible heels. I wish she was here, she was always so much better at this kind of stuff."

Kurt blinked away unexpected tears, and when he looked across the table his dad was doing the same. "What kind of stuff?"

"This," his dad waved his hand between them. "Talking. I just, I need you to hear me, kiddo, okay? You are okay. I love you, and I'll always love you. It doesn't matter what some thug at your school says, or what anyone else thinks. You don't listen to them, you listen to *me*. And you listen *here*," he tapped his chest with his hand, right over his heart. "You're just fine, Kurt, and anything you tell me isn't going to be a surprise."

Kurt nodded, and twisted his hands together on the table in front of him. "I'm gay, Dad."

"I know, kiddo." His dad moved suddenly, tugged Kurt out of his chair and wrapped him tight in a bone-crushing hug. "The kids at school keep giving you trouble, you let me know, okay?"

"Okay," Kurt promised, but he didn't want his dad to worry. He vowed to keep quiet, which was fine until some seventh grade boys stole his clothes while he was in PE so he had to wear his gym clothes the rest of the day. The next week he got tripped in the hall and caught his forehead on the corner of someone's open locker door; the nurse clucked over him and called his father, and then they were in the ER waiting for Carole to come back with the doctor.

Kurt gripped his dad's hand tight enough to make the bones creak while the doctor stitched him up, and then the doctor wanted to talk with Kurt alone, so his dad and Carole went into the hall. He talked to the doctor, told him about the bike rack and PE and the incident in the hall. He left out the name-calling, the jeers and taunts, the way nobody would sit with him at lunch. The doctor nodded and wrote on his chart, and Kurt could hear his dad's barely contained rage through the cotton curtain.

"I'm goin' down to that school tomorrow and havin' a word or fifty with that principal. My kid doesn't deserve to be treated like that," he was saying, low and intense, and Carole was soothing him with little success.

It was worse the next day, walking into school with a bandage on his forehead and his dad by his side, the two of them ushered into the principal's office before the counselor took Kurt to her office *so your father and Principal Jordan can talk in private.*

Kurt appraised the counselor's ill-fitting blue skirt suit and unfortunate shoes, listened to her condescending prepared speech about how sometimes kids are jealous of things, and that's why they act out that way.

Kurt tipped his head at her and scowled. "I'm *gay*. I'm pretty sure that nobody is jealous of me. In fact, I'm about 110 percent sure that they *hate* me and that's why they're doing this."

The counselor drew back, her eyes wide. "Your father knows?" she asked.

"Of course," Kurt replied.

She pursed her lips. "I see. Well. That changes things."

"Excuse me?" Kurt's stomach flipped, and he felt entirely inadequate to handle this woman who was looking at him like he was a rare insect specimen in a jar. Kids were one thing, but this woman was supposed to be his authority figure. He didn't know how to escape from her without being rude, and his dad had raised him better than that.

"I'm not sure that school is the place to be vocal about your lifestyle choice. It's distracting from the academic environment." She steepled her fingers in front of her chin and peered over them at him.

"Because the 8th graders two lockers down from me who make out and feel each other up *under their clothes* in the hall every morning is so supportive of academics." His words dripped with scorn. "I'm done here."

He shouldered his backpack and stalked into the outer office. The secretary glanced up when he slammed the counselor's door shut.

"You okay, honey?"

"I'm Kurt Hummel, 6th grade. Please mark me absent today. I would guess that in about five minutes my father will come storming out of the principal's office. Please tell him that I'm waiting for him in the car. I doubt I'll be coming back here to school."

He turned on his heel and walked carefully to the car to wait for his dad, who made it back to the car in three and a half minutes.

"The principal tried to make me think it was your fault," he said, flinging his cap on the dash.

"The counselor tried to tell me that my being gay would take attention away from academics."

His dad set his hands on the steering wheel, flexed his fingers, and frowned. "I don't suspect that Lima South will be any better, and you're sure as hell not going to any of those damn parochial schools. I guess we'll just have to do home schooling."

Sitting in the car with Kurt, the two of them fuming mad, Burt knew that it was settled. Finn stayed on at Lima North, and Kurt did homeschooling, and Burt Hummel discovered that bullying wasn't just a

problem in Western Ohio. He read stories about kids all over the country who were taking their own lives in droves because of it, and read about the parents of kids who'd been killed by other kids because of their differences. Every news article and interview and internet link left him sick and shaking. It felt like there was no possible way to protect any of those kids any more than he could protect Kurt. He got pissed off, and there was nothing he could do. There was nothing until the guy who'd held the seat in the Ohio 4th for the last half century died.

The day they announced the special election, Burt sat the family down over Friday dinner and threw the idea on the table.

"It would mean a lot of work," he said, waiting for them to say no and dreading having to tell them that he'd already filed his papers to run.

Finn looked up from his meatloaf with measured deliberation and said with focus, "No, man. I think it's a great idea. Maybe you'd be able to really *do* something about all those problems you guys are always complaining about, like the war and the banks and the stuff with schools."

Carole nodded her approval. "I think you'd do really well, honey," she said quietly and scooped another helping of salad into her bowl.

"Kiddo?" Burt eyed Kurt, who was staring into his mashed potatoes like they were going to start tap dancing or something.

"I think you should run," he said carefully, and then paused for a moment. "And when someone asks about your family, you shouldn't be afraid to tell the truth about me. I'm not ashamed of who I am, and I know you're not either."

Burt frowned at his son, thirteen and with no right to be as secure in himself as he was. "I'm not letting anyone exploit you, Kurt. That's not what elections should be about. They should be about the issues, and not whether my son, who I love with every breath in my body, is gay or not."

Kurt just shrugged and went back to his dinner, almost like he was silently telling Burt to think what he wanted, they would all just have to wait and see.

That first election was dirty, and the other guys dug deep against Burt, but he gutted it out and emerged with his family and his soul intact, and a sudden new job on top of the garage. They struggled, they really

did, Kurt tagging along to D.C. sometimes that first year, and then helping out with the re-election campaign. It seemed to loosen people's minds, meeting Kurt, and Burt wished that he could have Kurt with him all the time because he really seemed to connect with the voters on a personal level. But by the time he was ready to run his third race, Kurt was a sophomore at McKinley and seemed to be doing well, what with Glee club and all his friends, and yeah, okay. Carole sometimes called him late at night after the boys were in bed to tell him she was worried, Kurt was silent over dinner or went straight to his room after school. "He'll be okay," Burt reassured her. "Kurt's always been a little sensitive, and there's a lot, um, going on?"

"You're right," Carole said, sounding relieved. "I'll just keep an eye on him. Don't worry."

Burt sighed. "I'll try not to."

Kurt got more and more sullen as the school year went on, though. Burt and Carole even talked with him about going to D.C. for the spring semester, but he swore up and down that nothing was wrong. He really wanted to stay at McKinley because he didn't want to miss the Glee Club competitions, he said, and he kept reassuring them he was safe, so they let him stay.

Burt just worried in silence.

Junior year wasn't any better, Kurt angry and pale and lashing out at all of them. Burt offered again, to take Kurt to D.C, but Kurt said that if he did that then he'd be letting them win, and he didn't think he could do that again.

"So we all have to suffer," Burt whispered to Carole as they cuddled in bed on one of his weekend visits home. "I love that kid, but he's coming undone and I don't know what to do to help him."

"Maybe we should talk to that counselor, Ms. Pillsbury?"

Burt shook his head. "I dunno. Kurt and I are both a little wary of the counselors in Lima City Schools. We haven't had the best track record."

"What else? You're worked up about more than just Kurt." Carole rubbed her hand over his arm, and her touch raised goose bumps on his flesh.

"It's the election next year. I have some decisions to make." It was all jumbled in his head, too many options and not enough answers.

"You're planning to run again, right?" Carole looked at him, concerned. "You love Congress. You have a place there."

"There's a lame duck President." How was he going to decide if he can't even *say* the words.

"You're not thinking about . . . *you know*. Are you?" Carole tucked herself closer to him.

"I don't know," he said honestly. "It would mean some research first, and lots of talking with you and the boys. It wouldn't be like running locally at all. There's a lot to consider."

Carole smiled up at him. "Then you should start to consider it, I think."

Burt wrapped his arms around her, kissed the top of her head. "I think I will."

PART ONE

Decisions/The Early Days

October 2011

Kurt was having the worst day of his life.

Nobody saw anything. Nobody ever saw anything, and nobody cared that he was losing control over everything. And who was going to believe him if he told?

So he shut the world out, navigated his day on autopilot and numbed his heart against the chilling sound of Karofsky's words in his ear, soft and too intimate for the threat they conveyed. *You tell anyone and I'll kill you*, he'd said, calm as anything, and Kurt just stood there, frozen. There was nothing to say, nothing to do. He just had to take it.

He *hated* being helpless like that.

His hands shook on his steering wheel the whole way home, and he knew he had to be ghost-pale. He was scared, and he just wanted the sanctuary of his room and some silence to try and steel himself for another day in the trenches.

When he turned onto their street, though, his dad's car was in the driveway. That didn't make sense, because he wasn't supposed to be home until the weekend. He threw himself through the door only to find his dad and Carole sitting at the kitchen table with cups of coffee and a stack of papers in front of them.

"Oh, crap," he frowned as he skidded to a stop on his heels. "What's wrong?"

His dad looked up at him with a smile. "Nothing's wrong, we just have something to talk with you boys about."

"When is the baby due?" he said, because he was pretty sure it was only a matter of time before there was going to be a half-sibling on the way for him and Finn.

Carole chuckled. "No, honey, I'm not pregnant. But we need to wait for Finn to get home from practice."

He glanced back and forth between them, and he suddenly knew without a doubt what the news was. He'd suspected it for a long time; his dad had been spending more and more time in DC, even on the weekends, and when he *was* home he'd spent a lot of time on the phone talking polls and fundraising.

He was doing more groundwork than they'd ever needed for any of the House campaigns.

"You don't even need to ask me," he said, trying not to bounce on his toes and his voice breathless. "Yes. Yes, of course you should run. I have to come with you."

It wasn't as simple as that, of course. They spent days talking about it, and around it. On the third night, his dad went silent when they were talking about the primaries. "There's a really good chance that I won't even get past Super Tuesday, guys. This is a huge risk, and it's not something I'm doing because it's a game. I'm doing it because I want to make things better, and there probably won't be a better time than now."

Kurt looked around the table, at Carole who was smiling with tears in her eyes and at Finn who was nodding solemnly. "Dad," he said, firm and determined. "We all agree. You *need* to do this, and we'll all support you."

His dad planted his hands flat on the table with a *thunk*. "Okay, then. I'll file on Monday."

Later, Kurt was curled up on his bed with one of Carole's Suzanne Brockmann books, avoiding the Chemistry homework he'd set on the floor, when his dad knocked on his door.

"We need to talk," he said, opening the door before Kurt had a chance to invite him in.

"Dad! You can't just barge in like that."

"I knocked."

Kurt set his book down and groaned. "What if I'd been in the middle of something?"

His dad coughed and looked down. "Good point," he said, turning red around his ears. "Won't happen again. But we *do* need to talk, kiddo. Because I know you're telling Carole things are just fine, but I *know* you, and you're not fine."

Kurt closed his eyes around the terrified tears he'd been fighting all week. "No," he finally admitted. "I'm not fine. I can't – I can't tell you why, please don't make me."

"Is it worse than middle school?"

"Yes," Kurt sighed. "So much worse."

His dad nodded at him, his mouth set in a firm line. "Okay. Would talking to the school help?"

Kurt's heart beat faster. He couldn't breathe. "No, Dad. Oh, god, no. Please don't, that would make it even *harder*. You can't!"

"You're my kid, Kurt. It's my responsibility to protect you."

"Then please, let me go with you. I can do homeschool again, and being on the campaign with you would be such an amazing experience. Living history, and all that."

His dad shifted a little, and Kurt scooted aside so his dad could sit on the edge of his bed. "I think that's also something we need to talk about as a family. It would mean leaving Carole and Finn here alone a lot, and I think all that travel would be a burden for you. And, last year you told me that you didn't want the bullies to win. What changed?"

Kurt couldn't tell his dad, not all of it. Not the who and the what, but he could certainly tell him the why. He took a deep breath. "Don't ask me for the details, but just believe me when I tell you that it's not safe for me there, anymore, and there's nothing anyone can do because nobody cares."

His dad rubbed at his eyes. "Okay. We'll talk about it more tomorrow. But Kurt?"

"Yeah?"

"I want you to really think about this. If you're going to leave school and come on the road with me, you need to commit to it. No going back in three months if you don't like the travel. And you *have* to keep up

with your schoolwork. Anything less than a B and you get confined to the hotel on every stop. So make sure you really want it."

"Okay, Dad." But Kurt didn't need to think about it. He knew. He knew he was never going back to McKinley, and for the first time in months he was able to sleep that night.

Blaine was fresh from the showers after practice, his swim bag heavy with his suit and towels on his shoulder. He walked out of the gym with some of the other guys, made plans to meet with Andy to work together on pre-calc Sunday afternoon. Once they left the heart of campus, though, everyone else peeled off for their own clusters and Blaine was left alone to walk the rest of the way to Abbot. He loved the small dorms and close community of living in Abbot Cluster, but sometimes he hated the long walk from the pool back home. The afternoon was unseasonably warm for early October, so he tipped his face up to the sun that was filtering through the trees and smiled, hummed a little bit of his solo under his breath. The fall concert was coming up the beginning of November, and he wanted his performance to be perfect.

Laura, his dorm counselor's three year old, was riding her trike up and down the front walk. "Hi, Bwaine," she said as she pedaled past him. He knocked his knuckles lightly on her Dora the Explorer helmet and she giggled, which made *him* laugh.

He felt good, happy, like life was just moving along and nothing could touch him. He was still smiling when he opened the front door to his house and was brought up short because his parents – *both* of his parents – were sitting carefully on the edge of the sofa while Callie talked to them.

"Mom, Dad," he said with a nod of his head. He tugged his swim bag off his shoulder and held it up. "Let me go put my things away, I'll be right back down." He started up the stairs, heard his mother calling after him, but he didn't reply.

He closed the door to his room behind him and dropped his bag on the floor. He leaned against the door, breathing heavily. "Fuck," he whispered into his room. "This isn't going to be good."

To calm the little knot of anxiety in his stomach, he worked through the familiar motions of removing his wet suit and towels from the bag. He tossed his suit into his laundry basket and hung his towels over the bar on the back of his door. Then he changed from his school clothes into a pair of sweatpants and a long-

sleeved T-shirt and his house slippers. If he was going to have to deal with his parents, he was at least going to be comfortable.

He headed back down the stairs, feet heavy. He was pretty sure that nothing that was about to happen was going to be good.

"Blaine," Callie smiled warmly at him. "Visit with your parents a little bit. I'll be outside with Laura if you need anything."

"Thanks," he said, and took up her vacated seat on the couch across the coffee table from his parents.

"You're looking very casual," his father said with a barely disguised frown.

Blaine shrugged. "It's been a long day. Had a good, hard practice." Not like it was his father's business at all. "I've got tons of homework to start tonight. I like being comfortable."

"Your father and I want to take you to dinner in town," his mother jumped in. She took his father's hand. "We have some good news, something I think you'll be excited about. It will mean big changes for us, though, and for you as well."

Blaine frowned at them. "And you want to take me out someplace public so I don't make a scene."

"No, that's not it at all," his mother protested.

"Really." Blaine let a little sarcasm drip into his voice. "Because that's how it feels. Why don't you just tell me now, and then we can go to dinner and pretend that we're all one big happy?"

His father pushed to his feet, his voice loud. "You can't talk to us like that, we're your parents."

Blaine felt like his entire universe was being invaded. "You've never been my parents. I've raised myself since I was in elementary school. You sent me here because you couldn't handle the truth, and now that I've made a real life for myself I'm not going to let you take it away. So just fucking tell me." He felt suddenly weary.

"Language," his father admonished, but it was halfhearted at best and Blaine could see that that he had started to give up the fight.

"I've given it a lot of thought," his mother began, reaching for his father's hand and tugging him back down to the sofa. Blaine felt something like dread roll through his stomach. "And I've decided that the time is right for me to run for President."

Blaine let out a heavy breath. "What will that mean for me?" Other than occasional campaign appearances and a dramatic lack of parental presence in his life, his mother's political career had impacted him very little over the years.

"Well, you'll stay here until the end of Fall Term in December, and then you'll come out on the campaign trail with us. Your father is taking a sabbatical from the hospital, of course, so we can be out there as a family."

"No." Blaine stood, his hands in fists on his hips. "Absolutely not. I *like* it here, I have responsibilities. People are counting on me, in choir and on the team. We have Sectionals coming up next month, and the fall concert . . ." he trailed off, because there was nothing else to say, and his mother was just sitting there shaking her head at him.

"I'm sorry, Blaine," she said. "I understand all of that, but we both feel that it's for the best. Show a united family to the public."

"Lie to them, you mean." It was a low blow and he knew it, but it was also the truth.

"No," she tried to calm him. "Maybe this is the chance we need, to grow closer to each other. We miss you, honey."

Blaine pulled his Crew hoodie off the overflowing wooden coat rack on the wall behind the door and tugged it over his head. "Whose fault is that? I gotta – I can't *deal* with this right now."

"Blaine, wait!" his father called after him, but Blaine was already out the door. Laura was off her trike, still wearing her helmet but digging in the grass with a stick. Callie was standing at the end of the walk leaning on the fence and talking with Heather, one of the dorm parents next door. He brushed past them with a muffled '*scuse me* and headed down to the edge of the field that was at the heart of the cluster. He heard footsteps behind him, but he didn't slow down or turn around.

"Blaine?" Callie was breathless when she caught up to him. "Hey."

"Hey." He sniffled, and swiped at his eye with the cuff of his hoodie. "Sorry about that."

"No, honey. It's okay. Heather will sit with Laura for a few minutes. Wanna talk?"

Normally Blaine loved talking with Callie because they were both avid readers and they liked similar movies and TV shows, and she would sometimes sit in the tiny house kitchen with him when he had the urge to bake, and listen to him sing along with the radio while he worked. But everything *hurt*, right then. "I don't know what to say. Did you know?"

"Only that they had news for you. I hope it's not bad."

"Only if you're me." Blaine bit back a bitter laugh. "My mother is running for president and she wants me to join them on the campaign trail. I don't *want* that, but I don't think I have a choice. They're going to pull me out of school once Fall Term is over. Like it doesn't matter what *I* want at all."

"I'm sure your mother just wants what's best for you."

"No." Blaine swallowed hard. "It's always about what's best for them. *Be good, Blaine and don't flaunt yourself, Blaine. Get good grades, Blaine. Don't make things harder for your mother, Blaine.* Did you know, I went to one of the Alliance meetings a few weeks ago? Because I finally felt safe enough to stick a toe out of my fucking closet, and now I'm going to have to walk back in and deadbolt the door because god forbid Elaine Anderson, Republican darling, takes her queer son out in public." He was crying full on by then, and Callie just stood next to him, her hand rubbing circles on his back, trying to soothe him.

"Just breathe," she kept telling him, and he finally cried enough tears to comply. "It's not the end of the world, you know," she said once he stopped shaking. "You'll get to see lots of the country this way. And," she prodded him in his side with her elbow, "you'll get to do schoolwork wherever you want. No sitting in class, no having to change out of your pajamas."

Blaine leaned his head on her shoulder. "No musical, no choir, no show choir competition. Just me and them. It's easy to pretend to be what they want when I never have to see them. I don't think I know how to be *that* boy."

"What's wrong with letting them see the real you? Because you're a good boy, Blaine Anderson. You're smart and funny and a little wacky, and any parent should be thrilled to have you for a son."

"They think the real me is someone to hide away, and I'm fucking *sick* of hiding."

"Yeah," Callie said with a sigh. "Will they be joining you for dinner?"

Blaine shook his head. "They want to take me out. Maybe if I put on a really good sullen brat act they'll let me stay home."

"You should go," Callie said, tugging on his sleeve. "You should put on your nicest outfit and make them take you to Palmers because they can afford it, and then when you come home you and I can make cookies and you can borrow *The Night Circus*. I got it when I took Laura for story time this morning."

"Playing dirty, bringing in the bestseller," Blaine said with a light groan, but he nodded. "Okay," he acquiesced. "I think I can do that. But I'm still going to fight them on letting me stay in school."

"I wouldn't expect anything less," Callie said with a smile.

Dinner was a very stilted affair. Blaine's father was oddly placating, his mother was pleading, and Blaine was too silent. The food was delicious, though, and even though Blaine knew there would be warm cookies and milk when he got home he still ordered tiramisu for dessert because it was his favorite.

"I really want to stay at school," he finally said calmly once his parents had coffee and he had a refill on his root beer. "I know you think it would be best for us to be a family, but I also think that it shows the public that you value education, by letting me stay. And, you know, what does it say about commitment, if you take me away from the things that I've given my time to?"

Blaine's mother just tilted her head at him like she didn't understand what he was saying. "We all have commitments, Blaine. Don't you think it was hard for your father to take a break from the hospital? But he's sacrificing for this family, and we expect you to as well."

Haven't I sacrificed enough for this family? Blaine thought to himself. He leaned back in his chair, crossed his arms over his chest and sighed. His chest felt heavy, and he was terrified of the words that were threatening to spill out of his mouth. "I guess you want me to keep quiet about . . . who I am, then."

His father frowned at him. "You haven't mentioned it since *the incident*," he said in a whisper. "I thought we were done with that, clear about how things had to be."

"It's not a big deal," Blaine argued. "It's *never* been a big deal, not for me. It's just who I am. Why can't that be enough?"

"Because it would get me *crucified*," his mother hissed. "I'd get no respect. The party would distance itself. It's against everything the party believes in."

"So your party and your career are more important than your own son?" Blaine felt stupid tears again at the corners of his eyes. He blinked and stood, placing his napkin carefully on the table. "That's my condition, if you want me to come with you. I'm not saying announce it to the press, but I'm not going to lie for you either. Let me tell my truth if anyone asks, and I won't fight leaving school."

His parents stared at him, both of them open-mouthed in shock.

"Thank you for dinner," he said. "I need some air. I'm going to walk home. If you want, you can come for Saturday breakfast, but I have plans for the rest of the weekend that I can't change."

His father nodded and broke the adult silence at the table. "I'll send you an email later."

Blaine moved carefully through the room until he was out on the sidewalk. He was shaking, but he was still standing and he didn't feel quite so scared.

It was a quiet walk, back through town onto campus. The outside light was on and the door was unlocked, and when he got inside Tommy, Greg, and Ethan were watching TV. The opening credits for *CSI: New York* flashed on the screen.

"Hey, man," Tommy said, and held up his fist for a casual bump. "Nice dinner?"

"Yeah," Blaine said. "Food was good. My parents, well. That's another story."

"Sorry 'bout that. I think Callie's waitin' for you in the kitchen, but we're gonna watch *Blue Bloods* at ten." Tommy gestured to the empty spot on the couch next to Ethan, who nodded. "You still got a crush on the kid who plays Jamie?" he teased.

Blaine ducked his head and stared at his shoes. "Shut up," he grumbled, but he really didn't mind the teasing; it made him feel like he was normal, one of the guys. "Yeah, I'll watch," Blaine said, setting his shoes on the stairs with his blazer folded neatly on top. He unbuttoned his cuffs and worked on rolling his sleeves up as he made his way into the kitchen. Callie was sitting at the table with a book propped in front of her and the ingredients for the cookies lined up neatly on the counter. The oven was already warm.

"Someone's jonesing," he teased her lightly. "You know you could have made them yourself."

She looked up from her book. "But mine aren't as good as yours."

"Flattery won't get you special treatment," he said with a smile, and tugged a clean apron out of the drawer by the fridge.

"What special treatment? I'm the only one you make cookies for."

"True," he said over the rush of water. He washed his hands carefully with the lemon hand soap that Callie liked, and then carefully scraped the butter into the mixer. "I gave my mother an ultimatum tonight," he said with his back to Callie. Sometimes he just needed not to *look* at people when he talked about hard things.

"What did you tell her?"

Blaine scooped sugar out of the canister and into the bowl, and turned the mixer on low. "I said I wouldn't fight them about leaving school as long as I didn't have to lie about who I was. Not that I'm going to flaunt it, but if someone asks I won't deny it."

"And?"

"I guess they need to think about it."

Callie sighed. "I'm sure they'll come around."

"I hope so." Blaine turned the mixer up to medium and cracked the eggs and measured the vanilla while the butter and sugar whipped.

"Hey," Callie said over the whirring of the mixer. "Who taught you how to bake?"

"I had a nanny when I was in elementary school. We used to bake after school every few days. Then, when I was old enough to be home alone in the afternoons, it made the time pass. It's comfort." He focused on the familiar motions of adding the rest of the ingredients, let the routine calm him a little. "And I like being able to feed the people I care about."

"I'll always gladly eat whatever you want to bake, honey, but I wish you had a little better way to cope than eating your feelings."

Blaine turned to face Callie, careful not to spill the flour in the measuring cup onto the floor. "I'm not eating my feelings," he said, indignant. "I'm *baking* them. That way everyone *else* can eat my feelings."

He faced back to the counter just in time, just before the tears that had been building all night long spilled over his eyes and dripped down his cheeks. He dumped the last of the flour into the bowl, set the measuring cup down on the counter, and tipped his chin up to keep the tears out of his mouth.

"Blaine?" Callie's voice was full of concern behind him, and the only answer he could give her was a shake of his head and a strangled *please, don't*.

He felt her moving through the kitchen, though, and it was only seconds before she was next to him. "You know you don't have to hide from me, honey. Don't forget, I *know* you. You don't have to be okay with me."

"I know," he blubbered. "I just don't know what it's going to be like out there. I'm safe here, and out there I'm just going to be this weird boy who doesn't know how to be anyone's son or anyone's *anything*."

"You matter," Callie said with more conviction than Blaine had ever heard in her voice. "You're special just because you're *you*."

"But it's not *enough*," he said. "It's never enough, not for *them*. And if I'm not enough for them, then how will I be enough for everyone else?"

"Everyone who?" Callie sounded confused.

"All those people out there who are going to look at me and see some perfect boy. I'm just going to disappoint them the same way I've disappointed my parents my whole life."

"Who says you've disappointed your parents?" Callie's hand was firm on his forearm. "Have they ever told you that?"

Blaine thought for a moment, and then shook his head. "No. Not exactly. But they've also never said that they're proud of me, and if I were everything they wanted in a son then how come they've left me alone my whole life?" It was something he really wanted to ask his parents, but he could never seem to find the words; he figured it had a lot to do with not wanting to hear their rejection outright. It was easier, somehow, to imagine it. Knowing it for sure might just break him.

"I think that's something you need to talk with them about. But do me a favor and remember something, okay?" She pulled a paper towel off the roll, dampened it in the sink, and handed it to Blaine.

He wiped his face and nodded. "What?"

"Just remember that *I'm* proud of you. You may not be my kid, but you're the closest thing to a brother I have, and you're *so* special, Blaine. Just don't let them take that from you."

"Thank you," he sniffled, and hoped he could hold off crying any more until he got the chocolate chips into the bowl. "Should I bake them, or do we just want to eat the batter with spoons?"

Callie plucked two spoons from the silverware drawer. "Bake half and eat half?"

"You're a bad influence," he sighed, and grinned faintly.

"Shut up," she said, dipping her spoon into the mixing bowl. "I'm the *best* influence."

November/December 2011

Kurt had expected to feel overwhelmed, in the beginning, but two weeks into his dad's fledgling campaign he was actually getting used to the travel. He supposed it helped that they were visiting the same three states over and over and over again. He had a favorite coffee shop in Manchester, New Hampshire, and there was an awesome diner on the outskirts of Des Moines, Iowa that made killer pancakes. Kurt much preferred them as after-midnight snack food, but they were pretty good for a pre-event breakfast, too.

There wasn't much that he found redeemable about Florida, mostly because it was too sunny and he had to wear sunscreen lest he end up sporting an unfortunate sunglasses tan.

Florida was pretty far from his thoughts, though, because they weren't going to be back there until after Thanksgiving and right now, they were on an extended stay in New Hampshire. He was curled up in an armchair in the lobby of the Best Western in Concord on Friday night, *trying* to work on a paper for his US History class, when the automatic doors to the lobby snicked open and a tall dark haired woman strode confidently into the space. She was trailed by a sullen-looking boy about Kurt's age wearing rumpled khakis, an untucked blue button-down, and a loosened navy tie. He was cute, Kurt thought, and he looked incredibly uncomfortable.

He tucked his face back into his laptop, but he strained with one ear to listen to them.

"No," the woman was saying. "We need *two* rooms, not a *double* room. Adjoining, if you have them."

The boy sighed loudly enough for Kurt to hear him halfway across the lobby, so he peered over the screen of his computer. The boy turned and leaned with his back against the desk, tipped his head up and rolled his eyes. Kurt caught his eye and grinned in sympathy, and the boy glanced around the lobby nervously before grinning back.

"Hey, kid," his dad boomed from behind him. "I'm hungry. Ready for dinner?"

Kurt closed his laptop and slid it into the padded compartment in his messenger bag, then jiggled the whole bag to make room for his history notebook. He stood and shouldered into his jacket. "Yeah. No Denny's tonight, though, please."

"The desk lady said there's an Italian place up the street. That sound good?"

"Yeah. Is Randi coming with?" He slipped the strap of his back over his head, situated it across his body. His dad's campaign manager didn't join them often, because she said she didn't want to intrude on their family time.

"Nah," his dad said. "I think she was going to make some calls, get the new poll numbers. Somethin' like that."

As they passed the desk, where the woman was still arguing softly with the desk clerk, Kurt lifted his fingers in a little wave to the boy, who looked a little surprised and then waved back.

"Who's your friend?" his dad asked once they were out on the sidewalk.

"No idea," Kurt said truthfully. "He just looked like he was embarrassed by his mother, and I know that pain." Kurt stepped sideways, jostled his dad with his shoulder.

"Oh, so your old man is an embarrassment, huh?" his dad teased.

"Daaad," Kurt trilled. "You know it's not like that."

His father swung an arm across Kurt's shoulders and pulled him close. "I know, kiddo. Do you think he, you know. Plays for your team?"

"Dad! There's no *signal* or anything. And what does it matter, he's just some strange boy."

"But you thought he was cute."

Kurt felt himself blush. "Yeah, he was cute. But that doesn't mean anything."

"It means you looked more than once."

"Oh, my god. This is not happening right now." Kurt stopped in his tracks and stared up at the sky. "Tell me that my father isn't trying to set me up with some boy from the lobby of the Best Western in Concord."

"I'm just sayin' that I know it isn't easy for you, being on the road like this. Missing your friends and all. Missing having a life that isn't hotels and bad food and your father."

Kurt shrugged. "It's good, actually. Better than I thought it would be."

"That's good. Because I gotta tell you, I really like having you with me."

They crossed the street and Kurt held the restaurant door open for his dad. "Thanks, Dad," he said, and then whispered at his father's back as the followed the hostess to a corner booth, "I like being out here with you, too."

He wasn't sure if his father even heard him, but he supposed as he settled into the booth and opened his menu that it really didn't matter.

Baine was trying hard not to be mad at his mother. He'd been curled up on his bed in the hour between practice and dinner, two chapters into his English reading, when Callie knocked on his door.

"Honey," she peeked in at his quiet *come in*. "Your mom is here, and she's got a pass to take you off campus this weekend."

Blaine dropped his book on the floor and closed his eyes. "Fuck. It's New Hampshire this weekend, I thought my dad was doing that one."

"Sorry."

"No, it's okay," he sighed. "I agreed to this. I'll be fine. I have an excuse to be anti-social, I've got a History test on Monday and I need to spend my spare time studying." He pushed himself off his bed. "I guess I better pack."

Two hours later, it was dark and Blaine was hungry when they pulled into the driveway at the Best Western in Concord. He and his mother had passed the car ride in relative silence, Blaine plugged into the *Rent* soundtrack on his iPod, and their only real conversation when his mother asked if he wanted to stop for dinner or wait until they'd gotten checked in.

He trailed his mother into the lobby, his backpack and his hastily-packed swim bag hanging off his shoulder. He tuned her out when she started arguing with the desk clerk and turned his back to the desk. He rolled his eyes, and caught a boy staring at him from across the lobby. He was tucked into an armchair with a computer on his lap, and he had a really adorable smile.

Blaine tried to ignore the way his stomach flipped a little bit, and he pretended not to watch as a middle-aged man in jeans and a flannel shirt under a brown barn coat clapped the boy on the shoulder. When the boy unfolded himself from the chair, Blaine had to swallow a gasp because he was absolute perfection. Tall, legs for days encased in sinfully tight black jeans, a slim black button-down under a charcoal vest and tie. He slipped into a black pea coat and shouldered his bag and walked with the man, side by side, out of the lobby.

As he passed by Blaine, he wiggled his fingers at him. Blaine couldn't help it, he grinned and waved back.

After driving back into town to some steakhouse for dinner, Blaine let himself into his room and changed into pajama pants and an Andover t-shirt and went back to the lobby to stalk the boy from earlier. He had

his laptop and his History book, and he plopped into one of the chairs and plunked his feet onto the wooden almost-table in front of him. He was deep into reviewing his notes on the post-Reconstruction South when there was movement in front of him.

"American or Euro?" The voice was gentle.

"American," Blaine replied, looking up into the boys' blue eyes.

"Me, too." The boy set a stack of books onto the faux table. Blaine ran his eyes over the spines. One was the same textbook he was using, the others were assorted biographies of William McKinley. "I have a paper due next week, and I think my teacher hates me."

"Exam on Monday," Blaine said, tipping his head toward his own book. "I'm Blaine."

"Kurt," the boy said, extending his hand. Blaine took it and shook, firm like his father had taught him when he was little. "What brings you to New Hampshire this weekend?"

Kurt appraised him coolly. "My father has a thing."

Blaine snorted. "That's specific."

"Yeah, well. What about you?"

"My mother has a thing." He watched Kurt tilt his head.

"Uh huh. Who's your mother?" he asked, looking cautious.

Blaine rested his head against the back of the chair. "Elaine Anderson. She's a Senator."

"And her *thing* is a campaign event." Kurt shook his head like he was trying to clear a bad image from his brain.

"Yeah. Your dad, too?"

Kurt nodded. "But I don't think it's the same event. My father and I lean the other way."

Blaine lifted his hands into the space between them, palms up. "She's my mother, but we don't agree on lots of things, politics being just one of them."

"Okay." Kurt stuck his hand out again. "I'm Kurt Hummel. My dad is Burt Hummel from the Ohio 4th."

Blaine nodded, but he really didn't know much about the Democratic candidates. Hell, he hardly knew anything about the *Republican* candidates. "Sorry," he finally said. "I really don't know what's going on."

"Do you live under a *rock*?" Kurt watched him with barely disguised judgment.

"Boarding school," Blaine sighed, knowing that it wasn't any sort of an excuse *or* an explanation. "Are you just here for the weekend?"

Kurt shook his head. "I'm out with my dad full time."

"What about school?" Blaine knew it was going to be hard for him, come January, when he was on the campaign full time.

"Oh, I do homeschool. I did for a while in middle school too, so it's not that big a deal. It's better for me, anyway." Kurt tugged one of the McKinley biographies off his pile and opened it to a bookmarked page.

Blaine dropped his voice low. "My parents are taking me out of school after Fall Term. I'll be doing homeschool after that, too."

"Uh huh," Kurt said, but he sounded bored with the conversation.

Blaine gave up, and went back to his studying, but it was hard to concentrate with Kurt looking entirely too put together even in casual sweatpants and some kind of mesh sweater. When he realized that he'd read the same paragraph four times in twenty minutes, Blaine coughed lightly. "Excuse me," he said.

"Yes?" Kurt looked up at him, his eyes distant.

"I'm sorry, if this is too personal. I mean, we're strangers." Blaine lifted one shoulder in an awkward shrug. "I know you about as well as I know my own mother, so. I'm just going to put this out there. Are you, um. Do you date boys or girls?"

Kurt blinked at him and smiled, slow and sly and, Blaine thought, maybe teasing. "You interested?"

Blaine shifted back in his chair, a little startled at Kurt's forwardness. It felt risky and brazen, but he must have paused a little too long because Kurt was suddenly serious. "I was just teasing," Kurt said, and then his face was closed off again.

"No, wait." Blaine needed to make him understand. "You need to understand, this has been a problem with my parents, but I don't want to hide it or lie about it."

Kurt nodded, his bottom lip tucked between his teeth. "I wondered, earlier, but there's always a chance that people are just confused, or give off vibes even when they're not."

"Well. I am. And you are?"

Kurt laughed full on, then. "You can *say* it Blaine. It's not going to kill you."

"I *know* that."

"So what's the problem?"

Blaine felt his ears and cheeks get hot. "It's not often that I have the chance to say it to a really hot boy, especially not to one who also gets what it's like being from a political family."

Kurt huffed a breath into the air. "I'm not from a political family. My dad's a mechanic. My stepmother is a nurse, and my mom was a teacher. But I've also never really been in the closet, so. I know how to do this, if you want some advice."

"You know how to do what?" Blaine wasn't putting all the pieces together, not just yet.

"I came out the year before my dad ran the first time. I know how to be out in a campaign. I could help, if you want."

"That would . . . that might be nice," he said after a moment of silence. He yawned, hard. "I had school all day, and then practice, and then my mom showed up for this surprise trip. I gotta go to bed. But—"

"We'll be here till Monday morning. I'm in 412. Or, here," Kurt grabbed for his hand, and uncapped his pen with his teeth. He wrote carefully on the inside of Blaine's wrist, and then patted him. "It won't wash off that way. Just text me, if you want. There's a bakery up the street, they make a killer mocha and an even better coffee cake."

"I'd like that," Blaine said, tucking his book and laptop back into his backpack. "Goodnight, and good luck with your paper."

Kurt nodded and waved. Blaine smiled the whole way back to his room, and when he was inside in the cool and dark he plugged Kurt's number into his phone. For some reason, he was afraid to identify the contact as *Kurt Hummel*, so he marked it simply as *K* and then sent off *thank you* in a text message.

He waited over half an hour, but he never got a response.

Kurt was three pages into his paper, writing fast and furious, when his phone buzzed in his pocket. The number wasn't one he recognized and the message was simple: *thank you*. It had to be Blaine. He sighed, and turned his phone over and over between his fingers. "What the hell did I get myself into?" he wondered in a whisper.

He didn't reply.

The next morning, he overslept and was yawning as he slid into the empty side of the booth at the hotel restaurant. His dad and Randi were talking strategy, a slightly crumpled-looking pile of printouts sitting between their two plates of waffles.

"You were up late, kiddo," his dad mentioned with a quirk of one eyebrow.

"My paper started to take shape." He flagged the waitress down, and she nodded, heading back to the counter for the coffee. "Cute lobby boy is trouble, though."

"That right?" His dad sounded mildly amused.

"Yeah. He's nice enough, but his mother is Elaine Anderson."

"She's a piece of work." Randi speared three pieces of waffle onto her fork and popped them into her mouth. "Very independent. Never needs anything from anybody, and she's all about appearances."

"You know her, then," Kurt asked, curious, as the waitress delivered his coffee.

"I know *of* her, and I know enough to be surprised that her son is with her. He's hardly ever appeared with her, or for her."

Kurt dumped four sugar packets and a large splash of cream into his coffee and stirred it before taking a sip. It was blissfully hot and strong, and he just sat and let the caffeine wake his brain up for a minute. "He's coming out on the trail with her in January," Kurt said, and then instantly wished that he'd kept quiet. He wasn't sure why he felt the need to protect Blaine, and he didn't fully understand the odd trust the other boy had placed in him after only the briefest of conversations.

"Interesting," Randi remarked. "She's trying to strengthen her family image," she said more to herself than anyone else.

"What's on tap for today?" Kurt asked his father. He couldn't remember the schedule, except that there was some kind of a breakfast the next morning, and then on Monday they were headed back to Iowa.

"High school football and a PFLAG meet and greet," his dad said with a wink. "I won't make you go to the football game, but you're not leaving me to face the PFLAG moms alone."

"They're *harmless*," Kurt laughed, because even back home in their district, where Kurt always felt so alone, the PFLAG moms had always loved him best.

"That's because they think you're adorable and brave. They don't *want* anything from you, they just want to dote on you and feed you."

His dad was half teasing, Kurt knew it. "Why, what do they want from you?"

"What *don't* they want from me? We got Don't Ask Don't Tell and the Hate Crimes law taken care of, so now it's DOMA and health benefits for partners of federal employees." His dad frowned at the syrup sitting, sticky and dark, on his otherwise empty plate. "I hate telling them the truth about how hard it is to get *anything* done these days."

"Poor Dad," Kurt cooed, and finished off his coffee.

"Aren't you going to eat?" Randi raised a critical eyebrow at him.

"Nah," his dad answered for him. "Kurt's never liked breakfast. Well, not actually *for* breakfast. He'll be fine, he'll just eat two lunches."

Kurt nodded. "Breakfast for dinner, or for lunch, is all good. I just can't eat before 10 am."

"You're gonna work on your paper this morning, then? I'll be back to pick you up for PFLAG around 2." Kurt nodded, and his dad glanced at Randi. "I don't think we'll need you for that one, it's familiar territory for Kurt and me."

Randi threw her hands up. "Hey, works for me. I can make calls and set up some events for when we're back here in December."

"Randi." Kurt's dad spoke softly but sternly. "Take a *nap*. The December visit can wait."

"The December visit *can't* wait," she started to get a little frantic and scooted out of the booth. "I need to run up for my room, I left my phone. I'll be back in five and then we can go?"

"Of course," his dad sighed, and then visibly relaxed as soon as she was gone. "She's a little high strung," he said to Kurt, "but she's good and affordable."

"By affordable you mean free."

"Yeah." His dad held his gaze, long and hard. "I wish it were you, runnin' this show for me."

"Me, too. But this is the big show, Dad, not the Rotary Club and the Veteran's Day pancake breakfast. I wouldn't know how to do this for you, not the way Randi does. And besides, I can't even vote yet."

"Randi isn't family, *you* are. And what do you think the primaries are about? They're exactly like the Rotary Club and the pancake breakfast, only here and every other small town around instead of in Allen County. Look," his dad ran his finger over the rim of his coffee mug, "you and I, we're small-town guys and we know how to talk to people. You, especially, Kurt. You're so so good at this, and I'm so happy you're here with me."

Kurt blinked sudden tears away as he stared at his paper placemat. "Thanks, Dad."

"You sure I can't interest you in a football game?"

Kurt rolled his eyes, he couldn't help it. "I still don't like football, and I'll be a lot friendlier to be around if I finish my paper. I saw there was a library into town a little ways, I think I might walk over there to work for a while, so just text me when you're on your way back?"

"Sounds good," his dad said, and then got up and stretched his Red Sox cap onto his head.

"I don't think you'll get any extra votes just for being a Red Sox fan," Kurt scolded, and his dad grinned.

"But you might lose some if you tell them you root for the Browns."

"Shhh," his dad whispered. "You need to keep that our little secret," he said with a wink in the instant before Randi appeared again and practically dragged his father out of the restaurant.

Kurt finished his coffee, and then went up to the room to gather his things. He never minded sharing with his dad, and it was so much cheaper that way, but his dad was *so bad* at keeping his things neat and organized. Kurt just kept walking past the open suitcase and the slightly wrinkled suits draped over the back of one of the chairs. He slid his laptop into his messenger bag and took two of the three McKinley biographies; the third had proven to have little new information about the assassination, which was decidedly unhelpful and was part of the reason Kurt wanted to use the library. Now that the third book was useless, he needed another source for his bibliography that wasn't from the internet.

It wasn't too cool outside, but the air did have a crispness to it that felt different from Ohio. Kurt crunched through the leaves and hummed to himself, let himself get distracted by the town and the people. He passed a park where some parents were pushing toddlers on swings, and he moved aside to make room for a whole family of six to ride by him on bikes, the youngest on some kind of pedal-less bike that she was propelling with her feet. Every few strides she'd lift her feet off the sidewalk and glide, laughing hysterically with her red pigtails streaking behind her. The sight made Kurt laugh, too.

Laugh, and yearn.

He knew it wasn't like it had been, once. There were practically no obstacles standing in his path to parenthood, should he choose that. But he wanted all of it, not just the kid. He wanted the house and the husband and the pets and the kids playing on the swing set in the backyard. He wanted *love*.

Sometimes he was just so lonely.

He thought that maybe that was why he'd acted so out of character and passed his number on to Blaine the night before. He just wanted to know someone else understood what his life was like. Not just the political side of things, but the gay teenage boy parts, and the homeschooling parts, and the lonely parts.

He wanted someone who saw *all* of him, and not just the Kurt Hummel he presented to the world when he was out at events with his dad.

The library was old, and when he opened the door it he was overwhelmed by the scent of actual books. The library in Lima was modern and glistening and always had a vaguely antiseptic and plastic odor that Kurt found moderately unpleasant. He stood in the high arched entryway and just *sniffed*, and then turned at the sound of a girl giggling. She was standing behind the circulation desk, her elbows propped on the desk and her chin resting on her hands. "Everyone always does that. It's such a great smell. *So much better than rubber cement.*"

"You're *that* girl, then," Kurt sassed her. "You and my friend Tina would get along great. She was always getting sent to the hall during art class because she was a little too fond of the rubber cement. And the papier Mache paste."

"You're not from here," the girl appraised him.

"Ohio," Kurt said. "I'm unfortunately stranded without a third source for a paper that's due next week, and I have a few hours to kill while my dad's at a football game."

"Long way to come for football."

Kurt always hated hitting the awkward wall in conversations when he either had to lie or scare people away. He was fast learning that being the son of a Presidential candidate was pretty much a non-starter as far as casual conversation went. "Yeah, well. My dad's got other stuff besides football this weekend," he caged, hoping that it would just end the conversation.

"O-okay," the girl said. "What's your paper about, then?"

"The assassination of William McKinley. Since I go to a high school *named* after the man, I'm pretty sure my teacher hates me. Just point me toward your reference section, I'm sure I can find what I need."

The girl bounced out from behind the counter. "I didn't get your name," she said softly and motioned for him to follow her.

"Kurt," he replied.

"I'm Jennie. You sound like a guy who knows his way around a library, but Lydia, our reference librarian, is a little, um, *particular* about people poking in her section, so. I hate to do it, but I have to hand you off to her."

"It's okay," Kurt told her. "I can hold my own."

Lydia was keeping watch over the reference section from behind a computer monitor, but she seemed genuinely interested when Kurt told her about his project, and three hours later when his phone buzzed, he had more information than he'd expected to find. "Excuse me," he said to Lydia, who was printing an article from some database for him. "I need to check this, I'm supposed to meet my father."

"Go on, honey," she said, and Kurt smiled. She was a lot friendlier than Jennie had implied, and they'd made casual small talk about his homeschooling and his dad's campaign while she'd helped him. He flicked at his screen and then blinked at the text. It wasn't from his father, it was from Blaine.

Unexpectedly free this afternoon, want 2 meet?

Kurt sighed and sent back *can't, have to go charm PFLAG moms. Tomorrow around 11 am?*

He took the printout from Lydia and started to pack up his things. "It's not my dad, but I do have to get going. Thank you, for everything."

"I'd say it's my job," she said with a smile, "but it really was a pleasure to help you. You come back and see me if you need any help the next time you're here."

"Sometime in December," Kurt told her as his phone buzzed again. "I'll definitely stop in, even if I don't need any help."

"And bring me a campaign button for your father, yeah?"

"Of course." Kurt waved at her and headed back out into the bright afternoon. He opened up his text window and read as he walked.

No can do, Blaine had sent. *Church at 9 and then back to school.*

Too bad, Kurt typed, and he was a little startled to realize that he really did mean it. *Next time we're in the same city, then. But you can email me, kurt_e at hummel dot net if you want to talk before then.*

No reply came before he got back to the hotel, so he just tucked his phone away and went on to the next thing.

Blaine lay on his back on his bed, his feet on his pillows and his head hanging over the bottom. He twirled his phone over in his hands, and if he moved it slowly enough he could read Kurt's words, his *maybe next time* and *if you want to talk*.

The unexpected addition of his email, like they were friends instead of practical strangers.

Blaine didn't want to think about what that meant, or whether he should email, or how long he needed to wait before sending an email. He figured he'd wait, just let things sit until he made his next trip that weekend that school let out.

"Hey, you," Callie tapped on his half-open door. "Welcome back."

"Hey." Blaine tried to sit up, but the more he tried the more he slid off the foot of his bed. He finally just gave up and rolled onto his stomach before sliding to the floor with an *oof*. "Thanks." He shook his hair out of his eyes and cradled his phone in his lap.

"How was it?" Callie came over and sat next to him on the floor. "You're smiling, so it can't have been too bad."

Blaine wanted to tell her about confronting his mother about not wanting to take Communion at church, and how he wouldn't let her shove his being gay aside like it wasn't part of him, but when he opened his mouth to talk the first thing to tumble out was "I met a boy."

"Really." Callie rested her hand on his knee. "Tell me about him."

"His name is Kurt," Blaine began. "He's from Ohio and his dad is running, too, only, you know. On the *right* side of things."

Callie laughed, and Blaine frowned at her. "You have no idea how much I hate that my birthday isn't till after the Maine primary. I *really* want to register as a Democrat and vote against my mother, but I can't. In any case, Kurt's doing homeschool and traveling with his father, and he's gay. Not just gay, but *out*. Like, more out than I think I'll ever be able to be, and he's smart and *really* cute."

"You have a crush." Callie said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"No," Blaine denied it. "We only talked for a little while. He offered to help me, to talk about how to be out during a campaign. He's just being nice." But he couldn't shake the implication of Kurt sharing his email address.

"So you think you'll see him again?"

Blaine raised a shoulder in a half-shrug. "I don't know. Maybe? I mean, there are four primaries before the end of January, so the chances are really good that we'll be in the same place at least once before then. It would be nice to have a sort of friend out there, because I don't think many people will understand what this is going to feel like."

"Do you even know how proud I am of you?"

"I'm not doing anything special," Blaine insisted. He really felt like he was just rolling over, letting his mother control his life for the foreseeable future. "I'm pretty sure I'm just playing at being the dutiful son."

"Maybe." Callie nudged him with her shoulder. "But you're doing it on your terms. You're not walking away from something that's important to you. People will notice that."

"I don't want people to notice me. I never wanted to be involved in my mom's career like this. I just want to be *me*."

"I know."

They sat in silence for a few minutes, listening to the sounds of video games from downstairs and music from up the hall. Finally, Blaine tapped his finger on his phone. "He gave me his email address."

"Yeah?" Callie raised an eyebrow at him. "And did you give him yours?"

"No. I didn't know what to do. I think I got scared."

"You should send him an email, just so he knows you're not ignoring him. Who knows, maybe he has a little crush, too," Callie teased.

"Don't. Just, don't."

"What?"

"Please don't put those kinds of thoughts into my head. I can't afford to think that about someone I hardly know, and I *really* can't afford to think that about another candidate's son. Too risky." Never mind that he hadn't really let anyone get close to him after the attack. He didn't want to be that kind of a burden on someone else.

"So be his friend. You can always use more friends. And you said it yourself, very few people understand what this is going to be like for you."

Blaine thought about it for days after, but he couldn't make himself send an email. It felt like it was too much, so he threw himself into the end of his term, which was busy enough without the added worry of packing up his room and getting ready to leave Andover for at least the next six months. There were exams and papers, and all of his Winter Term teachers wanted to make sure he had his books and syllabi before he left campus.

He emerged on the back side of exams in somewhat of a daze, his mind foggy and his eyes bleary. He hadn't even been able to wear his contacts for three days. He just wanted to go home and sleep for a week, but his parents were picking him up and after a stop in Kennebunk to drop off his things they were heading out to Iowa for a week of events.

He supposed he could sleep on the plane.

Callie helped him pack the last of his boxes, and she tucked a fat envelope into his backpack while they waited in the living room for his parents. "Something to read, for when you're feeling down," she said and wrapped him in a hug. "You always have a home here, honey. Don't be a stranger."

"I'm going to miss you," he choked into her sweater. "Can I still call or email?"

"Of course," Callie sighed, and she ruffled his hair at the base of his neck. "Would you consider going light on the gel when you're out there? It makes you look less severe."

"For you, I'll think about it." Blaine peered out the window, squinted through the condensation on the glass at headlights winding their way to the front of the house. His stomach flip-flopped. "I think they're here."

"I'm sorry, honey. I wish I could keep you here, but I think this will be good for you. And when you come back here, you'll be so much stronger and more amazing, I won't even recognize you."

"I hope you're right." Blaine shrugged into his jacket and hefted the first of his boxes.

He didn't know how to say goodbye, so he didn't say anything at all. He just packed the car and hugged Callie one last time, and then sat in the backseat of the car and tried not to cry as they drove away from the best home he'd ever known.

It was going to be a tight schedule until Christmas. The itinerary his mother gave him that night at the long-neglected kitchen table of the Kennebunk house was fat, and it only covered the rest of December. "You'll have your own room on all the stops," his mother told him. "We trust that you'll behave, and that we won't regret giving you that responsibility. "

Blaine flipped through the pages, taking in the week in Iowa and then three days in Florida, two in South Carolina, and then a 36 hour New Hampshire swing before taking four days off for Christmas at home in Kennebunk, complete with Christmas Eve mass at St. Mary's over in Wells.

"We'll head back to Iowa right after Christmas," his mother said like it was assumed. "They *had* to go and mess things up by moving the caucus dates. January third, which is insane, but then we'll have New Hampshire, and it's so much easier to be based from here."

"Uh huh," Blaine nodded. "Don't worry, I won't throw any wild orgies in my room."

His mother paled, and his father frowned.

Blaine threw his hands up in the air. "Wow. I was kidding. You know me, you know I don't like parties."

"You can't joke about things like that," his mother said, her voice tight. "Those kinds of things can ruin a campaign. And I'm still not sure that your decision to go public is the best idea either."

"I can't hide," Blaine insisted for what felt like the hundredth time since the Andover dinner. "It's not healthy for me. That's my sticking point. If you don't want to deal with it, then let me go back to school after break."

"No," his mother shook her head. "We've been over this. I just need to get used to the idea of it."

"You've had four *years* to get used to it," Blaine cried, grabbing his itinerary off the table and storming off to his room.

"That wasn't—" his mother called after him, and he *knew* that wasn't what she meant, but it stung anyway. Maybe she didn't need to get used to him being gay, but she had to get used to not hiding it. He'd had four years to get used to the silence, and it never got any easier.

He hated being ashamed of who he was on behalf of other people.

He flopped onto his bed, set the itinerary on his chest, and grabbed his phone from his nightstand. He opened his email and typed a hasty message.

Sent: December 7th, 2011; 9:47 pm

To: kurt_e at hummel dot net

From: blaineanderson13 at phillipsandover dot edu

Subject: Iowa?

We're flying into Des Moines tomorrow morning, stops in Cedar Rapids, Iowa City, Le Mars, and Council Bluffs before heading back to Des Moines and flying back East on the 14th. Any chance we'll overlap?

Blaine refused to hold his breath, because he was sure he wouldn't get any kind of quick reply, but his phone chimed almost immediately.

Sent: December 7th, 2011; 9:49 pm

To: blaineanderson13 at phillipsandover dot edu

From: kurt_e at hummel dot net

Subject: re: Iowa?

We're in Cedar Rapids tonight, hitting Dubuque for two days, Des Moines and then Ames. I guess we'll miss each other. What about after your Iowa swing?

Blaine sighed, hit reply and typed:

Tampa, Miami-Dade, and Tallahassee the 15th-17th, Charleston for two days, and then a week in New Hampshire before Christmas. You?

He rolled onto his side and propped his phone on his pillow, scrolled through Facebook while he waited for a reply. He wondered how long it would be before someone was moderating his Facebook and twitter, never mind his tumblr. Maybe he wouldn't even tell anyone he had a tumblr.

Looks like we could cross paths in Charleston on the 19th, or maybe in New Hampshire on the 20th or 21st. We're home to Ohio until the 26th and then back to Iowa, obviously. If we can't make a go of something before then, maybe we could try for New Year's Eve?

Blaine sent back a smiley face and a teasing line of text. *That would be very You've Got Mail.*

Kurt must have been surgically attached to his phone. *Let's touch base when you hit Charleston, ok? Travel safe.*

Blaine smiled to himself. He liked talking with Kurt, even if it was over email. He needed to be better about putting himself out there instead of hiding away just because hiding was less scary.

He could hold on for Charleston.

PART TWO

The Primaries

A/N: This is going to be the longest chapter of the story.

Music credits here are from Ed Sheeran. The romance novels that Kurt and Blaine (and Carole) read are the Troubleshooters books by Suzanne Brockmann.

I know very little about political campaigns, and there's a lot that research can't tell you, so any mistakes here are mine.

--

January 2012

They didn't connect in Charleston, in the end. They didn't see each other on New Year's in Iowa, either. It wasn't until the second week of January, after Blaine's mother had come in second in Iowa and first in New Hampshire, all the campaign's eggs in the basket of South Carolina, that they finally had a chance to meet. It wasn't even planned, because Blaine had been so busy jumping back into what passed for school on the trail after Christmas; he'd ended up neglecting everything that wasn't pre-calc or Advanced Latin or reading books to kids at elementary schools and after-care programs, and Kurt hadn't answered an email or text since the night after Iowa.

Blaine hadn't even realized Kurt was in town. He was sitting in a packed Starbucks, ensconced in his stupid *stupid* math homework and listening to an EP that his friend Neil had sent him, some folk-rock singer/songwriter from the UK who was still practically a kid himself. Blaine had been listening to the one album on repeat for days, the only thing that had made the trip bearable to that point, and he'd emailed Neil that morning to beg for more. He was bopping his head along to the catchy beat of his favorite track when there was movement across the table.

He looked up and blinked at Kurt, popped an ear bud out so he could hear. "Hi, stranger."

"I hope this is okay-" Kurt waved his hand out at the full tables in the rest of the shop. "Can I share your table? I won't intrude." He reached into his bag, pulled out a pristine copy of *Beloved* and an overstuffed notebook.

"No, it's fine," Blaine said. "Listen," he ordered, and held an ear bud out for Kurt to take. Their fingers brushed on the exchange, and Blaine pointedly ignored how soft Kurt's skin was.

Kurt listened, a look of focus and intensity on his face. When the song ended, he handed the ear bud back to Blaine. "He's good. Who is he?"

"Ed Sheeran? He's from the UK. A friend of mine from school's from London, and he always has all this great music. He thought I'd like this. I wish I were that good on the guitar."

"You play?" Kurt took a sip of his drink and cracked the spine on his book.

"A little. I learned my first year at Andover. I don't play enough to be really good, and bringing my guitar on the road is kind of a challenge." Blaine missed his guitar, though. "You don't look like the guitar-playing type."

"What, I'm not emo enough for you?" Kurt laughed and shook his head. "I sing. Or, I did, in my school's show choir. We're pretty good, when we have enough members for competition. My leaving school sort of messed things up for them. The last I heard from my brother, his best friend bribed the biggest badass girl in school with a bag of Mallomars to be the twelfth body on stage."

"Why'd you leave school? I mean, I didn't choose to. But you did?" Blaine was really curious. He'd been following the Hummel campaign from afar, particularly the reports about Kurt and the way he seemed to draw people to his father's events. Burt Hummel was running a solid second on the Democratic side, barely three points behind former Secretary of State James Sewell, and Blaine was holding out hope that things would start to break for them soon.

Kurt swallowed hard and Blaine watched his eyes dart quickly around the crowded room. "I don't think that's a story for public consumption," he finally said after long moments of silence. "It's not that I don't trust *you*, I just don't trust anyone else. And it's not just my story, you know?"

"Yeah." Blaine did know. "I'd love to hear it sometime, though."

Kurt looked at Blaine like he was looking *through* him. "I don't think we know each other well enough to share those kinds of stories."

Blaine had been scribbling idly in the margin of his notebook with his pencil, but he dropped it to the table at Kurt's comment. "If you didn't keep ignoring my emails, then maybe we'd know each other a little better."

Kurt sighed heavily, and Blaine really looked closely at him. He was pale, and his eyes were rimmed with dark circles. He was dressed as impeccably as always, dark gray slacks and a vest over a medium purple shirt, but the collar of his shirt was unbuttoned and there was a pair of dark-framed glasses hanging from the collar. His fingernails were bitten and ragged, and he looked utterly drained.

Blaine wanted to touch him, wanted to rest his palm over the back of Kurt's hand, but he thought that might cross a line. "Are you okay?" he asked softly.

"No." Kurt sagged into his chair. "We have to perform here, or else we're done, and I don't know if we can do it."

Blaine looked around the interior of the Starbucks, and then out at the relatively empty street. "You wanna take a walk?"

"A walk would be great."

"Good. I don't have to meet my parents until dinnertime. I really don't know why they bothered bringing me along, they don't make me go to most of the events anyway." He packed his iPad and math book back into his backpack and hefted it onto his shoulder, waited for Kurt to tuck his book and notebook away and buckle his messenger bag. Kurt still had a nearly full coffee, but Blaine bussed his empty cup and pastry bag and unused napkins before they headed out into the sunshine.

"A nice change from New Hampshire, huh?" Blaine asked, and slipped his sunglasses out of his coat.

"Yeah," Kurt replied. "I don't like the cold, but I also don't do anything but burn in the sun. It's not so bad here. Florida is going to be the death of me, if we make it that far."

Blaine scuffed the toe of his shoe on the sidewalk as they waited for the light to change before crossing the street. "It sounds like you're putting a lot of pressure on yourself. It's not all on you, whether your dad wins or not."

"No, I know that," Kurt said. "But it might be my fault if he *loses*. As much as he says I'm the best part of his campaign, I'm pretty sure I'm a liability."

"What does his manager say?"

Kurt shrugged. "Who, Randi? I think she's mostly nervous that I'm gunning for her job."

"Are you?"

Kurt laughed. "In eight years, maybe. It makes me sad that I won't get to manage my dad's campaign, though. He and I have been doing this since I was thirteen. I like it."

"You guys really love each other."

"Yeah." Kurt ducked around Blaine and settled onto a wooden bus bench. "It was just the two of us after my mom died. Then he met Carole, and they got married, so it's been the four of us ever since. But on the road, just me and him, it's really nice. He's always been my champion."

Blaine swallowed his words, took a breath, and thought for a moment before speaking again. "That's what you need to do, then. He's your champion, and he's going to be that for the people, too. Market *that*, and you'll take this."

"You sound so sure."

Blaine supposed he *was* sure. "I don't immerse myself in my mother's races, and I honestly don't care most of the time, but I've been listening to political strategy since I was in diapers. Trust me."

"What do I owe you?"

"Excuse me?" Blaine didn't understand.

"Everything has a price, even *I* know that. You just gave me really good advice. What do I owe you for it?"

Blaine's heart was racing, and it felt like he needed to make his choice count. He closed his eyes, listened to the traffic rushing by on the street. When he opened his eyes again, Kurt was staring at him. "If it works, and you guys win here, then you'll let me take you to dinner the next time we're in the same place."

Kurt traced a lazy, loopy pattern on the knee of his slacks with his pinky. "I don't think you really want to do that."

Blaine felt the heat rise high on his cheeks. "I think I really *do* want to do that."

"You don't know what people will say," Kurt started to argue again.

Blaine smirked at him, slow and more flirtatious than he'd ever been with *anyone* before. "I don't really care. I just *like* you. You're interesting and different, and you *get* all of this crazy like nobody else could."

Kurt shook his head fiercely, like he was trying to dislodge something that was stuck. "You don't even know me."

"So start answering my emails. If you want, we can put dinner off. But could you start answering me when I write?"

Kurt looked like he was going to say no at first, but when he caught Blaine's eye his own cheeks were a little flushed and he was smiling shyly. "Okay," he agreed. "I can write actual emails. And we can negotiate about the dinner."

"Thank you," Blaine said, and he meant it.

Kurt jumped, startled, and pulled his phone from his pocket. "Oh, shit, I gotta- I'm late. Thank you, Blaine. For everything."

He grabbed his bag and headed back up the street, holding his phone to his ear and talking as he went. Blaine just leaned against the back of the bench and watched him go.

Who the hell was he fooling? He didn't just want to be friends with Kurt. He wanted *so* much more than that.

Kurt held onto Blaine's advice until he and his dad were alone in their room that night, both of them staring at the most recent polling data.

His dad ran his hand over his head. "I dunno, Kid. I hate to say it, but I think we need to talk seriously about packing it in."

"I ran into Blaine Anderson today," Kurt said without any preamble, because there was no other way to ease into the conversation. "He said we need to put you out there as a champion for the people, the way you've always been for me."

"I don't think I understand." His dad sat on the edge of his bed.

"You'd give everything to protect me, to take care of me. So we need to make everyone out *there* understand that you're going to do the same thing for them."

"And how do you expect us to do that?"

Kurt settled cross-legged on the other side of his dad's bed. "Let me introduce you at the rally tomorrow. Please."

"I dunno, Kurt. I know you like the events and all, but giving a speech is a totally different ballgame."

"What do we have to lose? We're going down, Dad. Are we going to just let it happen, or are we going to fight it?"

"This might not be my time," his dad said, softly. "I thought it was, but maybe I'm still too green, or too blue collar."

"You're trying to be something you're not, is the problem. You're trying to give the people what you *think* they want. Give them who you really are, and we'll be okay."

"I can't ask you to put yourself out there like that for me, Kurt. It's too much to ask." His dad got up, paced the length of the room.

"You've spent your whole career fighting for me. Please, Dad. Let me fight for you now."

"What brought this on? Than Anderson kid put you up to this?"

"No." Kurt tugged his bottom lip between his teeth. "More like he helped me see what we needed to do. I *want* to do this."

"Okay," his dad sighed. "You think you can give two speeches tomorrow?"

Kurt nodded. "I know I can."

"All right. We'll try it. If it doesn't go well in the morning, we pull it back. And don't tell Randi where you got the idea, she's a little paranoid."

"I'd noticed," he said drily and got up to go brush his teeth, but before he made it three steps his dad reached out and grabbed him, pulled him into a hug. "I love you, Kurt," he whispered into Kurt's ear.

"Love you too, Dad."

Kurt stayed up a little too late working on their speeches, but when he woke up the next morning he felt energized for the first time since Iowa.

"You ready?" his dad asked as they climbed into the car to head to the first rally at a public park.

"Ready for what?" Randi asked from the back seat.

"Oh," his dad waved her off. "Kurt's gonna introduce me today."

"No deviating from the prepared remarks," Randi scolded, and Kurt just caught his dad's eye and winked. They were so far afield from the prepared remarks, he knew Randi was going to be absolutely livid when they finished. Kurt thought that was a little funny, because she didn't seem to care as much about the message of the campaign as she did with *winning*.

"It'll be fine," Kurt soothed her, and tried not to think about the implications of the note cards he was bending back and forth in his hands. He'd texted Blaine before leaving the hotel, *took your advice and we're trying a new strategy today. I'm giving a speech, wish me luck*.

Blaine's response had come quickly, a single word that sent a jolt down Kurt's spine: *courage*.

The crowd was moderately sized, but they seemed enthusiastic, reaching out to shake his dad's hand and Kurt's too as he trailed behind. He tried not to panic.

He hadn't spoken in public outside of a classroom ever in his life.

When he finally stepped to the podium, he had to grip the sides so he didn't fall over.

"Hi," he said into the microphone, and the crowd roared *hi* back to him. "I'm Kurt Hummel, and Burt Hummel is my dad. We've been through a lot together, the two of us. You already know a lot about him, about my mom dying when I was eight, and how he met my stepmom Carole when my brother Finn and I were in the same Scout troop. You know he's a small business owner, and that he's spent the last five years in Congress working for the people back home in Ohio. But you don't know what kind of a man Burt Hummel is, and that's what I'm here to talk to you about today.

After my mom died, my dad would have tea parties with me in the backyard. He taught me how to ride a bike. When I was bullied in middle school and ended up in the emergency room for stitches, he held my hand. The next day, he went to the principal and fought for me, fought for the right thing. When the school wouldn't listen, didn't want to deal with the realities of having a gay student, my dad did what he needed to do to make sure that I was safe *and* got to have the education I was entitled to.

When I was thirteen, he decided to run for Congress because he saw that the things that had been issues for us in our small town weren't just small town problems; they were Western Ohio problems and Midwestern problems and American problems, and he thought that maybe he could help fix them.

And he *has* fixed them. He's worked on behalf of education reform and so that your kids receive a quality education that will leave them ready to compete against students from around the world. He's supported low and no-interest loans for small business owners so that they can afford to grow their businesses the same way he did. He's advocated for the repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell and the passage of the Matthew Shepherd Hate Crimes Act, and he supports fair wages and arts education and the right of every person to make their own healthcare decisions.

He always told me, when I was growing up, that nobody pushes the Hummels around. With Burt Hummel as your President, you can believe that nobody will push this country around. My dad will fight every day, for you and for the United States, the same way that he has fought for me every day of my life."

Kurt tucked his notecards into his pocket and let the crowd's cheers and applause wash over him. He was still shaking, but he was pretty sure that it was from adrenaline instead of nerves. The crowd was chanting *Burt! Burt! Burt!* Kurt stepped back to make room for his dad. As they passed each other near the podium, his father wrapped him into a hug and held him tight. "That's my boy," his dad said low into his ear. "You did good. Now it's my turn."

Kurt moved off the stage to stand next to Randi in the grass. "Those weren't the prepared remarks."

"No shit," Kurt said under his breath, because he was sure that Randi was good at her job but she didn't seem to really understand how he and his dad worked together.

She frowned at him disapprovingly. "I don't think that's going to help."

Kurt shrugged. "It's not like we were winning anyway. Just listen to him, okay?"

On the stage, his father was waving his hands to quiet the crowd. "Good morning, Blythewood. You look amazing this morning." He pursed his lips and looked out at the crowd. "I'm so proud of my boys. My other son, Finn, is back home in Ohio, getting ready to win the district football championship this weekend. We'll be heading home for the game, I can't wait." He rubbed his hands together and grinned. "I love football." That drew a few whoops from the crowd, which his dad acknowledged with a brief nod before continuing. Kurt left Randi's side and went to sit under a tree, and he listened while his dad talked to the gathered crowd about building families and bridges across difference, and paying down the deficit and balancing the budget because the only way to run a successful business was to make sure you ran it in the black. He told them he would bring their loved ones home safe from the war because *we can't strengthen our families and communities if our children and spouses and parents and siblings aren't here to do the hard work with us.*

"We're going to keep this country safe, and make her great again, and we're going to do it together, all of us, across our differences because we are *all* America, we are *all* Americans no matter where we come from and what we look like and how we love. And if we should stumble or struggle, we will do *that* together, too, and those of us who stay standing will reach hands out to our friends and neighbors and

loved ones to help pick them up when they can't do it themselves. I fight for my family every day, and every one of you is now part of my family, and I will fight for you with everything I have."

The crowd roared with enthusiasm, and Kurt could almost feel the momentum shift. His heart beat a little faster, and he watched with pride as his dad climbed off the stage to shake hands and accept hugs and take pictures. Randi trailed behind him, and Kurt could see her talking while his dad tried to wave her off.

The ride to the next event was going to be decidedly awkward, Kurt could tell already. He walked over to the car and waited, and when his dad finally joined him Kurt could feel him practically vibrating with adrenaline. He hugged Kurt again. "God, Kurt, you were right. That was *exactly* what we needed!"

Randi scowled at them both. "You wrote both speeches," she said to Kurt, her voice cold.

"I did." He buckled his seatbelt and stared out the window.

"You guys should have talked to me about all of that. I'm in charge of this campaign. You hired me to win."

"Yeah," his dad said, shutting his door and sticking the key into the ignition. "And South Carolina is make or break for us."

"There's still Florida," Randi started, but Kurt's dad just pounded the heel of his hand on the steering wheel and then turned to glare at her in the back seat.

"You know as well as I do that if we're zero for three going into Florida, things are pretty much over. And I *want* this. I want to win this whole thing, so I need you to decide if you're on board with the message Kurt and I are going with here. If not, then that's fine. It's entirely your choice."

Randi refused to look at either of them. "Can I have until the end of the day?"

"Of course," his dad said, but Kurt already knew that Randi probably wasn't going to be with them by morning; she hadn't answered his father's query quickly enough.

Blaine spent the day waiting. Waiting for his parents to finish with their rallies and speeches, waiting for evening so that they could get dressed up and go to a fundraising dinner. Waiting for the news to run clips of Burt Hummel's two campaign stops that day, for word from Kurt.

For anything.

Sometimes it felt like he was waiting for *everything*.

He was dressed and ready for the dinner, sitting carefully on the foot of his bed watching Brian Williams report on the day's campaign news when his mother called to him through his closed door.

"Are you ready, Blaine? Your father will be out in a minute and we need to go."

Blaine got up and unlocked the door for her. "I was just watching the news, do you want to come in?"

His mother looked at him carefully. "Since when are you interested in the news?"

"I just wanted to see what was going on." He turned back to the TV, just in time to catch a glimpse of Kurt on a stage. He bumped the volume up and listened to a man's voice over a montage of Kurt and his father at the day's events.

"Congressman Burt Hummel attended two events today, and at each he was introduced by his seventeen year old son Kurt. Kurt has been accompanying his father on the campaign since the fall, but he has always stayed relatively behind the scenes until today. Part of the revitalized Hummel campaign also saw a new speech for the Congressman, reportedly written by his son. The crowds were extremely responsive, and enthusiasm for the Congressman seems to be on a rise. With over a week left until primary day, only time will tell if this new focus will be too little too late. In related news, NBC has learned just moments ago that strategist Randi Granger has made an unexpected departure from the Hummel team; her replacement has not been named. With the Hummel campaign in Blythewood, South Carolina, this is Thanh Truong reporting."

"Oh, that poor boy," Blaine's mother said when the report was done. "Being used as a pawn like that."

Blaine stood and jammed his hands in his pockets. "What do you mean?"

"Being put up on stage to speak like that, writing speeches. He's your age. They shouldn't be trotting him out like the campaign is some kind of circus."

"Do you even hear yourself?" Blaine asked softly. "What am *I* doing out here with you? You've got me playing the dutiful son whenever it's advantageous for *you*, and the rest of the time I'm just here alone. At least Kurt is out there *helping*. *He's* doing this because he wants to, not because he's being forced to."

His mother's stare turned icy. "I didn't realize you knew him."

Blaine caged a little. "We've run into each other a couple of times. It's kind of unavoidable, really. He offered to help me adjust to homeschooling, because he's done it before."

"I don't think he's an appropriate friend for you."

"Because he's gay, or because his dad is a Democrat?"

"Blaine," his mother sighed. "Because it would hurt me with the party if it got out that you were consorting with someone from the other side."

Blaine turned and stared out the window because he was about to start laughing and he didn't want any *more* of his mother's disapproval. "Of course. Because American History and pre-calculus and physics are *consorting* with the enemy." He huffed into the air. "So we have some things in common. I'd hardly call us friends," he said, but he left the *yet* unsaid even though it felt like they were indeed getting closer and closer to friends with every text and email and face to face meeting. "I'm not going to share your secrets or anything, I promise."

His mother shook her head. "I don't even want to know. I'm going to go check on your father. We'll meet you in the lobby in five minutes?"

"Sure," Blaine agreed, and made sure he had his key card tucked into his wallet and his phone in his pocket before heading downstairs.

While he was on the elevator he tapped out a quick message to Kurt: *looked good today. I told you I was right.*

Kurt's reply came as he was climbing into the car: *too soon for you to say that, but thanks.*

Blaine smiled all night long, and for the first time on the campaign it wasn't forced.

The night of the primary, the whole Hudson-Hummel clan holed up in their hotel room to watch the returns. It was nice, having Finn and Carole with them. Kurt wished it could be like that all the time, wished that it wasn't going to end after Florida in ten days, Carole back to work and Finn back to school. Not that Kurt minded being out there with only his dad, he loved it actually, but sometimes it was lonely. Even though they were all sharing a single room at the Howard Johnson's, being together felt like being home.

Halfway through the evening, Kurt watched Finn glance over their parents sitting close on their bed, and then back at Kurt who was gnawing on his thumbnail. "Is it always like this, the waiting?" Finn asked.

Kurt popped his nail from between his teeth. "It's especially bad tonight. If we don't win here, we're pretty well done. I hate to think that, because Dad wants this more than I think either of us knows."

"What are his chances?"

"It depends on how well the new speeches went over. We may have waited too long to change our strategy."

Finn reached for the bag of pretzels on the nightstand and tossed a handful into his mouth. "That's bullshit. You have an idea."

"Will you be satisfied if I tell you I'm cautiously optimistic?"

"For now," Finn mumbled around his mouthful of pretzel crumbs.

Kurt shook his head. He missed Finn, that was true, but he didn't miss Finn's seventeen year old lack of manners. He was still musing on all of that when he heard Carole gasp from the other bed.

"Wha'?" Finn swung his head around and swallowed the rest of his pretzels with a noisy gulp.

Kurt sat up a little taller. "Are they calling it? It's so early."

"Shhh," Carole waved at them and raised the volume on the TV.

The local newscaster was shuffling some papers, and looking down at his desk, but his tone was confident. "We are ready to call the Democratic primary election for Ohio Congressman Burt Hummel. This will be Hummel's first primary victory after finishing a close second in both Iowa and New Hampshire. The Hummel campaign looked to be on fire at events late in this race, and there have been some recent changes to both the tone of the Congressman's message and the make-up of his staff, such as it is. Observers had wondered if the changes were coming too late to make any kind of difference, but I think those doubts have been answered tonight. We'll be getting someone down to Hummel headquarters within the hour, and we'll look to have a statement from the Congressman for you at that time."

"Shit," his dad drawled, and stared down at his jeans and T-shirt. "I think we all better change and get down to the office. We're *all* gonna be on TV tonight."

Kurt laid out clothes for Finn and his dad, and then ducked into the bathroom to comb his hair. He was just drying his damp hands when Finn hollered into the bathroom. "Kurt, your phone is going crazy."

Kurt bolted out into the room, wondered who could be calling. Because someone *was* calling, and it was his generic ringtone, not one of the specialized ones he had for the family or for Tina. "Hello?"

"Kurt?"

"Blaine, hey. How are things there, for you guys?" He ducked out into the hall, because he didn't want to talk to Blaine in front of everyone.

"We're okay. It's looking pretty good. I was just calling to congratulate you, and your dad. I'm really happy for you all."

"Watch the news in about an hour, you'll get to see the rest of my family too. Finn and Carole are here, and they're going to go down to Florida with us." Kurt leaned against the wall, slid down it to sit on the floor just outside the door.

"I owe you dinner," Blaine said, and there was muffled cheering in the background.

"I take it congratulations are in order?"

"I don't care," Blaine said, his voice a little cold. "I don't care what my mother does and doesn't do. We had a fight about you, and now she's barely even looking at me. I want to talk about this dinner I owe you, and whether we'll get to have it in Florida or if it's going to have to wait."

"I don't know if I'll be able to do Florida, not with Carole and Finn here." Kurt felt his face go hot. "I've never been out like that before."

Blaine went silent for a moment. "Out like how?" he questioned Kurt.

Kurt took a breath, tried not to let the words fall out of his mouth. "Out on a *date*," he whispered, finally.

"Oh," Blaine gasped. "I, um, I haven't been, either. Not *really*. Not one that counted."

Kurt felt butterflies in his abdomen. "So it would be, then. A date, I mean." He needed to know he wasn't imagining it, wasn't mishearing what he thought Blaine was telling him.

"If you want." *God*, Blaine was infuriating.

"Is that what *you* want?" Kurt didn't even know if he was supposed to ask for this or not.

Blaine didn't speak again for what felt like minutes. "Yes," he finally breathed, and Kurt felt a slow grin cross his face. "Are you *sure* you won't be able to make it happen in Florida?"

"I'll try," Kurt said. "In the meantime, I'll send you a real email tonight, I promise."

"Thank you," Blaine replied. "We should go. You have news to make, and I have parents to please."

"Blaine." Kurt wanted to make himself brilliantly clear before they both got sucked back into the realities of their situations. "Even if it doesn't happen right away, I'll look forward to our date."

"Me, too," and he could almost hear Blaine grinning.

"Good." He waited for Blaine to disconnect the call, and then he sat for another minute with his eyes closed trying to get his bearings. When he could breathe again he rose and knocked on the door; he'd left his keycard inside.

"Who's Blaine?" Finn asked when he opened the door.

"Nobody," Kurt looked at his shoes and stuffed his phone into his pocket. "A friend."

His dad snorted. "Lobby boy? He's more than a friend."

"Lobby boy?" Carol questioned, her gaze moving between Kurt and his dad.

"They met back in the fall when we were in New Hampshire. They email and text, and Blaine was the one who suggested the shift in the campaign."

"You're forgetting a little detail," Kurt admonished.

"Eh," his dad waved him off. "So his mother's a piece of work. The kid must be decent or you wouldn't trust him like this."

"Who's his mother?" Carole stepped into her heels and tucked a lipstick into her purse.

"Elaine Anderson," Kurt answered. Carole twisted up her face. "What?" he asked.

"She's anti-choice and anti-gay, and no kind of a feminist."

"Blaine said—" Kurt began, but then caught himself. Airing the Anderson family drama felt a little tabloid-esque, and decidedly unsuited for the tone of the evening. "Never mind. He's happy for you, Dad, and for us. We're going to try to touch base in Florida, maybe have dinner."

"Like a date?" His dad asked, voice bright and eyes teasing.

"No." Kurt jabbed the tip of his shoe into the carpet. "Not exactly. He did me a favor and I owe him a dinner with actual conversation."

"Yeah," Finn clapped him on the shoulder. "A date."

Kurt buried his head in his hands. "I never should have said anything at all."

The first six days in Florida passed in a blur, one hotel to the next, an endless series of church basements and parks and food banks. The response was larger than they had been expecting, and the poll numbers were improving every day. On the seventh day, they rolled into Tampa just before dusk. Kurt had driven most of the way, and he just wanted a hot shower and a meal that wasn't eaten in the car from a paper bag. He let Carole handle the check-in while his dad and Finn wrestled the bags in from the car, and he let his gaze float idly around the lobby.

He spied him instantly, the dark curl of his hair just visible over the back of an arm chair. He was reading something, his finger moving swiftly to swipe the screen of his tablet. Kurt crossed the lobby in half a dozen steps, dropped his messenger bag to the floor, and fell into the chair across from Blaine. "We have to stop meeting like this," he sighed. "What're you reading?"

"Nothing," Blaine said, looked up at him and blushed.

"Seriously," Kurt scolded. "With an expression like that it's either *Twilight* or porn."

"Neither." Blaine turned his tablet toward Kurt. "Romance. These stupid books my dorm counselor at school got me into. There's this guy in them, an—"

"FBI agent, yeah. Carole reads them. They're my guilty pleasure too, and if it gets out to the press I'll know it came from you." He wagged his finger jokingly at Blaine. "Sam and Alyssa or Gina and Max?"

"What, I can't pick Jules and Robin?"

"No," Kurt scolded. "Because Jules and Robin would win every time. You need to pick one of the straight couples."

"Cosmo and Jane, then. But mostly Cosmo. You?"

"I can't decide. Gina knows what she wants and goes after it, but I really like the arc of Sam and Alyssa's relationship. And I like the way that Sam protects Jules, so I guess if you pushed me really hard I'd have to go with Sam and Alyssa."

"I heard there's a new story coming out, in the spring, a Jules and Robin one."

Kurt nudged Blaine's ankle with his shoe. "You follow her on Twitter, don't you?"

Blaine set his tablet in his lap. "Guilty as charged. I'm sort of hating the day when someone decides I can't have unrestricted access to my phone anymore."

"Tell me about it." Kurt hadn't actually thought that far ahead, though, outside of what it would mean for his communication with Blaine. "They'll know, then."

"Know what?" Blaine looked puzzled.

"That you and I are friends. Or, well. Whatever we are."

"Friends, yes." Blaine nodded. "Friends with potential, maybe?"

"Yeah." Kurt closed his eyes against the light of the lobby. "How long are you here for?"

"Two days. We have an event tomorrow morning and another one on Thursday morning, and then we're off to Orlando. You?"

"Same. Well, not the Orlando part. We've got a breakfast tomorrow, and I have a thing in the afternoon. Carole and my dad have another event on Thursday morning. Then we're headed to Miami again."

"Do you think we could try to have dinner tomorrow night?" Blaine leaned halfway into the distance between their chairs and lowered his voice.

"I'd like that," Kurt said with a smile. "Very much." He spotted Finn waving wildly at him from near the elevators. "Can we talk details over email? My brother is over there, and I kind of want to spare you the Hudson-Hummel family interrogation."

"Sounds good," Blaine answered. "I'll be out at the pool after dinner, if you're not too tired."

Kurt shook his head. "I drove all day. I'm going to scrounge some food and crash."

"Okay," Blaine smiled up at him and then buried his head back into his book. Kurt stood and walked over to meet Finn, resisted the urge to look back at Blaine to see whether he was watching.

"Hey," Finn draped an arm over Kurt's shoulders. "That your guy?"

"Christ, Finn, I *told* you it's not like that."

"Suuurreeeee," Finn drew the word out, long and teasing. "Then why is he pretending to read while he checks out your ass?"

"Oh, god," Kurt muttered. "I hate you."

"You *love* me, little brother." He jabbed at the elevator button.

"Yeah, you're right," Kurt admitted. "We're going to try to have dinner tomorrow. Please don't make it a big deal with Dad and Carole."

"I got your back, K."

The elevator squeaked to a stop and the doors dinged open. Kurt motioned for Finn to go first, and when he got in and turned around he caught sight of Blaine trying not to stare. "Thanks, Finny-Finn. What floor?"

"What is this thing, again?" Finn asked as they slid into the backseat of the car. He tugged at his tie, at his belt, at the sleeves of his shirt. "And why do we have to be so dressy?"

"A breakfast for the county Democratic party," Kurt told him. "Stop fussing with your clothes. And don't complain, at least you get to spend the afternoon by the pool."

"Like you'd go to the pool anyway, dude. And *what* is it you have this afternoon?"

Kurt felt like he couldn't complain. It had been his idea, after all, and he'd done several similar events during earlier stops. Mostly in New Hampshire, but two in Iowa and one in South Carolina too. "I'm talking at a GSA meeting at a high school."

"Oh." Finn nodded his head. "That's . . . cool. Do you like it, doing those things?"

"Yeah." It was true, of course. Kurt secretly loved being surrounded by people who understood what it was like to be different, but even in a crowd of other gay kids and allies he was still *other*. Anymore, the

only place he really felt like he fit was with Blaine, and that was just weird because of their circumstances. "We hardly know each other," he mumbled to himself.

Finn nudged him with his shoulder. "You hardly know who? Are you having one of those conversations in your head again?"

"Blaine," Kurt said, closing his eyes against the motion of the car. He was *so tired* of cars. "I don't really understand what's happening."

Finn stared at him. "You *can't* be that sheltered. You didn't see the way he looked at you last night, or the way you looked at him."

"I don't—"

"Of *course* you don't see it. You've never dated anyone before. It's all new, and I know you, brother-mine, you're probably freaking out because you want to kiss him or whatever."

Kurt flushed and turned away from Finn to stare out the window at the seemingly endless stretch of highway and the plethora of palm trees lining the road. "Or whatever," he whispered. He was pretty sure he wasn't ready for anything like that at all, but he'd be lying if he said the thought *hadn't* crossed his mind. He may have been naïve, but he *was* seventeen.

He felt Finn's eyes on him, and when Finn spoke again his words were slow and clear. "Just make sure you're safe, okay?"

"You sound like you're repeating the lecture from health class."

"I am. I don't want you getting hurt, Kurt."

"I won't." Kurt wrapped his arms around himself. *At least I hope I won't*, he thought to himself as they pulled off the highway.

"Hey," Finn interrupted his musings. "Maybe you should see if Blaine wants to go with you to your thing this afternoon."

"I don't think it's his kind of thing at all, and I doubt his mother would let him." But Kurt was already pulling his phone out and shooting off a text. *Speaking at a GSA this afternoon. Wanna come with?*

Yes, please was Blaine's almost instantaneous response.

Your mother won't mind? And what are you doing, reading Facebook?

Twitter, actually. And if this gets out to the press I'll know it was you, but screw my mother. She's not my keeper.

Kurt stifled a giggle. Blaine seemed to be getting more and more antsy as the primaries wore on. *Okay, then. Meet me in the lobby at 1:30. I'll drive, you pick the music.*

Sounds good. Maybe we can grab that dinner afterwards :)

Definitely. Kurt refused to add a smiley face of his own, or even a winky face. But he was grinning to himself as he trailed the rest of his family into the breakfast.

Blaine was early to meet Kurt, and he was so nervous that he couldn't sit still. He felt like he had back when he'd first gone to Andover and hadn't known how to just *be*, quiet and safe inside his own head and body. It was better now, mostly, except for when he got nervous or excited. He really hoped he didn't make a fool of himself.

"Hey," Kurt said, breathless, from behind him. He was swinging a set of keys in his hand and he tugged gently at the sleeve of Blaine's T-shirt. "Sorry I'm late. You ready?"

"I was early," Blaine shrugged. "No big."

"According to Google Maps, this place isn't too far. We should still be on time." He stopped once they were out of the lobby and stared at Blaine. "You sure you're okay with this?"

"Sure," Blaine replied. "I went to one of the GSA meetings at school back in the fall, but I've never really done anything like this, and I'm not really out at all. It sucks. But I'm okay."

"All right." Kurt nodded at him. "Let's go, then. I'll fill you in in the car."

Blaine followed Kurt across the parking lot to a nondescript beige rental and fished his iPod out of his pocket while Kurt unlocked the car and let them inside. "How did you start doing these GSA things?" Blaine asked once Kurt was settled behind the driver's seat with his seatbelt fastened.

He turned the key and cranked the air conditioning. "We were at an event in Iowa and this girl came up and said that she had started a GSA at her school, and would I be interested in coming to a meeting while I was in town. So I went, and it turned out that her school was this big regional junior-senior high set up. She was in the seventh grade, and she'd organized this group that had like fifteen kids, and I could hardly talk at the meeting because I couldn't believe she'd managed to do *that* in Iowa and I couldn't even walk the halls at my high school without being shoved against the lockers or worse."

"Worse?" Blaine asked, once Kurt had merged into the through lane on the highway.

"There was one bully at school who came after me hard. I didn't understand why until I chased him into the locker room one day, because I was so fucking *pissed off* that I couldn't take it anymore." Kurt visibly shuddered and let out a bitter laugh. "He *kissed* me. And then he got *worse*, until he threatened to kill me if I told anyone."

"Kurt!" Blaine gasped. "What did you do?"

"Came out here with my dad, so I didn't have to betray someone else's secret and so I could be safe. It was never going to be good for me, there, especially not with Finn graduating in June. This is better. But I like going to the meetings, because yeah, maybe I'm publicly out, but these kids are doing the hard work every day in a way I never could in Ohio. They deserve our support."

Blaine was surprised to feel a lump in his throat. "Yeah," he managed to choke out. "When I was in 9th grade, the first time, I took my best friend to the Sadie Hawkins dance. I'd known about myself for a long time, but I'd only just admitted it to my friend, and we really just went together because it was going to be fun and whatever. But these upperclassmen cornered us outside while we were waiting for Daniel's dad to pick us up, beat the crap out of us. Well," he sighed, staring out the window, "out of *me*. I had to protect Daniel, so I ended up with a shattered hand and a concussion and some other stuff." He lifted his right hand and waggled his fingers at Kurt. "I had to have surgery. I have a plate and lots of screws in my hand, and I used to get these headaches. I had to do Freshman year over again, and switch schools to boot."

"But you're okay now. I mean, physically okay?"

"Yeah. I don't think – it's going to take a lot for me to be emotionally okay, but I guess you know about that too."

"Yeah." Kurt's voice was soft. "What did you bring for music?"

Blaine held up his iPod. "What *didn't* I bring? Are you in the mood for folk, rock, or Broadway?"

Kurt jiggled a little in his seat. "Please tell me you have RENT?"

"Of course," Blaine huffed. "Do you want the movie or the musical?"

"Musical, please," Kurt said with a firm nod. "Though I do prefer Tracie Thoms as Joanne."

Blaine flicked through to his album list and called up the soundtrack, and within seconds the car was flooded with the pounding beat of the opening track. Kurt waited until the chorus, and then he was belting right along with Blaine, *how we gonna pay last year's rent?*

"You have a really good voice," Blaine told him as they pulled off the highway onto a residential street.

"You, too. I know you play guitar, but you sing too, right?"

"In choir and a cappella. The a cappella group is the select choir. We won our Sectionals right before I left school. Our chances are pretty good to make it to Nationals this year. *Their* chances, I guess. I'll miss all of it."

Kurt turned into a large parking lot and followed blue signs to visitor parking at the front of the building. When he had slid the car into a parking space and shifted into park, he turned in his seat to face Blaine and let his hand hang tentatively in the air before settling it back in his own lap. "You're really missing all of that, huh?"

Blaine nodded. "For the first time in my life, I felt normal, like I belonged somewhere. And now it's just gone. I'm trying so hard not to be angry at them for this, for any of it. It's so hard, though, because they made me lonely when I was a kid, and now I'm almost 18 and I'm *still* lonely."

"Hey." Kurt took a breath, lifted his hand and settled it carefully over Blaine's. "You have me. I know it's different, for each of us, but I *get* it, okay?"

"Okay." Blaine sighed.

Kurt squeezed his hand once and then let go, opened the door and stepped out of the car. "Let's go do this thing, yeah?"

"Sounds good," Blaine answered, and followed Kurt inside.

The GSA met in a small classroom around the corner from the office. There were probably close to 20 people there, and Kurt was greeted at the door by a tiny girl with her hair in two braids. "Kurt!" she exclaimed, and Kurt looked nervous for a heartbeat before he wrapped her in hug.

"Rhee," he said, and then turned toward Blaine. "This is my friend Blaine. Blaine, this is Rhiannon. She cornered me at one of the December events and pretty much demanded that I come to a meeting."

Blaine reached his hand out, and Rhiannon shook it and then looked at him sideways. "I know you," she said, squinting.

"No, you don't," he insisted.

"Yeah. You're Blaine *Anderson*," she whispered. "I'm kind of a politics geek. But you're not . . .?"

"No, I'm not out."

"That's okay," she said with a definitive nod. "Confidentiality rules here, kind of like Vegas. Nobody will spill the beans. I'll hurt them if they do."

"Well, okay then," Kurt said, and winked over his shoulder at Blaine. "Shall we?"

Kurt could see Blaine shaking a little as they walked back to the car after the meeting. "You okay?"

"Sure," Blaine replied, but Kurt wasn't convinced.

"It was a lot, huh? You did great, though."

Blaine settled into his seat and crossed his arms defiantly across his chest. "If great means sitting there like a lump and not saying a word. *You* were great. I was just typical Blaine, nothing special."

Kurt wanted to shake him, just a little. "Why are you so down on yourself all the time?"

"Because I don't have a family that loves all of me the way you do. Do you realize how lucky you are that your dad doesn't care? Ever since the attack, all I've heard is *don't flaunt it, Blaine* and *think of what it would do to this family if it got out, Blaine*. They're *ashamed* of what might be the most important thing about me."

"Being gay is the most important thing about you?" Kurt wanted to understand, because sometimes it felt like that to him, too, but he also knew he was a good student and a talented performer and that he was a pretty good politician for a seventeen year old boy.

"Maybe not the most important, but it's the thing that makes me feel special and different in a way that nothing else does."

"I can understand that." Kurt nodded at Blaine. "You okay if I start driving?"

"Yeah. It's too early for dinner," Blaine replied, but Kurt had been ready for that.

"I know. What's your favorite thing to do when you have any downtime?"

"Coffee and a bookstore."

"Perfect. We're going to go be teenage boys."

"I don't understand." Blaine looked at him, clearly puzzled.

"We're going to go down to the gay neighborhood, have coffee, walk around, see if there's a bookstore, and then we're going to have dinner. And maybe," Kurt trapped the edge of his lip between his teeth, "if everything goes well and neither of our families interrupt us, maybe I'll kiss you after I walk you back to your room."

He watched out of his peripheral vision as Blaine lowered his eyes and smiled a long, slow smile. "I'd like that. *All* of that."

"Good." Kurt grinned to himself and reached out for Blaine's hand over the console and gear shift. "Is this okay? Because I have no idea what I'm doing, but I want to do this?"

"It's fine, Kurt," Blaine told him, voice a little lower and much more intimate than it has ever been between them.

It felt good, and right, and holding Blaine's hand even just in the car while they sang along to *Rent* in a strange city made Kurt inexplicably happy.

There was no gay bookstore in Tampa anymore, but they found a little coffee shop where they could sit outside and drink their iced mochas and people watch. They didn't really talk at all, but Kurt didn't feel like he *needed* to talk. He just wanted to be in the same space as Blaine, away from all the other messy and complicated parts of their own lives.

Sometimes he wished that he could be a regular boy, and he was definitely going to grab at the opportunity when it presented itself.

They sat for a long time, until Blaine's knee started bouncing under the table. "Time to walk?" Kurt asked gently.

"Please," Blaine said. "I get antsy, sometimes, when I'm nervous."

"Am *I* making you nervous, or is it everything?"

"Pretty much everything. I'll be okay, once we get moving."

Kurt looked around, at the men gathering at bars and cafés, greeting each other with hugs and pecks on the cheek. He didn't think too hard before grabbing for Blaine and swinging their joined hands between them. "Is this okay?"

"Very okay." Blaine squeezed his hand back, and *god* he looked so young when he was shy like that.

Kurt wasn't sure where his own confidence was coming from, but he wasn't going to think too hard about it. "You'll let me know, if it's not?" Christ, what the hell was up with his sudden need to act like he was Blaine's keeper? There was just something so hurt and vulnerable in Blaine, and it made Kurt want to wrap him up and keep him safe, even though he *knew* Blaine was perfectly capable of taking care of himself.

"I'll let you know," Blaine replied, soft and low. "I promise."

"Good."

They settled on a little Asian café that was moderately crowded – Kurt figured that meant it had good food, but wasn't über-trendy – and they ordered two appetizers and two entrées to share, set all the food between them and picked at plates with, at least in Kurt's case, awkwardly-wielded chopsticks.

Kurt tried for the third time to lift a piece of Vietnamese Egg Roll from the plate to his mouth, but all he managed to do was drip sauce onto the front of his T-shirt. He set the chopsticks down and picked up his fork. "Don't laugh," he ordered Blaine with a wave of his fork. "I've *never* been good at chopsticks."

He watched while Blaine balanced a piece of beef atop his, and navigated it carefully to his mouth. "My mom taught me when I was really little, before she went to the Senate. I can teach you, if you want."

Kurt just stared at his discarded sticks and frowned. "No, thank you. I'm good with my fork." He speared the bite of egg roll and popped it into his mouth. "We should finish these, and the Hong Kong noodles, because they won't reheat well."

"We're leaving in the morning. What are you going to do with the leftovers?"

"If you don't want them, I'll take them back and Finn will devour them."

"Okay," Blaine smiled at him over the plates. "We should save room, have ice cream before going back."

"You just don't want to go back," Kurt teased, but he knew there was some truth to his statement.

"I guess I don't. This just feels really good."

"Yeah." Kurt resisted the urge to reach across the table and hold Blaine's hand again, but he did nudge Blaine's foot with his own *under* the table. Blaine pressed back, the length of his calf warm and firm against Kurt's own, and he watched Blaine visibly relax. "You like physical contact," he observed.

"I guess?" Blaine shrugged. "It just feels . . . *right*, I guess."

Kurt ran his eyes over the remnants of their dinner. "How about we get boxes and go for ice cream, and then go back to the hotel. Maybe have a little time together before my dad sends out a search party?"

"He wouldn't."

"Oh," Kurt laughed, and pulled his phone out of his pocket. He flipped to his text menu and brought up the most recent text from his dad. "Here." It had been sent while they were walking, *where the hell are you, Kid?*

"I guess he *would*, then." Kurt watched as Blaine ran his thumb over the screen, scrolling down to read his reply. "*Lobby Boy?* Do I even want to know?"

Kurt flagged their waiter down, asked for boxes and the check. "The first night we met, back in New Hampshire, my dad ribbed me about the way I was looking at you, and I was embarrassed because it felt like he was trying to play matchmaker. After we had talked that night, I didn't want to be blatant, when I talked about you. I didn't want your secret to get out, so I started calling you Lobby Boy, since we . . ."

"Met in the lobby, I get it. It's sweet, I guess." Blaine fidgeted in his seat.

"I won't use it anymore, if you don't want me to."

"No," Blaine waved him off and slipped his debit card into the folder with their check. "It's okay." He handed the phone back to Kurt, and Kurt tapped out a quick update for his father. *Just finished dinner, going for ice cream and then we'll be back. Might go up to B's room for a little, just to talk.*

He put their to-go boxes into the bag the waiter had brought, and startled when his phone buzzed under his arm. *No funny stuff, Kid. Have fun.*

Kurt sighed. "My father has ordered me to avoid *funny stuff*." He tipped his head and winked at Blaine. "I hope kissing doesn't fall under his classification."

"You're such a tease," Blaine said.

"It's only teasing if I don't follow through," Kurt told him, and then waited while Blaine signed his name to the check. "C'mon. I want Coffee Oreo."

They walked a little further down the street to an ice cream shop, and got in line behind a family with two little kids. The boy, who was maybe two, played peek-a-boo with Blaine from around his father's legs. The girl watched them carefully from a distance for a few minutes before approaching Blaine and holding out a pristine hard-cover book. "I got a new *book*," she squealed, and Blaine took the book carefully in his hands. "*How Rocket Learned to Read*," he said. "This looks like a really good one. Do *you* know how to read yet?"

She shook her head solemnly. "I'm onwy four," she said, "and my brudder doesn't even *talk* yet. Well." She put her hands on her hips and stared at her brother. "He says mine and bus, and he knows the sign for *potty*!" She dissolved into giggles, and Blaine smiled, patient and sweet, and it made Kurt's heart melt a little bit.

When the mother turned away from the counter, she held her hand out to the girl. "Victoria, let's put your book away so it doesn't get ice cream on it. I'll read it to you when we sit down."

"Okay, Mommy." Victoria handed her book over and then took the small cup of strawberry ice cream her mother was holding out.

"Carefully, in both hands please." Kurt watched as she wrapped her little hands around the cup and stepped precisely over to a table in the corner where a diaper bag was sitting on one of the chairs. She stuck her tongue out of the corner of her mouth as she reached up to place the cup on the table.

"You're good with them," he said to Blaine when he stood up. "The little kids."

"I like them," Blaine said, focusing his attention on the different flavors of ice cream in the case. "Sometimes I think I'd like to be a teacher. Kindergarten, or something like that."

"You'd be good at that." Kurt moved into the space next to Blaine, put a tentative hand at the small of Blaine's back. Blaine stilled, like he wasn't sure what he was supposed to do. "Too much?" Kurt asked.

"No," Blaine finally said, letting his breath go. Kurt felt him relax a little. "It's okay. Just- it's all *new*, you know? Especially in public."

"I do know." Kurt left his hand on Blaine's back, though, while they ordered, and then he moved away a little to hand a ten over to the cashier. He folded a dollar and tossed it and the coins into the tip jar after he got his change, and took his double cone of Coffee Oreo. Blaine had one scoop of dark chocolate and one scoop of Snickers, and the Snickers was incredibly melty. He worked frantically to clean the drips off the side, and Kurt made sure they had a pile of napkins before they sat down.

They ate in silence, Blaine keeping a casual eye on the family, and when the parents got up to usher the kids out onto the street, the mother stopped by their table. "How long have you boys been together?"

"We're not—" Kurt started, but Blaine interrupted him.

"It's our first date, actually."

"You're awfully sweet together," she said with a gentle smile. "Good luck."

"Thanks," Kurt said, his face hot. When she had gone, he pressed his forehead into the heel of his hand. "So much for being discreet."

"She didn't seem to recognize either of us, so that's a plus."

"For now. What's going to happen when our parents are head to head after the primaries are done?" He couldn't help but both hope for and worry about that day, when the scrutiny would be too much for one or both of them and they would decide to call things off. He hoped it wouldn't happen before they'd even got started.

"Why do we have to think about that now?" Blaine nibbled around the edge of his cone. "I mean, can't we just enjoy whatever this is for as long as we can?"

"We can," Kurt replied, and he figured he didn't have a whole lot of choice anyway. But the problem was that he didn't want this to be casual, with Blaine. He couldn't identify exactly why, really, but he felt like there was something really *there* with Blaine, and he didn't want it to be just a campaign fling. "We can, but I'm not sure I want that."

"I don't understand," Blaine blinked at him. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying," Kurt slid his free hand out and crooked a finger around one of Blaine's, "that I *like* you, probably more than I should or more than is safe or smart, and I don't want this to last for six months and then disappear like it never happened. I think I want to be your, um, your boyfriend. If you want that, I mean."

"Yes." Blaine absolutely stared at him. "I want that, too."

They were both silent on the drive back to the hotel. Blaine had tuned his iPod to that Ed Sheeran guy he'd played for Kurt back in Columbia, and they held hands over the gearshift. Blaine heaved a sigh when they pulled into the hotel lot.

"I should probably go up first. Just because, you know." He shrugged. "I'm in 413."

Kurt ran a hand through his hair. "Okay," he agreed, because he really did understand Blaine's reasoning. He took the minute while Blaine crossed the lot and went into the lobby to let his dad know he was back at the hotel. *Walking Blaine to his room. Back soon.*

He didn't bother to look at his dad's response. He just moved with singular purpose to the elevator and took it up to the fourth floor. He knocked gently on 413, and Blaine must have been waiting right there because the door opened before he'd even pulled his hand away.

"Hi," Blaine whispered, and he looked nervous and cautious and excited all at once.

"Hi." Kurt stepped into the room and clicked the door softly closed behind them and flipped the lock. His stomach was full of butterflies – hummingbirds, more like – and when he clenched his fingers his palms were sweaty. He wiped his hands on the legs of his jeans and then took a breath, reached out for Blaine's hand, pulled Blaine toward him.

They crashed together a little awkwardly, but Kurt was able to steady them both with one hand on Blaine's hip, the other at the back of Blaine's neck. "I'm going to kiss you now," he said, and Blaine's hushed *okay* was lost as Kurt pressed their lips together.

It wasn't like he was a total innocent, but kissing Brittany had been chaste as best, and being kissed by Dave Karofsky had been nothing but fear and disgust and the overwhelming urge to run as far and as fast as he could. Kissing Blaine, having it be a mutual want, *that* was electricity and heat and more desire than Kurt had thought he'd ever feel.

It felt real and right, and he never wanted to stop.

He increased the pressure of his hand on the back of Blaine's neck and he felt Blaine yield to him, his mouth open and his tongue slipping between Kurt's lips.

"Oh, *god*," Kurt moaned, because it felt *amazing*. One of Blaine's hands was wrapped around Kurt's forearm, warm and anchoring, but he startled when Blaine's other hand fumbled along his waist and barely under the hem of his t-shirt. He hissed at the contact, because it felt like a shock, and backed away.

"Shit, I'm sorry," Blaine apologized. "I didn't mean—"

"No, I know. It's okay." Kurt ran a shaky hand through his hair. "I just wasn't expecting that, is all."

"But it wasn't *bad*, was it?" Blaine looked suddenly really young and insecure.

"No," Kurt grinned at him. "It was very *very* good." He took two steps back toward Blaine, reached out and took his hand. "Can I kiss you again?"

"Yes." Blaine blinked, his eyelashes criminally long and dark against his cheeks.

Kurt shivered at the unfamiliar sensation of absolute *desire* that rolled through him. "You're so beautiful."

Blaine just shook his head. "I'm not," he whispered.

"Shhh." Kurt barely tugged at Blaine's hand, and their mouths met again, a little more frantic than their first kiss.

It felt like magic.

Kurt *wanted*, in a way he'd never before, and he knew he *had* to stop, or he'd push too hard or too far or too fast. He twisted away, turned his back on Blaine and ran a hand through his hair. "We have to stop," he finally ground out when his breathing was less ragged and his body felt less wrecked. "If we don't stop now I'm not going to want to, and I don't want to go too fast."

"I don't care." Blaine snuggled up close, his chest against Kurt's back and his arms around Kurt's waist. He rested his chin on Kurt's shoulder. "I like having you here."

"I like being here," Kurt sighed. "I just don't know what I'm doing, and I don't want to mess things up."

"Yeah, I guess you're right." Blaine tightened his grip around Kurt's body. "We have lots of time, right?"

"Tons," Kurt said, and there must have been enough surety in his voice because Blaine relaxed and let Kurt go. He was having a bit of a hard time believing it himself, but he knew he at least had to have a *little* bit of trust in things working out. "I don't know if we're going to see each other before Tuesday."

Blaine shook his head. "I don't think so. We should have a plan, though. I mean, I guess we need to work on getting to know each other better," he said carefully.

Kurt bounced a little on his toes to get his blood moving through the *rest* of his body. "Lots of email," he said with a lopsided grin. "It's the only way, really. Unless you have an unlimited calling plan?"

Blaine shook his head. "I don't. Email is best, I think. In the morning and before bed?"

"Please." Kurt sighed. "God, I wish there were a rule book for this."

Blaine was on him in an instant, pulling him close and kissing his jaw, the side of his neck, hot and open-mouthed. "No rules," he mumbled against Kurt's collar bone. "I'm so *sick* of rules."

Kurt tipped his head back to let Blaine have better access to his neck. "*Fuck*, where did you learn to *do* that?"

Blaine laughed lightly, his breath soft and more than a little ticklish on Kurt's skin. "I just thought it would feel good. I'm assuming it does, then."

"Yes," Kurt breathed, and it *did* feel good, but he was also well on his way to becoming completely overwhelmed. "Blaine—" he put his hands on Blaine's shoulders and pushed gently, "we need to stop."

Blaine suckled again at the side of Kurt's neck. "Okay, okay." He stepped back and swiped his palm over his face. "Sorry."

"It's okay, *really*. We're okay. I'm gonna—I need to, um. I should go." Kurt walked backwards toward the door, unable to tear his eyes away from Blaine's flushed cheeks and luminous eyes. "I'll email later."

Blaine swallowed hard. "Me, too," he said in a whisper.

Kurt knew he needed to leave, but he couldn't make himself walk out of the room. He stood there, hand on the door handle, for what felt like half an hour, just staring at Blaine. When he felt like he'd captured every inch of Blaine into his memory, he opened the door and slipped out into the hall. He bypassed the elevator and headed instead for the stairs; he needed the quiet and solitude of the stairwell to get back to himself before he had to face his family back in the room.

Only Finn was there, though, when he got back. He was scowling at his Spanish book while a basketball game blared on the TV. "Mom and Burt went out for a late dinner. How was your thing?" He didn't even look up, just tapped his pencil on his notebook and frowned again.

"That's the best you've got?"

"What?" Finn looked at him like he was speaking Swahili or something.

Kurt dropped onto the edge of the bed. "I go out on a date and you can't tease me any better than that?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

Finn jostled Kurt lightly with his knee. "Did you kiss him?"

Kurt looked down at his hands, folded in his lap. He could still feel the light crunch of Blaine's hair gel under his fingers, Blaine's lips on his skin. He closed his eyes. "Yeah."

"And? Jeez, I've spent years telling you about the girls I like. You don't have to be shy with *me*, bro."

"And it was a kiss. More than one."

Kurt felt Finn's eyes on him, and then Finn was leaning uncomfortably into Kurt's space, crooking a finger into the collar of Kurt's t-shirt and tugging. "Yeah, looks like more than one, dude. Better keep Burt away from Blaine until *that* disappears."

"Fuuuccckkk," Kurt groaned, and ran his fingers over the spot Finn had poked at. It didn't feel like anything, but Kurt was sure that it was going to be readily visible when he looked in the mirror. "I don't know when we'll get to see each other again, anyway."

"So, are you guys, like, boyfriends now?"

Kurt shrugged. "I think so? I mean, I don't know what kind of a relationship we can even build, like this, but we're going to try."

"You have my sympathy, man. I have two words for you: cold shower."

"Oh, Christ, Finn, it's not like that," Kurt insisted, but he knew the blush on his cheeks gave him away.

"Uh huh." Finn just rolled his eyes. "I won't tease you about that hickey if you'll help me with Spanish."

"My dad is going to tease me enough. You can do whatever you want, but I'll help you with Spanish anyway."

They settled into companionable silence, Kurt with half an eye on Finn's translations and the rest of his attention on his reading for English. It was nice, Kurt thought. It felt like home, he and Finn doing homework and spending time together.

"I miss you," he whispered, in a moment when Finn's pencil was silent.

"I know, man. I miss you, too." Finn stuffed his notebook into his Spanish text and shoved it aside. He pulled a crumpled dollar bill out of his shorts pocket. "You wanna go down to the vending machine and get us some popcorn, I'll find us a movie? Like old times?"

Kurt put his book down and took the dollar. "Regular or kettle corn?"

"Doesn't matter. Action or Rom Com?"

"Whatever's on?"

"Got it."

The vending machine only had regular popcorn, and when he got back to the room he set it popping in the microwave while Finn scrolled through the TV menu. They settled on some old '80's movie that was running on VH-1, and held the popcorn between them.

Finn was right, it felt normal and good, and for two hours Kurt didn't worry about the campaign or his dad or Blaine or *anything*.

"You're sure you guys can handle packing and checking us out?" Kurt sat up in bed, still in the shorts and t-shirt he slept in, and watched his dad fuss with his tie through bleary eyes. "Carole and I'll be back by 11."

"We'll be fine, Dad. It's not like I haven't packed you up before."

"Okay. I just worry that you're taking on too much, with Randi gone."

"Screw Randi," Kurt muttered under his breath. And yeah, maybe he *was* taking on a lot, but he *liked* it. It left him energized and excited, and it kept his mind off of Blaine, most of the time. "As long as you don't mind my doing her job until we get someone on permanently, then I think we're good."

His dad turned away from the mirror and fixed him with a funny look. He pointed at Kurt. "What the hell is *that*?"

"What?" Kurt tried to play dumb, but it was no use.

"You told me no funny business."

"It was just kissing." Oh, *god*, he was *not* about to talk about this with his overprotective father.

"Uh huh." His dad came over and sat at the foot of the bed, and Kurt was really happy that Carole had taken Finn downstairs to eat before the Continental breakfast closed. "Do we need to have another talk?"

Kurt rolled his eyes. "Don't let anybody pressure me, no means no, use condoms even though I can't get anyone pregnant, and it's not a race."

His dad nodded. "What else?"

Kurt wrapped his arms around his waist. "Sex does things to a person, to their heart, and I shouldn't throw myself around like I don't matter because I *do* matter."

"Good." His dad hugged him tight. "Don't forget any of that. And if you need to talk or anything, Kiddo, *please* come to me. I know it can't be easy, what you two are tryin' to do, especially with his mother the way she is."

"I'm not even *sure* what we're trying to do." Kurt flopped back on his pillows. "Boyfriends feels too serious, but anything else feels too trivial."

"Just take your time, Kurt. You're both smart guys, you'll figure it out." His dad hefted himself off the bed. "I gotta go do this thing. See you boys in a couple hours."

"Thanks, Dad." Kurt watched his dad leave the room and only after the door was closed did he grab his phone off the charger on his nightstand. He had an email from Tina, and one from Mercedes, and one from Blaine. He left the ones from the girls and opened Blaine's first. It was four lines of text that looked like song lyrics, and an attached audio file. Kurt read the lyrics while he waited for the attachment to scan.

*My heart's against your chest
yet*

Your lips

And the feeling I forget I'm in love now

He didn't recognize the song, but the meaning made him gasp anyway, and he hit play on the file. The empty room was suddenly filled with unexpectedly delicate music, and Kurt just closed his eyes and listened.

Settle down with me

Settle down with me up Cuddle me in Lie down

Your heart's against my chest Lips pressed to my neck I've fallen for your eyes But they don't know me yet

And the feeling I forget I'm in love now

Kiss me like you wanna be loved Wanna be loved Wanna be loved

This feels like I've fallen in love Fallen in love Fallen in love

Settle down with me And I'll be your safety You'll be my lady

I was made to keep your body warm But I'm cold as, the wind blows So hold me in your arms

*My heart's against your chest
yet*

Your lips pressed to my neck I've still the food

And the feeling I forget I'm in love now

Kiss me like you wanna be loved Wanna be loved Wanna be loved

This feels like I've fallen in love Fallen in love Fallen in love

*Yeah I've been feeling everything From hate to love From love to lust From lust to truth I guess that's
how I know you*

So hold you close To help you give it up

So kiss me like you wanna be loved Wanna be loved Wanna be loved

This feels like I've fallen in love Fallen in love Fallen in love

So kiss me like you wanna be loved Wanna be loved Wanna be loved

This feels like I've fallen in love Fallen in love Fallen in love

When the song was done, he typed out a one-sentence reply through the tears in his eyes: *I miss you already*, because he did.

February/March 2012

They rolled into Nevada hot on the heels of the win in Florida. Blaine was jittery from the long plane ride and a decided lack of sleep, since he'd been up till after midnight emailing with Kurt. They were trying to set *something* up while both of them were going to be in Vegas (*since we can't gamble*, Kurt had teased with a little wink face as it closed in on 1 am), but Blaine didn't know if it was going to happen or not. His mom wasn't going to campaign much in Vegas; she'd said she couldn't win there, not with the strength of the unions, and she felt that getting out of the city was a better way to spend their time. Kurt had told him three days ago that the Hummel Express was going to be hopping back and forth between Nevada and

Colorado for the next seven days (*Sewell has Missouri locked, and it's a toss-up in Minnesota, but if we can take Nevada and Colorado then we'll be in good shape*, Kurt's email had said when Blaine had tried to pin him down).

Blaine tried and tried to ignore the wanting, but it left him unable to focus. He hated to think about what it would feel like when they were separated by more time than just a handful of days.

The Town Car from the airport was cool without being air conditioned. Blaine rested his head against the supple leather seat and listened to his mother talk to one of her strategists. He wanted to pull out his phone and see if Kurt had arrived yet, but he didn't want to answer questions from either of his parents. He started out the window, still and silent, until they pulled up at the hotel.

Once they were checked in and standing in front of their rooms, his mother turned to him. "Your father and I have a dinner tonight. You may order room service, if you'd like, and charge it to the room. You're expected to be dressed and ready to leave for tomorrow morning's rally at 8 am."

"Okay," Blaine said, and fumbled with his key. "I think I'm going to go down to the pool, then, if you don't need me for anything."

His mother waved her hand at him. "Do whatever you want, just *don't* get caught gambling."

Blaine grinned gently. "No gambling," he promised, and ran his finger over the contour of his phone in his pocket. He *really* hoped Kurt was already in town.

Kurt was just on the edge of falling into a nap when his phone dinged. *Just checked in. 'Rents are going out for the night. Come over?*

Kurt took a minute to run over the schedule in his head. His dad was out already, meeting with some local organizers, and there was a late afternoon reception, but nothing after 6 pm. They had a breakfast with some people from the hotel and food service unions, and then they were catching a flight to Denver for two events before coming *back* to Vegas for the primary.

6:30 good?

Blaine's reply was instantaneous. *Bellagio, room 647. Let me know what you want and I'll order us food.*

It felt dangerous, having an invitation like that from Blaine, like things were suddenly moving entirely too fast, but Kurt had no desire to put the brakes on at all.

Burger and fries and a piece of chocolate cake? I hear they have the best desserts on the Strip. Can't wait to see you, he sent back, and settled back into his nap.

He dreamed of kissing Blaine, and when he woke at his father's key in the lock, his heart was pounding and he was unexpectedly and awkwardly hard against the zipper of his shorts.

He could almost hear Finn laughing at him from Ohio, and the refrain of his advice from Tampa: *cold shower, cold shower, cold shower.*

Oh, he was in *so* much trouble.

Blaine had just placed the room service order when there was a knock on his door. He couldn't ignore that his palms were sweating, so he wiped them on his pants and opened the door. Kurt was leaning against the frame looking excited and nervous, and when he said *hi* his breath was higher and a little more breathy than Blaine had heard from him before. He didn't reply, just nodded at Kurt to come into the room, and Blaine didn't even let the door close completely before he was on Kurt, his hands in Kurt's hair and their mouths fused together, bodies pushing and pulling like waves.

"I missed you," Kurt breathed as he kissed Blaine's lips, his closed eyes, the tip of his nose. "How is that even possible, when we only had the one date? I mean, the emails, they're good. They're really *good*, you know, but I missed *this*." He wrapped his arms around Blaine and just held him tight and silent for a moment.

Blaine could feel Kurt's heart thudding, could smell the intoxicating blend of his shampoo and aftershave. "It's kind of impossible, right? I mean, we're kind of crazy, aren't we?"

Kurt laughed, and it made Blaine more than a little giddy to hear such a joyful sound from Kurt. "I guess."

"Dinner'll be about half an hour. What do you want to do tonight?" Blaine pulled away from Kurt's embrace and sat nervously on the edge of the bed.

"If I told you I just wanted to spend time with you, would that be too hokey?" Kurt suddenly looked young and awkward.

"No," Blaine said, and patted the mattress next to him. "I would *love* that." In fact, he couldn't think of anything better.

They ate dinner on the bed, cross-legged and facing each other. They ended up sharing all the food, Kurt's burger and Blaine's Reuben, Blaine's onion rings and Kurt's fries. The only thing they didn't share was dessert, because Kurt didn't like tiramisu. "It's the alcohol," he told Blaine. "I can't stand the smell enough to even *get* to tasting it, not after—"

"Oh, there's a story here isn't there?" Blaine grilled him, and Kurt turned bright red.

"It's so embarrassing," he muttered around a bite of his cake, but Blaine *needed* to know, like hearing the story would help uncover another level of the Kurt Hummel puzzle.

"Tell me," Blaine said, rubbing his thumb slowly over the back of Kurt's hand. "I promise I won't laugh."

"Okay," Kurt relented after a minute, and Blaine settled in and listened to Kurt's story that started with his Glee club and trouble fielding enough members to compete and ended with him barfing on his guidance counselor's shoes. "It was pretty stupid," he told Blaine. "I mean, I don't know why I even *listened* to April at all, except that the bullying was *so* bad, and I thought that if I had a little more courage then I'd be able to stand up taller in the halls and fight back or something. It didn't matter. I looked like some poor sad little *boy*, and I never stopped being a target. And now," he said with a wry little half-smile, "I can't even enjoy tiramisu."

"That's a shame," Blaine taunted, swirling his fork through some mascarpone and licking the tines. "It's really good."

Kurt scooped another bite of his cake and held it out carefully to Blaine. "Want a bite? The frosting is *amazing*."

Blaine leaned forward and took the fork between his lips, chewed thoughtfully and swallowed. "Mmm, it *is* good." He kept leaning, placing his hands among the dishes between them. "I bet *you* taste good, too." He put his mouth to Kurt's, pressed with his tongue and felt Kurt give way under the pressure.

He was right, Kurt *did* taste good, the deep chocolate of his cake lingering on his lips and tongue. Blaine wanted to devour him, spend hours and days and weeks just losing himself in everything that was Kurt. He was well on his way, his brain focused only on *more* and *yes, this*, until Kurt was pulling away.

"What?" Blaine asked, frustrated, as Kurt put distance between them.

"I don't think either of us would really want to explain why we ended up with dessert all over the bed." Kurt nodded at the plates. "Maybe we should move these and then get more comfortable?"

"Sure," Blaine agreed, and he was a little unsure about what *more comfortable* might mean. But he and Kurt *had* agreed over email not to move too fast just because they were hardly going to get to see each other much.

"Hey," Kurt said once they'd stacked the empty plates outside the door and settled the remains of their desserts on the nightstand. "I'm not gonna bite, remember?"

"I remember. And I'm not, either."

"Good." Kurt arranged himself on his side, his elbow on the pillows. "Come here." He shifted to make a little more room, and Blaine slid into the space. He thought it would be a little rude to face away from Kurt, but that was what his body seemed to want. He tucked himself into the curve of Kurt's body, and then Kurt arranged himself around Blaine. When they were both still, Blaine let out a relieved sigh. His body felt relaxed and his brain was blissfully silent. "Feels good?" Kurt asked.

"Oh, yeah." Blaine tried not to shiver at Kurt's breath, which was warm and a little too gentle on the side of his neck.

"Me, too," Kurt admitted, and he tucked his right arm over Blaine's waist. "Tell me about your dorm advisor. Callie, right?"

They ended up talking for hours, about Blaine's school family (*they're the closest thing I have to one, really*) and Kurt's mother (*I don't know if I remember her how she actually was, or how I saw her*). Blaine told Kurt

what it was like growing up pretty much alone, and how hard it had been when he got to middle school and his parents decided he didn't need a nanny anymore and he'd had to say goodbye to Sarah, who had been with him for five years. He listened while Kurt talked about homeschooling, and helping at his dad's garage, and working on his dad's early campaigns.

"So you think you want to be a teacher?" Kurt asked, when it was dark outside and Blaine *knew* they were going to have to say goodbye soon.

"Yeah," he whispered, and every fear and doubt and need and want in his head and heart were *right there* for touching. "I want to, I just don't know how it will go over. There are *expectations*, you know."

"Sometimes I hate your mother." Kurt's words were short.

"I hate my mother *all* the time." Blaine tried not to look at the red letters on the clock. "I don't want you to go."

Kurt tightened his arm around Blaine. They hadn't moved in a long time, and Blaine wished he never had to. "I don't want to go," Kurt said, even as he lifted his arm away and rolled over. "This part really sucks."

Blaine just watched Kurt step into his shoes and pocket his phone. "I wish it didn't have to be like this," Kurt said when he was leaning over to kiss Blaine again, tender and sweet.

"Me, too," Blaine told him. "But neither of us is exactly a normal boy, so I guess we have to make do with what we have."

"That doesn't make saying goodbye hurt any less," Kurt explained.

"You're right, it doesn't." Blaine already knew that watching Kurt walk out that door was going to hurt like crazy, but he also knew that if he was going to get through that then he had to focus on the *next* time they'd have a chance to be together. "Colorado on the 7th, right?"

Kurt nodded silently and closed his eyes. "You don't have to say anything," he finally whispered, "but I think I love you."

Blaine's heart felt like it stopped beating for half a second, and then he was filled with the kind of peace he only experienced when he was in his own head, singing with his choir or swimming laps in the pool. "I think I love you, too," he told Kurt, and he *knew* he was right.

"Did you have fun?" Kurt's dad winked at him entirely too gleefully when he closed the door to their room. The bed was scattered with papers and his dad had his laptop open on his knees.

"Yeah." Kurt was still reeling from his own confession, not to mention Blaine's.

"You look like you've been poleaxed. Everything okay?"

Kurt dropped onto his bed and slid beneath the covers with his clothes still on. He could still smell Blaine on his shirt and he didn't want to let that go just yet. "I told Blaine I loved him."

"Oh." His dad frowned at him. "You meant it." It wasn't a question.

"Yeah." Kurt closed his eyes. "I kind of figured it out this afternoon, and I wasn't going to say anything because, I mean, we're crazy, right? We're just two boys on this wild ride, and—"

"Kurt." His dad's voice was firm. "If you thought it, if you *said* it, that means you meant it. Just because you're both still in high school or both on the campaign, that doesn't mean you don't know what's goin' on. You've always known your own heart, Kiddo. Just trust yourself."

"You think?"

"I *know*."

Kurt thought about Blaine's smile, and his gentle and amazing heart, and the depth of his hurt and loneliness. Sometimes it felt like Blaine was his mirror, like they already knew all of each other's secrets and hiding places. "You're right, Dad."

"Of course I am. Now get some sleep. We have a crazy day tomorrow."

Kurt let his thoughts drift, felt the memory of Blaine's body warm and close and *right* against him, and he slept.

Blaine didn't sleep when there was anything big happening in his life. It had always been that way; he remembered being in elementary school and Sarah reading to him very late into the night when both of his parents were away, but it had gotten markedly worse in the years since the beating. Now it was not unusual for him to spend most of the darkest hours of the night watching movies on his laptop, or reading. He was lucky, he supposed, that his mother didn't care when he used her credit card to buy eBooks. He had iBooks, plus both the nook and kindle apps for his tablet, and he'd read six books in January alone. After Kurt left, he bounced around from some homework that wasn't due for a week, to the latest episode of *Criminal Minds*, to the first season of *Friday Night Lights*, to his favorite *Queer as Folk* episode, when Michael first meets Ben. None of that settled him, so he finally opened his tablet and scrolled through his library to find something, anything, to take his mind off of Kurt and his own needs and wants and fears.

He found it in the pages of *All Through the Night*, the book about Jules and Robin Cassidy's wedding. He'd read the book before, of course, but he found hope in the idea that he could have his own happy ever after. Maybe it was stupid, to hold onto such an idea, but some days it felt like the only way to get through the hard days.

He read until almost 3 am, and when he did fall asleep it was with his face buried in the pillow Kurt had used, because it still smelled like him and Blaine needed to hold onto that, too, because sometimes he felt like there was nothing tangible between the two of them, that their entire short relationship, whether as friends or boyfriends, existed only in an alternate reality.

He dreamed of Kurt, and he slept through his alarm.

Elaine Anderson knew that something was going on with Blaine. She suspected that it had more than a little to do with Burt Hummel's son Kurt; she'd seen Blaine's face that night in South Carolina, watching them on the news, saw reverence and enchantment and something more intense in his eyes.

It scared her.

She'd known about Blaine from the time he was very little, and she really didn't care, one way or the other. It had been fine, when she'd been in local politics, school committee and city council. But Washington was the Big Leagues, and even though she was much more moderate than most of her party-mates, she had to walk the walk. Having a gay son just wasn't going to cut it, not if she wanted to advance in that world.

Elaine Sumner Anderson had politics in her blood: there was a cousin who had been mayor, two uncles in the state legislature and one distant third or fourth cousin many times removed who'd gone up to Washington in the troubled Reconstruction years. She had something to prove, every day, to her husband's family who thought she was *less than* for being a Southerner and her bigot of a father back in Alabama who'd cursed her up one side and down the other for *choosin' some liberal lady school* and *marryin' some damn Yankee to boot* when she'd enrolled at Wellesley and then come home after graduation with a fiancé who was headed for Harvard Medical School, a third-generation legacy from Maine who had a job waiting for him with his family's practice, if he wanted it.

She had *everything* to prove, but she also knew that she'd been losing Blaine since the night he'd been attacked. She'd watched him shrink into himself, silent and ashamed, and then she'd watched him start to grow at Andover. She'd seen him with Callie, and maybe it was juvenile but she was *jealous* of that other woman for getting to mother her boy.

She knew she had no right to expect any different; it had been the same with the nannies, Sarah and Isobel before her. Blaine had always preferred them over her, and she didn't understand why. So when she and John talked and decided that it was the right time to try for the Presidency, she'd been adamant about bringing Blaine along.

She knew she could have gone about it differently, talking about it with him rather than giving him an ultimatum, but she didn't know how to talk to him anymore. Maybe she'd never known.

She'd hoped that the campaign would have given them all a chance to be a real family, but Blaine was as sullen and withdrawn as he'd ever been at fourteen. He was always on his phone or his tablet, tapping away at emails or texts, and he was secretive about how he spent his free time. The previous night when she and John had returned to the hotel from their fundraiser, there had been a pile of dishes outside of Blaine's room, dishes that looked like they had fed two people.

Elaine was tired of the secrets.

When Blaine wasn't in the lobby by 7:45, she left John to wait and went back upstairs. She pounded hard on Blaine's door, listened to him moving through the room. He opened the door with his toothbrush sticking out of his mouth, his hair damp and curly and completely un-gelled around the collar of his button-down shirt.

"Mom," he mumbled around his toothbrush. He opened the door wider and let her into the room, and then ducked into the bathroom. She listened to the water running, and then he was back, drying his face on a hand towel. "What's wrong? I still have ten minutes."

"You're always early, Blaine. I was worried."

Blaine rolled his eyes at her, which made her *crazy*. "You never worry about me. Why start now?"

He walked over to his suitcase and pulled his dress shoes out, stepped into them, and then shrugged into his blazer. She waited while he gathered his wallet and phone, and grabbed his room key off the dresser.

"Who was here last night?" she asked, a lump in her throat because she was pretty sure she already knew the answer.

"Why do you care? Why do you suddenly care?"

"It was that boy, wasn't it? The Hummel boy."

Blaine turned and stalked back toward his bed. The covers were rumpled, his laptop open on the pillows and his tablet on the nightstand. Elaine felt like she didn't even know her son anymore.

"So what if it was? Again, *Mom*, why do you freaking *care*? You never care about anything that isn't your career."

Elaine moved up behind him, put a hand on his shoulder. She tried not to be hurt when he started at her touch. "I care about you, and I'm worried that you're not making the best choice here."

"Because Kurt's dad is the wrong party, or because Kurt's *Kurt*?"

"Because you're only seventeen, and you're on your own a lot, and you're vulnerable."

Blaine wheeled on her then, his hands balled into fists at his side. "You bet I'm fucking vulnerable, Mom. You brought me out here with you, and you and Dad leave me *alone* all the time. You don't get to decide *now* that you want to parent me, because you're about sixteen years too late on that."

"You never *talk* to me."

"Christ. I *do*, but you never hear me. Maybe you don't *want* to hear me. I don't need you to take care of me, but do you know how much I need my *mom* right now? Because I'm in love with an amazing boy, and I know I can't tell you about it because it goes against everything you believe in, everything your precious party believes in. I want you to be happy for me, but I don't want to bother telling you because I know you won't approve."

"Who you are, that's never been a surprise to me. It didn't matter until I went to D.C."

Blaine's face was more open than she thought it had been since he was a preschooler, and he looked pained. "It shouldn't matter at all. That's what I'm trying to tell you. It shouldn't matter." He shook his head at her. "I don't understand why you brought me out here."

"I thought it would be good for us, to be together as a family. I'd hoped it would bring us closer."

Blaine sat, hard, on the bed. "You're too late for that. You're too late for a lot of things. Please, give me a minute to get myself together."

Elaine blinked, because Blaine's coldness was something she and John had both given him. She'd never seen it so blatantly before, and it was a little shocking. "Okay." She breathed, heavily, and left the boy who had been her son alone, again.

She used her time in the elevator to still her shaking hands, and she was breathing normally by the time she got back to the lobby. John was pacing near the desk.

"Where's Blaine?" he asked.

"He's on his way," she said with a tight smile. "He slept through his alarm, stayed up too late watching movies or something. You know how teenagers are."

John nodded. "It was a good idea for us to do this together, Lainey. He seems to be enjoying himself, being out here with us."

Elaine just swallowed and agreed, because it felt like there was nothing else to do but continue living a lie, watch her son grow up and leave her behind.

She wondered why it mattered so much, because Blaine was right, she'd left him behind years ago. Maybe she *was* too late.

Maybe there wasn't anything left to do, no thread to hold onto.

Maybe there never had been.

Blaine was moving on, moving away. Maybe it was time to let him go.

Except that Elaine Anderson wasn't ready to let her son go yet, at least not before she got to know him again.

They won Nevada, which Kurt hadn't been too surprised about, and by the time they landed in Colorado on February 5th they'd gained a campaign manager as well. Devin Byrd had been organizing the Nevada campaign; he was young and enthusiastic, and he thought that Kurt was doing just fine writing the speeches.

"I want you to keep doing that," he'd said in his office in Vegas, the two of them perched on folding chairs with cardboard cups of weak coffee in their hands. He understood that Burt had never had a large staff, that he was resistant to having too many people with their hands in the plans, and that he *hated* being handled. He brought along a friend of his, Micah, who was a whiz with numbers, to work on fundraising, because Kurt and his dad's collective math skills had been buried under the influx of donations before they'd left Florida.

And so it was the four of them, surrounded by a decent-sized crowd at a rally in the suburbs south of Denver, on an oddly warm day when Kurt's phone buzzed. He ignored it, *and* the looks from Micah and Devin, but it buzzed again, and a third time, at which point he excused himself and ducked behind a tree.

He unlocked the screen, typed in the password he'd added since Florida, and blinked. He had three texts from Blaine, each one increasing in frantic tone. *I don't know what's wrong, but I miss you and I can't breathe* read the first.

The second asked *Can you meet tonight? We're at the Hyatt at the Convention Center.*

When Kurt read the third, he could almost hear Blaine's voice pleading with him. *Please just let me know you're not ignoring me.*

Kurt took a deep breath and typed carefully, because the thought of Blaine in any kind of distress make his hands shake and his heart race. *We're at an event, and then we're having an early strategy meeting/dinner with the new staff. Meet for coffee around 7? Starbucks at 16th and Tremont, on the Mall?*

He leaned against the tree, felt the roughness of the bark through his shirt and jacket. Blaine's reply was quick, but not quick enough to keep Devin from peering around the tree at him. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Kurt nodded, one eye on his phone, as if staring at it would make Blaine's reply come faster.

"You don't look fine. Boy troubles?"

Kurt sighed. "Did my father tell you?"

"No." Devin shook his head. "Your father and I don't talk about you, other than as it relates to speech writing. You just look like you got your heart handed to you, and I've been there, more than once."

Kurt looked at his phone, and then back at Devin. "I can't talk about it out here. It's not for public consumption, but I could find you later tonight, after I get back, and fill you in? I mean, I guess you kind of do need to know, in case it all goes sideways."

"That doesn't sound promising." Devin's tone was dry.

"He's fine. *We're* fine, but there's an, um. A political problem." Kurt jumped when his phone buzzed.

7 is good. Okay. Breathing easier now. Thank you.

You're welcome, Kurt sent back. He must have been grinning, because Devin just smiled at him.

"It suits you," he said.

"What does?" Kurt asked.

"Love." Devin tugged on his jacket sleeve. "C'mon. We have people to meet. Show me how the Hummel campaign makes the magic happen."

Blaine wasn't there when Kurt got to the Starbucks at quarter to seven, so Kurt went ahead and ordered Mochas for each of them, and a brownie to share. Even if Blaine didn't want it, Kurt needed chocolate.

Blaine tumbled through the door, finally, ten minutes late and looking about as frantic as he'd sounded in his texts. "I'm so so sorry," he gasped when he dropped into the chair across from Kurt. "I had a . . . thing . . . with my mother. She's been kind of out of control since last week." He took a sip of his mocha and nodded at Kurt. "Thank you."

"You scared me today," Kurt finally said after a minute of silence. "I don't know why, but when you freak out it makes me freak out."

"I just." Blaine propped his elbows on the table and buried his face in his hands. "It felt like too much, you know? The feelings, the distance, this awful crazy way we're both living right now. And my mother."

"What's going on with her, anyway?"

"It's a mess," Blaine sighed. "She freaked out after that night in Vegas, saw the room service dishes in the hall. She knows it's you, I told her I was in love with you, and she went all silent like she does. She hasn't said anything, but she doesn't like you."

"She doesn't even know me." Kurt felt affronted, that Blaine's mother would hate him simply because of who he was, but he'd never expected anything different.

"I don't think it matters. I'm her *son*, and I don't think she likes me. She tries to tell me that she loves me and she worries, but it's all just bullshit."

Kurt glanced around the room, made sure nobody was watching before he covered Blaine's hand with his own. "I'm sorry." He took a breath. "I need to tell my dad's campaign manager about us. Not for any reason other than he needs to know in case something happens, this gets out, whatever."

"I understand." But Blaine looked scared.

"Hey." Kurt squeezed Blaine's hand, caught his eye. "We'll figure this out. I promise."

"I believe you," Blaine said, but his eyes betrayed him. They darted all over the interior of the Starbucks, and he picked his half of the brownie into little pieces on his napkin without eating a bite.

Kurt sipped at his mocha and just watched Blaine in silence for a little while. His stomach did somersaults, and his heart was pounding. He had to ask, he knew that, but it scared him because he didn't want to lose Blaine before they even really got started. "Do you want to stop doing this?" he asked, finally, his words knotted in his throat.

"No!" Blaine exclaimed. "Why would you even think that?"

"You're acting weird," Kurt told him. "Jittery, anxious, like you're panicked about something."

"I haven't slept much, lately. I don't usually sleep well on good days, and it feels like every day since Vegas has been a bad day."

"Why? What's going on?" Kurt thought that maybe he knew, because he'd been struggling too, but he was so used to hiding the things that were hard for him, it was relatively easy to fool his father.

"Being apart, only having the emails and nights like this, it's really awful. I mean, I don't want to stop, but it's just *so hard*." Blaine blinked, and Kurt saw the tears sparkling in his eyelashes.

"I know." Kurt wanted to wrap Blaine in his arms and hold him tight, keep him safe, but doing that in public definitely wasn't the right thing to do at all. "I pretend really well, but I'm not handling it well either." He held his hands in the air between them and made sure Blaine could see the way they were trembling. "This is almost constant. I wish there were something else to do, but there really isn't. It's more of this, or nothing at all. And I don't want nothing."

Blaine scoffed at him. "It's going to be like this every time we see each other, isn't it? All this safe and in public shit?"

Kurt shrugged. "I have no idea. If your mother's on the warpath, maybe this is best. But it kind of sucks because I really want to kiss you."

Blaine blushed. "I want to do more than just kiss you," he said, and his voice was low and full with wanting.

"Yeah," Kurt breathed. "I want that too." He tipped his cup all the way back and drained the last drop. Then he stood, tugging on the scarf, hat, and mitten set that Carole had knitted him for Christmas, pale gray alpaca and soft like butter. "Walk me home?" When Blaine nodded, Kurt leaned in close. "We can hold hands, and maybe if there's nobody in the stairwell we can kiss before I have to go."

"I'd like that," Blaine grinned. "Let's go."

Kurt bypassed the room he was sharing with his father, and went right to the room Micah and Devin were in. He knocked, and Devin answered. The TV was blaring, Chris Matthews railing and angry about something, and Devin had a crease down the side of his face.

"Did you fall asleep on a memo or something?" Kurt teased.

"Polling data," Devin gestured to the printouts on the bed. "So much for the paperless society everyone used to promise us. C'mon in, sit wherever. You want a pop?" He nodded at the mini-fridge. "Micah mainlines Mountain Dew, there's some Sprite and root beer. Just don't take my Cherry Coke"

"I'm okay, thanks. I just had a mocha." The mention of which made him remember the feeling of Blaine's mouth against his, the contrast of the heat from Blaine's body and the cool of the concrete wall in the stairwell, where they'd kissed for what felt like an hour before Blaine had to get back to his hotel. He knew the memory was making him blush, and he looked away when Devin smirked.

"Uh huh. I'm *sure* that's all you had," he teased. "Your secret's safe. Tell me about your boy."

Kurt didn't even know where to begin, other than at the beginning in New Hampshire. He didn't use Blaine's name, or tell Devin anything identifiable about him other than that he was campaigning with a family member. Other than that, there really wasn't much to tell as far as their relationship story went. "We send lots of email," he told Devin after he'd recounted their date two weeks ago. "It should be ridiculous, the way he makes me feel. Love doesn't happen like *this*."

Devin just shook his head and flicked through his phone. "We really need to talk about getting some campaign phones," he muttered under his breath and then turned the screen to face Kurt. The man on the screen was dark-skinned, in camouflage pants and a khaki T-shirt, boots on his feet and a camouflage-covered helmet in one hand. "This is Byron. He's a translator, and he's serving his second tour in Afghanistan. We've known each other forever, it feels like. Eight years, we met in college, but he was ROTC and he couldn't come out, and I refused to date someone who was that closeted. All our friends thought he was crazy, wanting to support an Army that wouldn't support him, and a lot of them wouldn't write to him when he deployed the first time. But I did. I *always* did, because I'd been in love with him almost since the first day we met." Devin shrugged. "I dunno. I didn't need the time, the letters and the emails and the Skype, to fall in love. But Byron did. He's halfway around the world, we've really only had a week together since he finally clued in. If you want it enough, you can hold onto it even when it seems crazy, or impossible."

"Did you guys get together before the ban was overturned?"

Devin nodded slowly. "Sort of. We'd been dancing around things for a long time, and once it looked like a done deal I sort of called him out, asked him what he was afraid of besides losing his job. Turned out that he was afraid I'd reject him. I swear, if I could have crawled through that webcam, shit. Whatever you and your boy toy were doing before you showed up would have been decidedly PG."

"It was pretty PG anyway," Kurt admitted, because hello, stairwell? And also because while it sometimes felt like they'd been dating for months, they really *hadn't* been, and Kurt *really* didn't want to rush things. "So getting rid of the ban was a good thing, for you guys?"

"The best thing," Devin said firmly. "That's why I decided to work for your dad, when he announced. He sees overturning the ban as something to be proud of. He sees you, our whole *community*, as something to be proud of. He's the reason Byron doesn't have to worry about losing his job for keeping a picture of me in his bunk, or for talking about his *boyfriend who's in politics*."

"But the distance still sucks?"

Devin laughed. "I'm not gonna lie to you, Kurt. The distance is a fucking killer. But it's no different from what hundreds of thousands of other families are going through. There's this guy, in the unit Byron is stationed with? He's got twin boys, 6 months old. He missed their birth, and he's not going to get to meet them until they're almost a year old. *That's* hard. Me, I'm a grown boy, I can wait."

Kurt flopped backwards, careful not to disturb Devin's papers. "But I'm *not* a grown boy, and we're both being so *careful*, and he's probably about as scared as I am. Sometimes it feels like we're too cautious, when we're together, and other times I just want to say *fuck it all* and just go for it. Because yeah, we hardly ever get to be together in person, but I think we know each other better than anyone else knows us, except maybe for my dad and his friend Callie."

Devin squinted at Kurt. "You told me you met him on the campaign, but you didn't tell me anything else about him. His name, who he's campaigning with."

Kurt took a deep breath. Devin may have spent his time in Nevada, but he surely hadn't been living under a rock. He'd *know*, as soon as Kurt said Blaine's name. "His name is Blaine. His mother is—"

"Oh, you *have* to be kidding me. The boy you're dying to fuck is Elaine fucking Anderson's *kid*?" Devin ran a hand through his hair, which made it stand up on end like he'd stuck his finger in a light socket.

"He's the one who told me what to do, in South Carolina, how to change the focus of the speeches." Kurt hoped that giving Devin a piece of good news about Blaine would keep him from coming completely unglued. "The only problem we're going to have is if his mother makes a huge deal of this. She sort of hates me, and Blaine hates her."

Devin shook his head. "No, no. She might make a stink in private, but taking it public would backfire on her so hard. That may be the only good thing you guys have going for you." He gentled his expression and patted Kurt's knee. "Other than loving each other, I mean. Christ, Kurt. I'm a sucker for first love and the romance, and even the other stuff, but *really*? He's a *terrible* choice, and not just because your parents are probably going to go at it like gladiators in the General."

"I can't help it, Dev," Kurt sighed and flung his arm over his face. "I love him. I love him, even if it's going to end up hurting me."

Devin just sighed. "Oh, Kid. It might end up doing *exactly* that.

They didn't win Colorado, but they came damn close. "It's okay," Dev said, setting three beers and a Coke on the table at the hotel bar. "We'll still get some delegates, and we really didn't expect to win here anyway. It'll be different, in the General. We're going to have to work our asses off. But we should all plan to sleep tonight, and we'll hit Maine tomorrow."

Kurt hoped he and Blaine would get to see each other at least once in the next four days. Blaine and his parents were going home to their coastal town, some name that sounded natural when it slipped off Blaine's tongue and was nothing more than awkward Native American syllables when Kurt tried to say it. Carole and Finn were going to meet up with he and his dad, spend the weekend in Portland campaigning. *I wanna meet your guy*, Finn had told him on the phone the night before. Both of them were pleased to finally be getting their own room, even if it meant not thinking about what his dad and Carole might be doing in *their* room.

I'm not a hundred percent sure I'm going to get to see him, Kurt had replied, and they'd both gone silent. The thought had plagued Kurt throughout the night, and his sleeplessness had been courtesy of more than just stress about the vote.

He tried pinning Blaine down, over both text and email. He even went so far as to send Blaine a list of their campaign events, but he'd heard nothing. Nothing for almost a whole day, and he was getting frantic again.

He wished he understood why that was happening. It was weird, feeling like he was untethered, floating inches above the ground and uncomfortably weightless.

He also wondered if Blaine was feeling something similar.

He sat back in his chair and listened to his dad and Devin talking strategy. Micah was at the bar, probably trying to pick up some tourist under the pretense that hooking up with a political staffer was the ultimate in sexy. Not that Micah wasn't cute, Kurt just didn't think the business-suited women at the bar were going to fall for it. Maybe in DC, but Denver seemed like a different planet entirely.

He slipped his phone out of his pocket and texted Blaine under the table. *Missing you tonight. You okay?*

He still hadn't gotten a response by the time they got to the airport the next morning.

Blaine hadn't felt right in his skin since the Denver coffee date. He wasn't precisely sure why, but he thought it was the pressure of keeping *two* secrets instead of just one.

He felt scared, every day. Nervous, anxious. Because his sexuality was only going to impact him, *his* relationships, his *mother's* campaign. If word got out about him and Kurt, the implications had the potential to be catastrophic. If the press thought that Kurt had seduced him – and Blaine wouldn't put *anything* past the conservative press at all – the vitriol could ruin *both* of the campaigns. Kurt could become a target for hate, Blaine could become a laughing stock.

He was living in *two* closets and he couldn't fucking breathe.

He couldn't face Kurt through his fear, so he didn't do anything. He read every email and text, and he even tried to reply a couple of times, but he couldn't make himself type anything other than *I don't know why, but I'm really scared* and *I miss you, more than I should, and I don't know how to handle it*. He always erased his words, discarded the drafts, because he didn't want to scare Kurt away.

He was a mess, and nobody even noticed because he was *so* good at hiding. *Too* good at hiding. He knew he was hurting himself, but there was nothing to be done.

He just had to keep holding on.

He *wanted* to make plans to meet Kurt while they were all in Maine, but he didn't even know if he'd be able to get away from his parents without arousing suspicion.

It was all so fucked.

Instead of apologizing and explaining, he just stayed silent.

Going back to Maine was . . . unfamiliar, at best. It was going to be the longest time he'd been home in three years, and after three months of relative independence, he was back to having to ask to borrow the car.

His mother's schedule was pretty light, since she was expected to win Maine handily, so on the day before the primary Blaine convinced his father to let him have the car. *I'll take off for the day*, he'd said, *so you and Mom can have the house to yourselves*. His dad had handed over the keys, plus a folded \$20 and instructions to take himself to lunch and a movie, or something, whatever he wanted as long as he was home by midnight.

Or something. Right.

He found the Hummels where the itinerary promised, at a large park in downtown Portland. It was crowded, the people were enthusiastic, and Kurt looked *amazing*.

Blaine stood at the edge of the crowd, listened to Kurt introduce Burt, listened to Burt's revised speech. It was good, a tight piece of writing. Kurt stood at the base of the stage, his hands clasped in front of himself, and when his dad left the stage to the roar of the crowd, they hugged each other hard. Blaine held back, of course, waited for both men to work the crowd, shaking hands and hugging people and spending necessary moments listening to the people who stopped to talk. Finally the crowd dispersed, and Kurt was ensconced in a group of teenagers, probably talking about coming out or GSAs or something like that.

Blaine knew he was never going to be able to do for people what Kurt did.

He moved then, stepped closer to the group, and something in his movement must have caught Kurt's attention because he looked up and held Blaine's eye. He was *smiling*, and it made Blaine smile, and while he waited for Kurt to excuse himself from the kids he was with, Blaine blinked his eyes.

He was crying.

He had no idea why, but he was *crying*.

Kurt had felt someone's eyes on him for over half an hour. It wasn't an uncomfortable feeling, not at all, just . . . kind of like a minor annoyance. He tried to ignore it, but his awareness of it grew stronger while he was talking with a group of kids from one of the local high schools, where they had organized a GSA against the wishes of the administration and were working weekends on behalf of the gay marriage initiative that looked like it was going to be on the ballot come November.

Something by one of the trees caught his attention, and he looked up from the group and saw him.

Blaine.

His Blaine.

Shit. *His*? How had *that* happened?

He really was screwed.

He excused himself from the kids, and walked carefully over to where Blaine was leaning against a tree.

"I didn't know you were coming. You didn't answer my messages." Blaine looked at him, and Kurt could see that there were tears in his eyes. His heart beat a little faster. "Please don't tell me you drove up here to break up with me before we've even had a *chance*." Oh, god, he was begging, and he *hated* doing that.

"No," Blaine said, and his voice was hoarse. "At least, I don't think I did. I don't know what I'm doing. I can't— I can't sleep, and I can't *think*, and I just don't know."

"Okay," Kurt sighed. "It's okay. We'll figure it out. How much time do you have?"

"My curfew is midnight, so, um. Until around 10, to be safe?"

Kurt glanced at his phone. It was just shy of noon. "Do you care about lunch?"

Blaine just turned his head, stared off into the distance without responding, like he really *didn't* care.

"Okay." Kurt thought for a moment, made a decision. Made two, actually. "There's a good deli next to the hotel. Why don't we get sandwiches to go, and then we'll go and talk. Just give me a minute." He left Blaine at the tree and headed over to where Dev and Micah were watching his dad continue working the crowd.

"Dev," he said, slipping in next to the other men. "Someone's here for me. I need to go back to the hotel, but I can't risk Finn walking in."

Dev reached into his pocket and palmed his key card, slipped it into Kurt's hand. He winked at him. "Just don't leave a wet spot on the sheets."

Kurt nudged Dev with his shoulder. "Fuck you, it's not like that at all. We need to fucking *talk*. Look at him." Kurt tipped his head toward where Blaine was standing. "He's an absolute wreck."

Dev sighed. "Go. Take care of your boy, and I'll worry about everyone else. Text me when you're done, and we can do the key hand-off."

"You're the best fairy godfather ever."

"You know it. Don't tell your father, thought, he might fire me."

"He loves you. You're like a grownup version of me. He wouldn't fire you." Kurt turned and started walking, heard Dev mutter under his breath and he knew the comment that followed him hadn't really been meant for anyone's ears at all much less *his*.

I can only hope I'm like you when I grow up, Dev had said to nobody at all.

If he hadn't been so worried about Blaine, it would have made Kurt smile.

It wasn't far to walk, from the park to the deli, but Blaine was silent the whole time. He spoke to order his sandwich, turkey and cheese on white, mayo and lettuce. "I don't like tomato either," Kurt told him while they waited for their order, mostly to make small talk, but Blaine just nodded and continued to stare at the menu board.

Kurt grabbed their bag when it was ready and moved to leave, but Blaine was looking around for a table. Whatever. Kurt clearly had no clue about what was going on with Blaine, but he *did* look like he needed to eat, so they sat and ate in silence. Kurt was too worried to taste much of his roast beef; he just picked at it until Blaine was done. They tossed their trash and then Kurt took Blaine's arm (not even his hand, which was stuffed into his coat pocket), and dragged him around the corner and up two blocks to the hotel. "Dev gave me his key, so we can have some privacy. Carole and Finn are doing some meet and greet with military families today, and Dad and I aren't really qualified to talk about that at all. I just didn't want us to be interrupted."

"I don't think I can *do* anything," Blaine said, sinking to the bed with a sigh.

His despondency made Kurt want to laugh *and* cry. Instead, he leaned over and pressed his hands to the side of Blaine's face and kissed him, hard and playful, in an attempt to lighten the mood.

Blaine stiffened for half a second, and then flung his arms around Kurt's neck and kissed him back, a little cautious at first but then more enthusiastic as he relaxed. Kurt tried to stop himself, but his angle was all wrong and he sort of *had* to climb into Blaine's lap to keep from knocking them both to the floor. It was incredibly awkward, mostly because he was taller than Blaine and between trying not to knee him in the stomach and trying not to accidentally touch him someplace neither of them were quite ready to go, all he really managed to do was feel like an out of control octopus. Blaine finally broke off their kiss and just stared at Kurt.

"What are you trying to *do*?"

"I was going to fall, so I thought . . ." he waved his hand at the floor, at them, at the bed. "I didn't want to hurt you, and then it was just all awkward and *wrong*, and this is *so* embarrassing and *not* how I'd planned any of this." God *damn* his stupid babbling.

"It's okay, really." Blaine stepped on the heels of his sneakers to pull them off, and then scooted up into the middle of the bed. "Come here. Please."

Kurt took his own shoes off, and crawled up next to Blaine. He wrapped his arms around Blaine's torso, pulled him in for a tight hug. "Hi," he whispered into Blaine's ear.

"Hi." Blaine sighed again, but it was relaxed that time, and Kurt could feel the tension seeping out of Blaine's body. "I missed you, so much."

"I know. Me, too," Kurt soothed him. "I feel like I've said it all already, that I wish it didn't have to be like this and the distance doesn't matter, but it *does*, and there's nothing we can do. Just so you know, I hate feeling helpless."

Blaine tucked himself into the curve of Kurt's body. "I'm pretty well always helpless. I don't think I know any other way to be."

Kurt hissed at the implications of that. He knew Blaine's parents had largely abandoned him to nannies and his own devices ages ago, but it still hurt him to think about how that must have felt. "Do you trust me?" he asked.

"As much as I trust anybody." Well. Blaine was honest, at least.

"I'm going to do my best to fight for us, but you need to make sure you want that. Want *this*."

Blaine trembled against him. "I'm sure."

"When was the last time you slept?" He unwrapped himself from Blaine, and got up to grab the extra blanket from the little shelf above the pseudo-closet.

"A couple of hours last night. I've never been a good sleeper, and my parents' house feels too strange."

"Mmm." Kurt got back on the bed, stretched out and opened his arms for Blaine. When Blaine had settled with his head on Kurt's chest, Kurt pulled the blanket up over both of them and stroked his hand down Blaine's back. "You need to sleep. You're safe here. It's okay."

"I don't need you to protect me." Blaine's words were cold, bitter.

"The fuck you don't. Shit, Blaine. *Nobody* is giving you what you need. I know I can't come close, but I can damn well try because I can see that you're sinking, and I love you. Please. Just- just let me be strong for both of us, because I want to and I *can*."

Kurt felt Blaine snuggle a little closer. "I don't know how to do that, I really don't."

"I know." Kurt felt like every time they were together, he got a clearer picture of who Blaine was and what his demons were. He thought that there were entirely too many demons in Blaine's life, and he knew that he couldn't fix any of them. But he also knew that he could hand his heart to Blaine and Blaine would hold it and protect it.

It had become clear that moving forward with Blaine was more risky than Kurt had thought, but he didn't want to walk away, didn't think he could, even. "I'm here," he whispered into Blaine's hair. "I'm not going anywhere. You're safe, I've got you." He kept mumbling reassurances and endearments until Blaine's breathing gentled and his body relaxed into sleep.

Kurt hadn't meant to fall asleep himself, but the months of endless travelling were starting to wear on him, and it was so warm and comfortable with Blaine there. When he blinked awake to his phone buzzing against his hipbone it was dark outside. Blaine was draped over him, still boneless in sleep. Kurt nudged him hard with his arm, and then again with his knee, and Blaine sighed and slipped off of Kurt, grabbed the edge of the blanket, rolled onto his side and went back to sleep.

Once he could move, Kurt fished his phone out.

"Hello?" He kept his voice low so as not to wake Blaine. He knew he'd have to, sooner rather than later, but he really wanted him to get as much sleep as he could.

"That's an awfully long talk," Dev teased.

"He's sleeping. Apparently he's a worse insomniac than you or I." Kurt looked over at Blaine. He looked so *young*, sleeping like that. "Am I in trouble yet?"

"No. I explained it to your dad, but *you* might want to do the same. I think he's worried about you." Dev paused, like he was thinking hard.

"Just say it," Kurt sighed.

"I'm a little worried about you, too. You're only seventeen. This seems like an awful lot of work for you."

Kurt closed his eyes, listened to Blaine breathing, heavy and relaxed. "Maybe," he admitted finally. "But I don't think I can talk about this right now. I just need to be in this, you know."

Dev sighed. "Yeah, honey, I do know. Just- call your dad before he flips out. I'll be in the lobby, when you're done with my key. But take your time."

"Soon," Kurt promised. "If he'll actually talk to me instead of being silent, I'm going to try to take him to dinner before he has to go."

"When you're apart so much, every minute is like a date," Dev said, and Kurt could hear something wistful in his voice.

"Can you call Byron? You should, if you can. I mean, if it's not the middle of the night over there." Because Dev *had* to be lonely.

"Tomorrow. We already have a Skype date set up. And yes, before you ask, I'm okay."

"I wasn't going to ask, but that's good." Blaine stirred next to him. "I should go. See you in a few. Thank you."

"I'd say any time, but let's not make this a habit."

Kurt laughed to himself and ended the call. Then he set to work on truly waking Blaine. It was so easy. He was there, sleep-warm and so delicious looking, Kurt just *had* to trail kisses down the side of his face and into the crook of his neck.

Blaine squirmed away, and Kurt giggled. "Ticklish, huh?"

"Noooo," Blaine whined. "Sto-op."

Kurt wrapped an arm around Blaine's waist and tucked himself behind Blaine like a spoon. "We need to get up. Dev wants his room back, and apparently my dad is freaking out, and I *really* want to take you out to dinner before you have to go home."

Blaine shifted, stretched, let out a little squeaky contented noise. "I don't want to get you in trouble."

"I'm not in trouble." Kurt knew that was true. "Dev said my dad is just worried about me. I'll talk with him later, everything'll be fine."

Dev was waiting in the lobby, laptop open on the table in front of him, tablet in his hands, and two cell phones at his elbow. "Multitasking, much?" Kurt called as he made his way across the carpet. "I'm sorry we messed up your day, but *thank you*," Kurt said setting Dev's key on the table.

"There's always work. I'm just glad I could help." Dev tipped his head and ran his gaze over Blaine. "You look better. I'm Devin." He held out his hand and Blaine took it.

"Blaine. Thank you." Blaine laughed nervously. "I appreciate it."

Dev nodded. "Anything for Kurt. And for you. Seriously." He reached into his pocket and pulled out one of the hastily made business cards they'd printed up at a Kinko's in Denver. Kurt could see that he'd scrawled his personal cell number on the back. "You need *anything*, call me, any time. Except if you need bail, because I'm broke."

Kurt laughed, but Blaine just stared.

"Kidding," Dev said finally. "Wow. You're serious, and you're *so* not a guy who's going to get into that kind of trouble. Just ignore me, then."

Kurt leaned in and kissed Dev lightly on his cheek. "Thanks. We're gonna go eat, I'll talk to you later?"

Dev nodded. "Definitely. You know where to find me."

Kurt motioned toward the door, waited for Blaine to follow him. "I hope you like Italian," he said when they were on the sidewalk.

"Who doesn't love Italian?"

Kurt shrugged. "No idea, but apparently people don't."

"Oh, well. More for us, then." Kurt knew the sleep had been good for Blaine, because he was talking again with lightness and humor in his voice.

"Dev was right, you are looking better. How do you feel?"

Blaine reached out and took his hand. "A little more human," he said, and he pulled Kurt closer so they were walking shoulder to shoulder. "I know I need to sleep more, but it's so hard sometimes."

"I know. I have trouble with that, too. So does Dev. Would it help if I called you before bed every night? When we can, I mean?"

"Maybe?" Blaine didn't sound too sure. "I don't know if it would help, but I guess it can't really *hurt*, either."

"We can try it, and if it doesn't do much, we can try something else." He held the restaurant door open for Blaine, breathed in the rich scents of garlic and tomato and warm yeasty bread. "But we also need to talk about how we can really make this work."

"Yeah," Blaine whispered as the hostess led them to a small table near the middle of the restaurant. She set two plastic covered menus in front of them and flounced away, leaving them alone. "I do want this, Kurt."

Kurt nodded. "I know. Food first, talk later."

They ended up talking over their dinners, ravioli and fettuccini alfredo that they shared between them, Caesar salad and garlic bread. Once the table was clear of everything but their cups of coffee and two chocolate-dipped cannolis, Kurt reached across the table and took Blaine's hand. "We can make this work, I know we can. But that means that you can't pull whatever shit this has been, the last week. You can't not respond to emails or texts, because then I worry."

Blaine opened his mouth to respond, but Kurt cut him off. "No, I know. You don't want people to worry about you because you don't know how to trust people, or let them, I don't know what. Take care of you?"

Blaine nodded in affirmation.

"I get that. But I love you, and I *want* to do that. It's not an obligation, it's not a burden. It's something I'm happy to do."

"I'm not supposed to want that," Blaine whispered. "Andersons aren't supposed to need that." He took a sip from his water glass and set it back on the table with a light thud. "We're supposed to be like robots or something. But I'm not *like* that, and none of this is what I thought it was going to be."

"None of what, baby?" The endearment just slipped off Kurt's tongue, but it felt right, and Kurt saw but didn't hear Blaine gasp lightly.

"The campaign. It was supposed to be like it is for you and your dad, and I made this agreement that I wasn't going to lie, if anyone asked I was going to tell them the truth. But I never have the chance, because they just keep me shut away like always, like I'm invisible or a *problem*. I thought I'd finally be able to get out of this damn fucking closet, but nobody ever asks me, and now I have to keep *this* a secret, too." He slapped his hands on the table. "It hurts."

"I know."

"Says the boy who's never *been* in the closet. Do you know what it feels like, to have to hide who you are every day?"

"No," Kurt said, his eyes on the tablecloth, glued to the spot where he had dripped a dollop of marinara sauce. "I guess I don't."

"It's like suffocating. I don't know how to *keep* doing it."

"You don't have to, not with me. Not with Dev. Not with Callie, right? Have you talked to her at all since you left school?"

Blaine shook his head. "I didn't know what to say. Things are so different now."

"I think you should call her. At least tell her about us. Because you need someone you can talk to who isn't me, who isn't invested in your life or your mother's career like everyone else is, and you *need* to let go of some of the secrets before they bury you."

Blaine took a bite of his cannoli and chewed carefully. "How are you able to be so confident about everything? I try to be like that, and I just *can't*."

Kurt didn't have any good answers to that. He had them for himself, but anything he said to Blaine was going to feel like he was poking at Blaine's turmoil with a stick. He'd never felt ashamed of having been loved and cherished by his family before, but in the light of Blaine's absolute emotional neglect (and Kurt knew without understanding exactly how, that that was *precisely* what Blaine had experienced) the unconditional love he'd grown up with made him feel very spoiled indeed. "I think it's just part of me," he said finally, carefully.

"It's part of what I love about you," Blaine said softly. "I do, you know. Love you." He turned his hand over under Kurt's, so their palms were together and their fingers intertwined. "I don't- I don't know how to talk about things like that. I don't want you to think that because I don't say it very much, I don't feel it. Because I do. God, I *do*. I feel it every day, and it's too much sometimes."

Kurt closed his eyes, breathed deep. "You don't have to carry it all alone. I know it's hard and scary for you, but you've got people you can trust. Please, baby. Trust me. Let me help. I told you I would be strong for us both. I wasn't lying about that. I can do it. I *want* to do it, but I can only help if you let me."

Blaine blinked at him, and in the low candlelight Kurt could see tears sparkling in Blaine's eyelashes. "I can't promise," he said finally. "I can't fucking promise *anything* right now. But I can try. I can try, and I'll just have to hope that's enough."

"I hope it's enough, too."

He walked Blaine back to his car, and they kissed gently under the golden glow of a streetlight. He waited until Blaine had turned around, headed back toward the highway and the route south toward his house before he walked the short distance back to the hotel. His dad was sitting in the lobby sipping at a can of Mountain Dew when Kurt got inside.

"Micah's pulled you over to the dark side," Kurt said with a smirk and settled into the chair across from his father. "I'm sorry I'm making you worry. I just have no freaking clue, here."

"That boy of yours, he's kind of a mess."

"That's one way of putting it."

"You think his mother did this to him? I'd love to wring her neck for that. He seems like a decent guy."

"He is. He's sweet and funny and smart, but they treat him like a commodity, or like some kind of puppet. He's malleable, because I think he just wants to make everyone happy."

His dad nodded. "Dangerous," he said, "because he doesn't know how to be happy himself."

Kurt remembered some of the things Blaine had told him, about school and singing and swimming. "I think he was happy, himself. Or at least he was getting there, at his school, but then his mother decided he needed to be with them on the campaign. He didn't choose this like we all did, this has just been his life forever, and it's really, *really* bad for him."

"Is there anything we can do?"

"We can't fix things for him," Kurt said, even though he wanted to. "Can you just- can we be a safe place for him, wherever we are? He's so closeted, Dad. He has to be, about himself and about us. I think he just needs a place to be himself."

His dad was silent for several long moments. "Okay," he finally nodded. "You let me know when you guys are gonna get to see each other, I'll make sure you have your own room. But you gotta promise me, Kurt, that you're bein' careful."

"Why does everyone think I've suddenly turned into a sex fiend? Jeez. We haven't even been together a month yet."

"You're teenage boys, it's a logical assumption." Burt winked at him, and Kurt blushed hard.

"I'm so lucky you're my dad."

His dad put his soda can down and stared hard at him. "I'm lucky you're my son. I love you, Kurt, and I always will. I'm so glad you're out here with me. I don't think I could have done any of this without you. Now," he looked at his watch, "it's late and we have a busy day tomorrow. Let's go up and go to sleep."

Blaine pulled into a Dunkin' Donuts in South Portland for a large coffee with extra cream and sugar, and before he got back on the road he turned his Bluetooth earpiece on and dialed Callie's cell phone.

"Blaine!" she exclaimed, and he could hear some of the guys from his house calling out in the background. "How are you, honey?"

Blaine merged carefully back into traffic, and followed the signs to 95 South. "Okay. I'm back in Maine through tomorrow. I just- I have so much to tell you, and I miss you, and I figured I'd call. It's not too late, is it?"

"No," she replied. "I was just making some cookies from that dough you froze before you left. I wish you were here."

"I wish that, too."

"What's going on? You sound sad."

Fuck. Callie could always read him. "I am, I guess. I need to talk to you."

"What's his name?"

Blaine startled, jerked the steering wheel lightly. "What makes you- how did you—" he stammered.

"I know you. Who is he?"

Blaine took a deep breath. "Kurt Hummel, Congressman Hummel's son. We're- we've been- he's my boyfriend," he let out in a rush.

"Snagged yourself a hottie on your first try," Callie teased him. "Good for you, Blaine."

"He's amazing, but I'm a total mess. I keep freaking out, and it's ridiculous. He told me to call you, because I'm keeping too many secrets and it's killing me. I hate it out here." He knew he wasn't really making any sense, but the words were trying to push their way out of his mouth and he wasn't sure he could stop.

"Hey, sweetie, slow down. What's the problem?"

"That stupid deal I made with my parents, my whole personal don't ask don't tell shit. I never get to tell anyone because nobody asks, and it would be bad enough if it was just my being gay. But it's not, because Kurt and I *definitely* can't tell anyone, and we're going to get to a point where one or the both of us has a security detail and people are going to be looking at us too closely, and *then* what?"

"You're thinking too far ahead," Callie said. "Can't you just take each day as it comes?"

"I want to, but I can't stop thinking about what it's going to be like if someone tells us we can't see each other. I know we're young, and neither of us have ever . . . done *this*, before. But I need him. We need each other." Blaine knew he sounded desperate. It was how he felt, most of the time. He didn't know how else to explain how he felt about Kurt, like they were magnets or something, constantly seeking each other. "And what happens if someday we're able to be together and we *can't*, because we only work when we're apart? I don't think I could stand it."

"Blaine, baby," Callie's voice was soft, soothing, but her *baby* was nothing like Kurt's, and Blaine had to pull over to the shoulder because he was suddenly sobbing. He didn't want to go home. He didn't want to go back out into the world on the campaign. He *wanted* Kurt and couldn't have him, not the way he wanted, so the only place left for him was school.

"I want to come back," he whispered once he could breathe again, once he'd wiped his face on one of the flimsy napkins the Dunkin' Donuts clerk had pressed into his hand when she'd handed over his change. "I want to come back to school. I think I *need* to. It's the only place I feel real."

He heard Callie sigh. "I know. You've got to talk to your parents. I can't make that happen for you, but your room is here, and the guys would love to have you back. *I'd* love to have you back. I miss you, Blainers."

"I'm 18 in two weeks. Technically I can re-enroll myself. The tuition is paid, I'm actually ahead in my work because I have nothing to fucking *do* all day but sit in hotel rooms alone. It would be better for me if I could be back there and go out when my mother really needed me."

"It's a good argument," Callie told him. "Just tell your parents that. Tell them what you need, and maybe they'll listen."

"They never listen," Blaine said, thinking of the argument with his mother in South Carolina. "No, that's not right. They never hear me."

"So make them hear you, make them listen. Stand up for yourself. You'll never know unless you try."

"I guess I don't really have a choice." Blaine sometimes felt like he had *no* real choices in life; everything, from the secrets he kept to the lies he told everyone, including himself, it was all tied up in other people, in what they wanted from him or thought he should be.

Sometimes he felt like he didn't even know himself.

"I can do it," he said, as much for his own benefit as for Callie's. He sniffed again, and rubbed at his eyes. "I'm okay. I can do it."

"I know you can, honey. I believe in you. Where *are* you, anyway?"

Blaine leaned back in his seat. "South of Portland on 95. I spent the day with Kurt, and now I'm going home. I had to pull over, though, because I was crying."

"Shit, honey. You need to take better care of yourself."

"I know." And he did, but he had no idea *how* to do that. "I'm trying."

"I hear you. I'm going to hang up now, and you're going to drive home, and you're going to talk to your parents. With any luck, I'll get to see you soon. Be safe, baby."

"Thanks," Blaine said. "Thanks for listening."

"Any time."

There was next to no traffic on the road that late. Not that it was surprising, for a Monday night. Blaine was just happy that the weather was clear and he didn't have to drive through snow or freezing rain. When he pulled up in front of his house at 11:30, all the lights were on downstairs. He could see his parents sitting at the kitchen table. He really hoped they'd had a good day.

He went in through the kitchen door. "Hi, guys," he said, and they both looked up from their mugs. They must have been drinking tea, because the coffee maker was turned off.

"Blaine," his father said gravely. "Come sit, please."

Blaine flicked his gaze back and forth between his parents. They looked concerned, and the kitchen felt cold. "I think I'll stand, thanks."

"Your mother tells me you've formed a particular friendship with an inappropriate boy. Did you see him today?"

"It's not friendship, he's my boyfriend. And so what if I did see him today?"

"Then your actions show little concern for this family, for your mother's career. For yourself. Who is the boy?"

"Does it matter *who* he is, or does it matter that he's a *he*?"

"What kind of a question is that? Of course it matters that he's a boy. We really wish you wouldn't persist in living this way, but I also know that you really can't change what you are."

"Who I am," Blaine muttered, and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Now you're just being difficult. Who is he?"

Blaine tightened his arms around himself, wished they were Kurt's arms holding him up, keeping him safe. He heard Kurt's voice echoing in his head, *let me take care of you*, and he knew that when he was done with his parents he could go upstairs and call Kurt and it would be okay.

"Kurt Hummel."

His father pushed to his feet and stalked over to the sink. He rinsed his mug and set it and his teaspoon into the sink with a clatter. "Absolutely not. You're forbidden to see him. Never mind the political ramifications, his family isn't *appropriate*, Blaine."

"Because his father's a mechanic, because they're a blended family? What? They're more of a family than we are. And I'm 18 in two weeks, you can't control who I see. And while we're on the subject of my birthday," he paused and took a deep breath. "I want to go back to school. You can send me back, or I can re-enroll myself after my birthday. There's no *point* to my being out there with you when you leave me alone all the time."

"That's not true." His mother finally spoke up from where she was still sitting, silent and small-looking. "We love you."

"No you don't," Blaine said bitterly. He knew it was true. He'd known for years, but he was as much a pretender as his parents were. "You love the boy you *wish* I was, but I c-can't—" he drew in a ragged breath and silently cursed the damn tears that wouldn't let him alone. "I can't be that boy, but I keep trying. I keep hiding and pretending and acting like everything is shiny and perfect, but I am *so* fucking far from perfect. All Kurt wants to do is love me and take care of me, and I don't know how to let him because I've never had that before. You're my parents, I should have at least had that from you."

He was shaking, could feel the remnants of his coffee mixing with the bitter taste of adrenaline at the back of his throat. He wanted to get back into his dad's car and just *go*, it didn't matter where as long as he could breathe when he got there. Instead, he backed up a little and let the kitchen island take some of his weight. Okay, he let it hold him up because he couldn't fucking stand and he really just wanted to fall into a little puddle on the floor, but he couldn't do that. He had to fight for himself, because nobody else was going to do it for him.

His parents were both stony and silent, so he kept talking. "How am I supposed to know you love me if you never tell me, or if you put conditions on it? Because all I ever hear is that I'm not enough for you, that what I want and who I am and how I want to live my life are wrong because I'm not you, and I can't live up to the ideal of your career or your party. Why isn't enough for me to just be myself and be happy?"

Blaine's father just stared at him, and Blaine thought that maybe this was the most he'd said to either of them since that night in the hospital when he'd dismissed his father the same way he'd been dismissed so many times over the years. Since nobody was interrupting him, he just kept on. "I told you that I wasn't

going to flaunt my sexuality, and I'm *not*. Kurt and I both know what this could do, if it got out, and we're being very discreet. But I also told you that if anyone asked I wasn't going to lie, and I won't. But by keeping me away from everyone and almost everything, you're *making* me live in the closet and *that* is hurting me."

A hint of shock floated across his mother's face, and Blaine had to wonder if she'd honestly not realized what she was doing, all these weeks. He supposed anything was possible. "I can't spend every day living a lie, and I can't believe that people would be pleased to know you *urged* me to lie."

All of a sudden, it was like the path was straight and clear in front of him. Maybe it was going to come off like blackmail, but he knew he had to try. "Let me go back to school, please. Either that, or we set up an interview with *The Advocate* or the *New York Times* or somebody and I come out publicly, it's your choice."

"You can't keep giving us ultimatums," his father scolded. "You need to learn that you can't have everything you want."

"I can't have my education or my mental health? I don't think wanting either of those things makes me spoiled, it just makes me human. Jesus, Dad. Just- please. Think about it. I need to—" he held out a still-shaking hand. "I need to go to bed before I fall over. If you failed to notice, I don't think I've slept more than two or three hours a night since before Christmas."

"You make it sound like we're terrible parents," his mother argued, her voice trailing after him as he made his way slowly up the stairs. He knew he should have said something, denied her statement, but he couldn't even figure out what to say.

He wanted to call Kurt, but it was so late, and he was so cold and tired. He crawled under his down comforter with his clothes on, and when he was completely cocooned into the dark and warm he pulled out his phone to a new text window. *Home safe, but things are bad here. Big discussion. Told them to send me back to school or I'd come out in the press.* He didn't expect to get a response before morning.

Kurt was still awake, though. *Baby. Are you okay?*

I don't think so, but I'll know better in the morning. Good luck tomorrow. I love you.

Sleep well. I love you, too, baby.

When Blaine woke in the morning, after a fitful night of sleep, the house was quiet and empty. The only evidence his parents had been there at all was a note on the table in his mother's perfect script:

Blaine-

Your father and I are out all day. Please meet us at the local office at 7. We'll discuss school and everything else later.

I know you don't believe me, but you're my son and I do love you.

-Mom

Blaine crumpled the note and threw it away, ate cereal in front of the TV, and then took the car and drove down to Wells, to the town beach. Nobody went to the beach in February, the water was too violent and cold and dark, but that was how Blaine always liked it because it felt like he did, inside, so much of the time. He sat on a big rock and watched the waves, the stray seagulls flapping and dancing in the wet sand.

Maybe he'd been wrong, to push things the night before, but he'd felt like he was up against a wall and either something was going to change and he was going to be able to be happy, or nothing was going to change and he was going to be miserable for the rest of his life.

Even if something changed, maybe he was incapable of being happy, but Callie was right, he had to try. There was nothing to lose, really, not for him personally. And yet, his brain just kept repeating his father's implication from the night before: *spoiled spoiled spoiled*.

The answers weren't any clearer when he left, cold to the bone but as calm as he was going to get. He took a hot shower when he got home, and dressed in his favorite all-black suit. He spent extra time making sure his hair was perfectly gelled, and then he cemented on his Perfect Political Son face and drove across town to the campaign office. He'd expected a big party for the primary, but his mother had just shaken her head when he'd asked and said they were saving the festivities for *when I win the Presidency, Blaine*, like he was stupid for even thinking something like that. Instead of a fancy dinner, there was Chinese take-out spread out on one of the phone bank tables and some kind of cake in a disposable sheet pan over in the corner. That, at least, looked homemade, and possibly chocolate.

The local volunteers were mostly his parents' age and older, though there was one girl there who looked a little familiar. Blaine thought maybe she'd been in his class in middle school, or for the handful of weeks

he'd attended Kennebunk High, but he couldn't dig a name out of his memory so he just skirted the edge of the room and tried to avoid people asking him lots of questions.

His mother was a shoe-in, so he didn't understand why everyone was nervous when the results started coming in. He finally asked the girl, who was curled into one of the too-small metal folding chairs that were all over the office reading a dog-eared Harlequin romance.

"Nobody's nervous for your mom, they're just worried about who's winning for the Democrats."

"Why?" God, he felt so stupid. He was a politician's son, he should *know* these things.

"It's going to be a harder race against Hummel than it would be against Sewell. Hummel is young and progressive, and he's a working man. He'll appeal to the working class, and to younger voters, and have you seen his son? He's so cute!"

Blaine fought the urge to roll his eyes. "He's also gay," he deadpanned, but the girl just smacked him lightly on the arm.

"The other one, Finn? He plays football, and he's super tall and just, yummy."

Blaine looked at her hard, tried to place her again. "I know you from somewhere."

She nodded. "Yeah. You sat in front of me in Civics Freshman year. Well. Until, you know."

Blaine poked absently at his right hand with his left thumb. He'd had really good surgeons, and a really good physical therapist, and there were some days when he forgot he'd even been so hurt. But the cold at the beach hadn't done him any physical favors, and his hand was aching. He *hated* when it was a constant reminder like that. "I know," he said. "I'm Blaine," he introduced himself, mostly because the courtesy dance was soothing to him.

"Tara. Nice you meet you, again."

A gasp went up from the room at large, from where the adults were all crowded around the TV. Someone turned the volume up, and Blaine could hear the newscaster's voice " . . . *at the ecstatic Hummel campaign office in Portland.*"

"I guess that's that, then," the girl said, going back to her book.

"Why are you here? It doesn't seem like you really care."

She shrugged and brushed a piece of hair out of her face. "I don't. I want to volunteer for the Hummel campaign, but my parents are all about your mom, and I don't have a car so I can't go up to Portland myself. They don't have an office here, it's either up to Portland or down to Manchester. It'll be okay, really. I'll just subvert the system in my own way."

"World domination, I like it," Blaine said with a wink.

Tara shifted in her chair and fixed him with a stare. "Is it true, what they were saying after? That you and Daniel got jumped because you were gay?"

Blaine knew he had to tread carefully. He didn't want to accidentally out Daniel. "I am. Gay. I don't know about Daniel, I haven't talked to him since that night. My parents wanted to get me out of here. Is he- is he okay?"

Tara looked away. "I don't know," she said. "He tried to, um." She gestured to her wrists. "You know, when we were sophomores. Then last year his mom lost her job, and they moved away. Down south somewhere, Florida maybe? I don't know. He was just so sad, especially after you left school."

"Oh." God. Blaine should have been a better friend, shouldn't have been so scared and self-involved that he couldn't check in on the boy who'd been the closest thing to a friend he'd had back then.

The room swam a little in front of his eyes, and he felt himself sway. Tara was on her feet, a hand on his arm. "Hey. You look like you're gonna pass out. C'mere." She led him carefully out of the main room in to a little kitchen, where she grabbed a cold Coke from the fridge. She made him sit on the dusty linoleum floor before she handed him the can. "Drink this. Are you gonna hurl? Do you need a wastebasket?"

Blaine rolled a sip of the soda over his tongue. It was sticky-sweet, almost too bubbly, but the sugar and caffeine were like a jolt to his system and his stomach ceased its tumbling. "I think I'll be okay," he muttered. "Fuck, this is so embarrassing."

"Nah," she waved a hand at him. "I had to give a presentation in my history class last week, and I get the worst stage fright. I told my teacher that I was going to be sick, and he didn't believe me. He made me get

up there, and I warned him, but he sat in the front row anyway." She shrugged sheepishly. "It's not my fault he didn't listen."

"What happened?"

"I gave the whole report, and then I puked on his shoes."

Blaine snorted. "Okay, you win. That's funny." He held his phone out to her. "Give me your number, I'll have someone from the Hummel campaign call, get you set up to volunteer."

"No shit." She stared at him. "How the hell are you gonna do that?"

It was reckless, but he was feeling like pushing boundaries. He dialed Kurt's number, waited while it rang into his voicemail, and left a brief message. "Hey, you. Tell your dad congrats for me. Listen, I'm with a friend who wants to volunteer for your dad, but she doesn't have a car and can't get to Portland on her own. If I give you or Dev her number, can someone up there help her figure out a way to help? Her other option is working for my mom, and well, that's not really something she wants to do. So, yeah. Um. Still no word on the other things, but I'll talk with you later. Hope you're having a hell of a party."

He clicked off and watched Tara's face. "Which son?"

"Which one do you think?"

Tara pursed her lips in thought. "Yeah," she said finally. "I can see that. Not for public consumption, though, right?"

"Oh, Jesus *fuck* no. Nobody knows but you, my parents, and the boy in question. Okay, and his family and their campaign manager. If it leaks, you can forget about volunteering."

"Got it. Not a single word." She took Blaine's phone and added herself as a contact. "We should hang out the next time you're here. I like you."

Blaine smiled in spite of himself. "I like you, too," he said. "I don't have a lot of friends."

Tara nodded at her book. "I'm a political geek who reads romance novels for fun. I don't have a lot of friends either. So you won't pretend you don't know me if we run into each other on the street?"

"No." Blaine was adamant. "I may be lots of things, but I'm not a scared fourteen year old anymore. I know better, now."

"Good."

They sat there, in that cold and neglected kitchen, until Tara's parents were ready to leave. Blaine waited while his mother said the last of her goodbyes and thank yous, and then he followed his parents home. When they were inside, jackets shed and shoes on the mat next to the door, his mother ushered them all into the living room and settled onto the couch.

"Blaine. Your father and I have talked. While we're not happy with your language and attitude last night, some of what you had to say held some weight for us. You're correct that you will gain a lot of freedom after your birthday. While I know you don't want to hide who you are, if you were to, um, come out, that would cause lots of problems. So we've decided that you can go back to school. Your father talked to the headmaster this morning, and they're pleased to welcome you back. We'll drop you off in the morning, but you have to understand that there will be occasions when we'll require you on the campaign trail, so please don't make any long-term commitments. The understanding, then, is that you'll stop seeing that Hummel boy, and you'll keep quiet about . . . *that part* of your life."

"I won't go public, but I will *not* stop seeing Kurt." Blaine's blood felt like it was going to boil just at the thought of it. "You can't control who I see and who I don't. Why can't you just let that part go?"

Blaine's father's face was twisted up in anger. "Because saying that's who you are is one thing, but acting on it is completely different. It's not *right*, Blaine."

"And *that's* why I stopped going to church, right there. I can't listen to this. I'm gay. It doesn't matter if I *never* do anything with a guy or ever have another boyfriend. I'm always going to be gay, and keeping me from Kurt isn't going to change that." He stood, smoothed at his clothes. "I'm going upstairs, I have packing to do. Thank you, for hearing some of what I had to say."

When he got to his room, he shut the door and locked it behind himself, turned on some Ed Sheeran, sat down on his bed and cried with relief. When the tears were done, he opened his phone and texted Callie first. *Coming home tomorrow. So happy. See you soon.*

He emailed Kurt, instead of sending a text.

I'm going back to school tomorrow. I guess this means more closet for me, but I don't have to hide at school, and I'm not letting them keep me from you. They tried, they did, but I'm 18 in two weeks, so it doesn't matter anyway. I'll be at certain events, but I don't know which ones yet, so I have no idea how this is going to change things for us. Maybe it will be better, because at least one of us will have some stability? I don't know.

I love you. I love you and I'm here, and I'm holding onto you and trying to believe in a future when we could have all the things we want.

Congrats, again. You guys are going kick ass in November, I just know it.

Being home for a week meant that his clothes were mostly clean, and he hadn't even unpacked the majority of his school boxes from December. That would make things easy, at least. He tossed his dirty clothes in his laundry basket and his clean ones into a duffel bag. He made sure he had all his school books, and the assignments he'd already completed. He would pack his electronics in the morning, so he put his phone on to charge and crawled into bed.

He slept, long and hard, and he didn't get up until morning.

The morning after the Maine primary, Burt struggled to get out of bed. Carole was curled up next to him, and god it was so nice to have her there, her *and* Finn, but mostly her. He rolled over, looked at the clock. They still had three hours till check out.

"Oh, fuck it," he groaned and rolled back toward Carole.

"Wha'?" Carole rubbed at her eyes. "Wha's wrong?"

"Nothin', honey. Go back to sleep. I'm just feelin' lazy this morning."

"Mphf." Carole bunched her pillow up and sighed, went back to sleep.

Burt just lay on his back and stared at the ceiling. He was drained, *absolutely* exhausted. He wasn't sure how he was going to make it through the primary season.

He needed a break, and he was pretty sure that Kurt did, too. Even though he'd looked less stressed after their talk about Blaine, he was still about as pale and wrecked as he had back in the fall. Burt didn't want to think too much about how things with Blaine were affecting Kurt. It had to be hard, keeping things quiet and never feeling like they had a safe place to go (and Burt wasn't blind, he'd seen Dev slip Kurt his room key as the boys had left the event the previous afternoon). He wasn't going to begrudge them a little privacy.

But really, they needed a week off.

He reached for his phone, hated the way he'd become attached to the damn thing. It wasn't even his personal one, because Dev had made them get a cheap calling and texting plan just for the campaign. The keys were infuriatingly tiny, and every time he squinted at the screen he just knew that glasses were in his future. He poked at the little keyboard and hoped he'd spelled at least some of the words right.

Michigan can take care of itself for a week. Kurt and I need a break. Going home to Ohio. You and Micah welcome to come with if you want.

Burt wondered if Dev ever slept, because most mornings he woke up and things had been *done* or had *happened and been dealt with* overnight, and Burt knew that mice weren't taking care of any of it, it wasn't like that animated *Cinderella* movie Kurt had watched over and over as a toddler. Dev's text came back lightning fast: *I like that plan. I'll definitely go with. M. may not, but I'll ask. You tell K yet?*

No, Burt typed. His thumbs felt awkward on the keys.

Oooh, can I do it? Dev was so much like a child, sometimes, it made Burt laugh.

If you want. I'll take care of getting tickets. Burt reached for his laptop and started powering it up.

Dev's next text took a couple of minutes. *Done and done. We're on a 4 pm out of Logan. Carole and Finn'll get there before us, there was nothing left on their flight.*

Thanks, Dev. Burt leaned back against his pillow and closed his eyes, listened to Carole breathing beside him.

No prob, boss.

Burt grinned to himself. Carole was gonna be so fucking happy.

The week off was exactly what they needed. He got to spend a little time at the garage, and Kurt slept, and wandered around the house in his pajamas and ate cereal for lunch and watched some werewolf show that Finn had put on the dvr. He talked to Blaine every night, now that Blaine was back at school, and that seemed to calm Kurt, having Blaine settled someplace where he was *loved and safe, because he doesn't get that from his parents at all, Dad*. Burt didn't care, one way or the other. He just wanted Kurt to be happy.

They showed Dev the sights of Lima, but he spent most of the week driving between Columbus, Toledo, and Dayton laying the groundwork for not only the primary coming up in March, but also for a full-scale infiltration for the general, because Ohio was already being labeled a battleground.

Burt was glad Dev was thinking five steps ahead, because all he could think about were the trips coming up. They were really only going to spend a little time in Michigan, because Burt was a working man and he'd voted for the auto industry bailout because it was smart legislation and it was the right thing to do while Sewell was vocal about wanting the big manufacturers to drown themselves. Kurt had laughed when the UAW endorsement had come through, had jokingly told him *they'd have to be crazy to endorse Sewell, and this is good for you for November*. Burt had just nodded, but he knew that it meant more than any of them wanted to verbalize. It meant that he'd arrived, and it meant that he could at least take the Michigan primary with both hands tied behind his back.

Spring Training was going on when they went to Arizona. Burt wanted to go out to Goodyear Park to watch some baseball, have a hot dog and a beer and feel like summer was closer than it was. Dev got them three tickets for a Reds/Diamondbacks game, and Kurt went grudgingly, complaining like always about there never being an excuse for stirrup pants. He'd had fun in the end, though, rolling on the grass with some little kids who started wandering away from their parents after the second inning. It made Burt smile, seeing Kurt being so playful and carefree; there wasn't a lot of fun in his son's life, and Burt couldn't help thinking that it was mostly his fault.

They went out to Tucson to spend a little time campaigning for Ron Barber, who was running in the special election for Congresswoman Giffords' seat. Burt hadn't known Giffords very well, but he'd been absolutely wrecked when she'd been shot. He knew, from the letters and late night hate-filled voicemails that came through his office, it could just as easily have been him. He'd been home, that weekend, had

even done a similar event that morning, a breakfast at American Legion. When he'd seen the news he'd left the house, gone down to the garage and locked himself in the office and cried like a baby, because there was just too much of that shit in the world, and he hated that it always happened to good people.

The Wyoming primary was March 1st. The two-day trip had been staring at him for weeks, and it had been causing both he and Kurt nothing but stress since the day it had appeared on the itinerary. When Burt had told Kurt they had to go up there, that they were going to Laramie even, Kurt had gone ghost-pale. He was young, but he *knew his tribe*, he always said. He knew his history. He'd only been in preschool when Matthew Shepard had been murdered. Burt knew he didn't remember the way Molly had cried, the way Burt had held her on the couch after Kurt was tucked into bed while she talked about *that poor boy's family, how terrible, how could people do something like that out of ignorance?* It was the first night they'd talked, *actually* talked, about what life might look like for Kurt, what the threats would look like if he turned out to be as gay as his childhood play and affectations suggested.

I know you can't tell anything for sure, Molly had said, wiping her tears on her sleeve as picture after picture of the fair-haired boy in a blue and white checked shirt flashed on the screen. *I just want better for our baby. I don't want him to be afraid because of who he is.*

Later, when the endless barrage of news reports was done and Molly had taken three Excedrin for her headache, Burt had closed up the downstairs and headed up to bed himself. He slipped into Kurt's room, sat on the floor by Kurt's bed in the glow of his My Little Pony nightlight, watched Kurt's tiny chest rising and falling under his blankets. He brushed Kurt's hair off his forehead and whispered to nobody in the night, *I'll always fight for you, Buddy. Nobody pushes the Hummels around and gets away with it. You're safe.*

And yet. He hadn't been able to keep Kurt safe in school, and now he couldn't even keep Kurt's heart *or* his boyfriend safe, and he was out there trying to become President. He still wasn't sure what he was doing most days, but Kurt and Carole and Finn believed in him, and he kept meeting kids like the ones at the University, the ones in the College Democrats and the Queer Advocacy Network who had sponsored the event. They loved him, wanted to tell him their stories about how Kurt helped them come out to their parents and how *he* helped their parents learn to be accepting. Some of them didn't have it as good, but they always told him that they had faith because *things weren't as bad as they could be*. There was always one who cried, who told him they wished he was their parent, and that was the one he would hug and tell the same things he tells Kurt: *you matter, you're special, we love you for you.*

For all the kids who wanted to hug him and bare their souls, the same number or more would be crowded around Kurt, ready to revere him like he was some kind of patron saint of the under-21 GLBT universe. The kids were all older than he was, some of them were even older than Matthew Shepard was when he died, and they want Kurt to tell them what the journey *could* be like when you have family and friends who stand up and say *we're not going to let this happen to us*.

That night, Kurt was strangely quiet. He talked to the students, he always talked to the students, to every one of them until the last stragglers had left and it was just them and some assistant dean of something or other stacking chairs and throwing away empty cups of watery punch. He slung his arm around Kurt on the walk to the car.

"You okay, Kid? You're awful quiet."

"Fine," Kurt said, settling into the passenger seat. He stared out the window on the drive, and Burt had to focus extra hard to keep from being distracted by the odd shapes his eyes were catching in the dark, some kind of fence that looked tipped on its side, and too much flat empty space to make any kind of sense to his mind.

"I love you," he whispered to Kurt across the unfamiliar interior of their third rental car of the week. "And I'm so damn proud of you, do you even know? Those kids, they *adore* you. You're so damn brave, Kurt. I can't even tell you—" he broke off, because his throat was getting choked and he knew there were fat sloppy tears threatening to spill down his cheeks, but he couldn't see in the heavy dark as it was, so he swallowed and blinked and then he was okay again.

Kurt still didn't say anything, just kept staring while Burt parked the car and managed the room key (an actual key on a plastic tag, he almost couldn't believe it; he was pretty sure that those kinds of keys had gone the way of the adding machine he used to use for the garage books until Kurt had convinced him they needed a computer that seemed to learn things without him).

Once they crossed the threshold and the door was closed and dead-bolted behind them, Kurt fell to pieces.

"It's been 13 years, Dad, but nobody seems to have learned anything. How come things like that keep happening? We're not monsters, why do people hate us so much?"

Burt wished he had answers, but he didn't. Every time someone got up on the House floor and ranted against partnership benefits or hate crimes legislation or AIDS education in schools, Burt wanted to shake them and ask them where they learned to hate like that, because they were wishing harm on *his boy* and he would kill them with his bare hands for it. He was scared, because ignorance did nothing but beget fear, or maybe it was the other way around, or even a vicious circle that never stopped, and it seemed like it was getting worse. For as much progress as he'd seen in recent years, he knew there was going to be a backlash. He could feel the seeds of it stirring, and he was terrified that it would just sweep the progress and the freedom and all the *people* under with it.

He didn't want to lose Kurt to a backlash, so he was going to fight like hell to make sure that didn't happen.

He just held Kurt while he cried, tried his best to soothe both of their frayed and fragile souls, and then he went down to the hotel bar for a beer so Kurt could call Blaine. He wished it hadn't been three weeks since they'd seen each other, since Blaine had driven up to Portland the day before the primary, but he supposed it was a lot harder now, with Blaine back at school. At least Kurt had started sleeping through the better part of the night again. The last time he'd been as bad as it was in Maine had been in the months after Molly died, when they would sit together on the couch in the middle of the night and watch the old musicals Molly had loved, Fred and Ginger and Gene Kelly.

Burt wished Kurt and Blaine could be like normal teenagers, dates and backseat fumblings, but this thing they were growing was so fragile and needed to be tended *just so*, and Burt thought that maybe nightly phone calls and the occasional coffee dates were the only way to do it, right then.

He really hoped things would get better after the primaries.

When he got back to the room, Kurt was in his pajamas with his math book open in front of him, phone pressed to his ear, talking about variables.

Huh. Burt never would have thought that a cross-country telephone *homework* date would be a way to spend a night, but what the hell did he know? He was just the candidate.

They had to be up and out early the next morning, off on some kind of whirlwind shit that Dev had sworn was a great idea, three states in one day, sandwiched between the primaries in Wyoming and Washington. So they went to Seattle, where Kurt drank too much coffee and Burt lost his left glove from the nice fleece-lined pair Carole had given him for Christmas. Then it was Idaho, which was a long shot but there were

more people than expected at the Rotary Club in Boise, so Burt figured he was doing something right after all.

They'd written off Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Virginia because Sewell was from Texas and he was expected to take the majority in states where most voters seem to hate Burt on his face simply because he wasn't ashamed of his son.

They spent two days crisscrossing Massachusetts and Vermont in the lead-up to Super Tuesday, stopping at schools and diners and all the little campaign offices along the way. They had some really good ice cream at the original Ben and Jerry's in Burlington, took the tour and everything. They stayed the night in Boston, and Kurt asked to borrow the rental car to go out and visit Blaine for a few hours. It was the first time they had to see each other since Maine, and probably the *last* time they would get to see each other until Blaine's school let out the first of June. With any luck, the tickets would be decided by then, but Burt wasn't holding his breath. Sewell was a tenacious bastard, and Burt was worried that he'd hold on like a damn rabid dog until the bitter end.

Kurt returned from Andover looking relaxed and happy, and he blushed when he told Burt about meeting Blaine's dorm counselor and his friends in his house and from his singing group.

"I'm happy for you guys, glad you got to have that time," he said, and he really meant it. "Blaine's doing better, back at school?"

"Yeah." He kept running his fingers over his neck, delicate, like he was looking for something. Or remembering something.

Fuck. Burt *really* didn't want to think about what *that* might mean.

Kurt held his wrist out to Burt, where there was some kind of leather band laced through a silver charm. "That from him?" Burt leaned over to read the tiny writing on the charm.

"Uh huh. It says Guardian Angel," Kurt said, a little snark in his voice. "You really should get glasses."

"After the damn election," Burt growled, because he hardly had time to breathe most days, much less worry about the fact that his eyes were approaching middle age without him. "That's what you are to him, his angel?"

Kurt shrugged. "I think maybe it's more that I'm his guardian. I don't know. He trusts me, and that's not something he gives easily. I get that."

"Yeah." Burt tugged Kurt close, held him tight. "You're like that too. Careful. But once you give that trust, it's forever. You guys'll figure it out, I have faith."

"I'm starting to," Kurt admitted.

"That's alright," Burt said. "I think I have enough to spare."

Next morning, Kurt went off and did his GSA thing at Boston Latin and Burt went to a fundraising breakfast. When they met up for lunch, Kurt was shaky and kind of broken-looking, and it felt bad like Wyoming all over again.

"Talk to me." He settled across the table from Kurt and stared hard. "What happened at your thing?"

"It was – it was *lots* of things," he began, and Burt settled in because when Kurt hedged like that it meant that he really needed to talk. "Did you know how progressive they are here?"

Burt sort of had no idea what Kurt was even talking about, so he said no.

"They have a safe schools law here, that protects students against homophobic bullying, and they passed it back when I was still in diapers. They have a Governor's Commission on GLBT youth. GLSEN was founded here. The governor who did all that was a Republican. He saw a need and he just did these things. Do you realize, if we had that back home, I would've been protected in school? That stupid counselor wouldn't have been able to act like getting my ass kicked in the hall was my fault for not wanting or not being able to hide who I was." Kurt twisted his straw wrapper around his fingers, over and over again. "I shouldn't have had to leave school. It was their job to protect me."

"That's *my* job, Kurt." Burt had always been adamant about that. Kurt was his son, his responsibility, and he wasn't going to shirk that responsibility.

"I tried to report it, but nobody listened. Nobody believed me. Teachers, kids, they all looked right past me while it was happening. They *saw* it, but nobody wanted to do anything. And then- and then- it was just us in the locker room and who was going to believe me then, his word against mine?"

Burt *really* wasn't following now. "What the hell, Kurt. What are you talking about?"

"In the fall," Kurt said, and picked up his napkin, opened it in front of himself and promptly started tearing it into fine white confetti. "When I was- when I wasn't acting right. You kept asking if I was okay and I said yes, but I wasn't. And then when you decided to run, I told you I couldn't tell you what was going on at school. I still can't tell you everything. I can't tell you his name. But he- he really had it in for me, like it was his mission or something."

"What'd he do, Kurt?"

Kurt's face went blank. "I'm sure you don't want to hear about the locker slams or the slushies or the dumpster, or knocking my books out of my hands, or calling me *lady* or *fag* or a hundred other tired insults."

Burt's stomach sank. When Kurt started getting short like that, it meant that whatever happened had been off the charts bad. "Just tell me. I won't be mad at you. At your principal, definitely. At the mystery boy, yeah. But never at you, Kurt. I could *never* be mad at you for other people's ignorance."

Kurt took a deep breath, let a little pile of his napkin-snow drift down to the table from between his fingers. "I had enough, one day, so I followed after him, called him some names, asked him what his problem with me was, and he pushed me up against the lockers in the boy's locker room and kissed me." Kurt shivered and looked away from him. "After that, it was like he lost *all* his fear. He came after me harder, more often. I didn't want to challenge him again, but the day you came home to tell us you were going to run, I must have said something that pissed him off even more, and he threatened to kill me if I ever told anyone," he let out in a rush.

"Oh, Kurt." Burt's heart broke. "I know why you didn't tell me, but *god*, Kid, I hate the idea that you had to deal with that alone."

"I didn't end up having to deal with it because I didn't have to go back to school. I just wish there had been some way to fight it, because I shouldn't have had to leave school to be safe. It's just *wrong*."

"I know. *Dammit*. If we were home, I'd be down at that school first thing, givin' that idiot Figgins a piece of my mind."

Kurt shook his head. "It wouldn't do any good. Nothing ever does any good in Lima. But I think—" Kurt twisted his hands together. "I think I need to start talking about the bullying. I don't, usually, because everyone wants to hear about what it was like coming out so young. But I think it's time, because maybe Massachusetts is progressive, but most states aren't. It happened to me, it happened to Blaine. It could happen anywhere, to anyone."

"I'd never pressure you to talk about *anything*, you know that, but I'll support you, whatever you want to do."

"Thanks, Dad." Kurt was looking better, less freaked out, and he'd finally stopped shaking.

"I'm proud of you, you know that, right?"

Kurt blushed and rolled his eyes. "You tell me that all the time. I know."

PART THREE

Dog Days

*A/N: Thanks to nubianamy for the favor and for being a fabulous emergency beta; to oddjustodd for *her* beta when she has so many other things to deal with right now; and to all the folks who have been signal-boosting this.*

I freely admit that I know nothing about proper Secret Service protocol. I'm a hundred percent sure that I've take plenty of liberties here. And I'm also sure that in our world of instant media and cameras and phones, there's no way the boys could have kept things a secret even this long. But in my imagination, they get a little breathing room, which they enjoy in this chapter.

--

Secretary Sewell conceded the Democratic primary at the end of May. Blaine's mother's opponent, Governor Jackson of Mississippi, gave up his fight after the first of the June primaries, and so it was crystal clear when the Hummel-Hudson family marched at the front of the Columbus Pride parade on Father's Day weekend, that it would be Hummel vs. Anderson for the 2012 Presidential race.

Blaine didn't go to Pride. He'd wanted to, so badly, but he'd promised his mother he wouldn't come out. Instead, he sat on his hands at a Junior League luncheon in Baton Rouge. Kurt sent him pictures from Columbus, which Blaine kept checking on his phone under the table, and all he could do was hope that someday he'd be free to go to a parade himself.

He had to believe in a *lot* of somedays. Sometimes it felt like the only way he was going to get through was having that hope.

Pride night, he called up *Milk* from his iTunes library and Skyped Kurt, and they "watched" the movie together. He never got tired of spending time together like that. It wasn't a traditional date, but it was what they were both able to do. It wasn't easy, per se, being with Kurt across the distance like that, but he kept reminding himself that he'd rather have to deal with the distance and the public secrecy than not have Kurt in his life at all.

They didn't see each other again until the heat of August in Atlanta, a weekend trip for both the campaigns between the Anderson family vacation, the Republican Convention, the Hummel-Hudson vacation and the Democratic Convention. For old time's sake, Kurt suggested that they meet at one of the local coffeehouses between their respective hotels. By the time Blaine got there, his gel was useless and his hair was soggy and curling around his face. Kurt was sitting just inside the door, two massive blended iced drinks with towers of whipped cream on the table in front of him. "They make a killer caramel mocha frappe," he said, nudging one of the cups at Blaine when he was settled at the table. His eyes went automatically to Kurt's arms, bare and toned and so so pale against the black fabric of his tank top, which was stretched tight across his chest. Blaine couldn't help it, he licked his lips and stared. Hard.

"See something you like?" Kurt teased gently.

"You," Blaine blurted, before he could get his brain to mouth filter in place.

Kurt just smiled and whispered *I missed you*.

"I missed you too," Blaine sighed. The frappe was good, rich with caramel and chocolate over the bitterness of dark-brewed coffee. "This summer pretty much sucked."

Kurt pulled the lid off his cup and swirled his straw through the whipped cream. "It hasn't gotten better at all?"

Blaine shook his head. "It's still so much silence, all the time, and it's exhausting. And I did promise, you know. So I just have to deal with it? It's better than the spring was, though."

Kurt kept his eyes on the tabletop, like he was avoiding staring outright at Blaine. "You look better."

Blaine ran his thumb over the tiny hint of pale skin visible where his watch had slid down his wrist. "I've always gotten really dark in the sun."

"It agrees with you."

Blaine smiled, and looked at Kurt again. He knew he was being blatant; he raked his eyes up and down and finally settled them on Kurt's fingers, long and slender and wrapped around the bottom of his cup. He thought about how cold they would be, how good they would feel on his skin, about how many nights he'd

dreamt of Kurt's touch and woken aching and hard and desperately lonely. "Thank you," he whispered, and his voice was choked with want.

"Blaine—" Kurt started, and then swallowed visibly. He let the silence hang between them for a long minute. "I have a room to myself," he said finally, nodding toward the door. "Do you want to?"

Blaine took a swallow of his drink. "Please." His mouth was dry, and his leg was shaking under the table.

"Okay." Kurt glanced around the coffee shop, stood, and held his hand out to Blaine. Blaine didn't really touch him back, just brushed a finger against the side of Kurt's hand with a glance toward one of the baristas, who was watching them with barely-disguised interest from behind the counter.

"We need to be more careful now," he whispered to Kurt as they walked out the door. "It's not like the primaries." He nodded at his agent, Max, who fell into step behind them. Kurt had two agents, a man and a woman, and Blaine wondered, not for the first time, whether the agents brought them *more* attention.

He wouldn't have been surprised if that afternoon was the last time they'd see each other until the first debate. The logistics of in-person meetings was going to fast become a Very Big Deal.

When they got to Kurt's hotel, Blaine wanted to collapse right in the wonderfully air conditioned lobby, but he also *really* wanted to touch Kurt, because *god*, they hadn't seen each other since March, and Blaine's body was absolutely on *fire* with the wanting of Kurt's hands and the pressure of his body and the softness of his lips.

Fuck.

It had been entirely too long.

The agents got into the elevator with them, and when they got to the floor where the Kurt and Burt were staying, Max took up position at the elevator and Kurt's agents followed them to the room. He and Kurt had to wait outside while the room was cleared, which was always awkward, but Blaine was beginning to get used to that.

Once Kurt's agents were done with the room, they moved down the hall and stopped, one at each staircase door. Kurt shut the door behind them and locked it with a thud, and then he turned to Blaine. "You're not worried about what they might think, the two of us in here together alone?"

"Max knows, about us. All my agents do." He eyed Kurt heavily. "Don't tell me you lied when they asked you about any significant relationships they needed to be aware of."

Kurt shook his head. "I didn't lie, but I didn't out you either. I didn't know if you had said anything, so I didn't want to—" he apologized.

"No, no," Blaine stopped him. "It's okay. Really. They probably know now, though," he said, tipping his head toward the door.

"Yeah," Kurt said, and blushed. "I think maybe I should care, but I don't."

"Me, neither." Blaine snaked his hand out, settled it on the soft, over-warm cotton of Kurt's tank top. He could feel the light texture of the ribbing against his over-sensitive fingertips, and the heat from Kurt's body. His fingers twitched there, just above Kurt's hip, and Kurt leaned into his hand a little bit.

It felt like he was moving in slow motion, suspended in jello or running in sand, as he shuffled closer and leaned into Kurt, kissed him hard.

Kurt mumbled incoherently into Blaine's mouth, but Blaine couldn't make himself pull away to ask *what*. He just sort of gasped into Kurt's mouth and tugged him closer, pressed their bodies tight from knee to mouth and tugged at the hem of Kurt's shirt. He wanted skin under his hands, he *needed* it, and he didn't want to think about what he was doing, he just wanted to *do* it.

He wanted to do it before everything about the two of them together was a distant memory, because Blaine was pretty sure *that* day was coming, too.

He felt like he needed to grab the opportunity now, while it was unfettered and *right there* in front of him. He plucked at the tight fabric of Kurt's tank top, tugged the hem free from Kurt's shorts, slid his hands over the soft smooth skin of Kurt's sides. *Please*, he whispered against Kurt's lips, breathed in Kurt's little gasps and moans. *Please*.

Kurt pulled back just far enough to be able to look at Blaine without squinting. He blinked at Blaine a couple of times, opened his mouth like he had something to say, and finally just leaned his forehead against Blaine's shoulder. "Are you sure? I don't want to—"

Blaine knew. They'd had this conversation over and over and *over* again. "You're not going to hurt me. I'm a big boy. I can make my own decisions. And *god*, Kurt," he leaned in and trailed his tongue along Kurt's collar bone, "I *want* this. Tell me you *don't* and I won't push it."

Kurt shook his head. Blaine felt the motion through his shoulder all the way down to his toes. "I do want it," Kurt said finally after a long moment of silence, "I just can't help thinking—"

Blaine broke away from the distraction of Kurt's body and groaned. "I think enough for both of us *all the time*. God, Kurt, *please*, just stop thinking and just fuck me already."

Kurt's eyes went owlsh in the dimness from the tightly closed blinds and curtains. "Oh," he breathed, trapped his bottom lip between his teeth the way he did when he was thinking, or concentrating.

"I said," Blaine moved back toward Kurt, drew him close again, "stop thinking. We both want this, what's the problem?"

"No problem," Kurt said, leaning in and kissing Blaine hard, deep. "No problem," he said, his fingers just as deliciously cool against Blaine's too-hot skin as Blaine had imagined. "No problem," he whispered, his voice hushed and reverent in the instant Blaine felt him let go, Blaine's hand a little nervous and fumbling under the cotton of Kurt's boxer-briefs.

He chuckled lightly then, nudged Blaine's hand away. "You've got to stop, if you want me to be able to do anything else," he said, and Blaine let Kurt lead him to the bed. They undressed each other carefully, awkwardly, and Blaine was unexpectedly and momentarily scared until Kurt held his hands and his gaze stared at Blaine with tears in his eyes.

"I love you," he told Blaine, his lips teasingly soft against the line of Blaine's jaw. "I love you so much."

"I love you, too," Blaine replied, and it felt like the only truth he'd known in his life.

It was surprisingly easy to give in to Kurt's mouth, his hands, the press and retreat of Kurt's body. Blaine wanted to close his eyes and get lost in it, wanted to keep them open and watch every second, but it didn't matter in the end because he knew he would always remember the way Kurt felt, long and hard and deep inside of him. It was more tender than he'd expected, and more intense, and he held on and held on and held on until he finally came undone from the simplest thing, from the gentle sweep of Kurt's thumb along his jaw and Kurt's whispered prayer, *you're so beautiful, so beautiful, god, Blaine, I love you*.

Kurt held him, after, tucked them both tight under a cocoon of blankets to ward off the chill from the air conditioner that Blaine hadn't even felt until the sweat was cooling to goose bumps on his skin. Blaine kissed Kurt's mouth, his cheeks, the tip of his nose, and came away with his lips stinging from salt.

"Kurt," he said, more than a little concerned. "Are you okay?"

Kurt blinked, and Blaine could see the tears there, still, and he wanted to make even the memory of them disappear.

Kurt nodded, swallowed. "I really am," he said, and his voice was a smile. "Thank you, Blaine. *Thank* you."

They were Kurt's only words, and Blaine understood completely because there *were* no words. Blaine just let his hands drift over Kurt's body in the darkness, memorizing. "I have to go," he said finally, when the world outside was as dark as the interior of the room, breaking the spell and tearing himself away from Kurt.

"When can I see you again?" Blaine had known the question was going come, but he still didn't know how to answer it.

"I guess it'll be at the first debate, so October for sure," Blaine said, because he was going back to school after Labor Day.

"Okay," Kurt nodded, and he looked like there was so much more that he wanted to say.

"I love you, Kurt," Blaine said once he was dressed again, his fingers dragged hastily through his hair and a new and not unwelcome buzzing under his skin.

"I love you, too." Blaine moved next to the bed, kissed Kurt firmly.

Kurt stopped him before he pulled completely away with a hand on Blaine's wrist. "It feels like you're saying goodbye to me."

"No," Blaine reassured him, but the lie was bitter and hot in the back of his throat. "I wouldn't do that."

But he knew it was coming, because it was inevitable. Things were already changing, and Blaine had no control over any of it. "I'll call you tonight," he said, and slipped into the bright hallway. Max pressed the

button for the elevator, didn't say a word while they waited. There was so much Blaine wanted to talk about, but there was nobody to tell so he swallowed it all down and acted like everything was exactly the same as it had been that morning.

He hated that he was so good at lying.

Kurt was fidgety all through dinner, twisting his napkin and knotting his straw wrapper, running his thumb over the edge of his glass. He picked at his food, and Burt could feel his knee jiggling under the table, but there were too many people around, and always the damn agents. It wasn't the time or the place to still his motion, to be his father, to ask him what was wrong, so he waited.

Kurt went right back to his room after dinner, and Burt took half an hour to sit with a beer from the mini-fridge and he called Carole to check on Finn and his preparations for college, her excitement over their coming vacation. He hid his tension well, because she didn't ask what was wrong, which was just as well because he couldn't have explained it even if she'd pressed him. He just knew, the way parents *always* knew.

Something had happened.

He hung up with Carole and finished the last swig of his beer, dropped the bottle into the recycling bin the hotel provided, and left his room. His primary agent, Karl, was down near the elevator, and Kurt's primary, Tyson, was sitting outside of Kurt's door with one of those Navy SEAL romances that Carole and Kurt liked to read.

"My wife or my kid sucked you into that?" Burt nodded at him.

"Sir." Tyson quirked his lip and started to stand. "No. My boyfriend does a fine job of that all on his own."

"I'm not President yet," Burt said, put a hand on the kid's shoulder. "Sit." He stared at the door, looked back at Tyson. "He okay?"

"You'll have to ask him, Sir."

Burt took a breath and knocked on the door.

"Hold on," Kurt called to him. He heard the jingle of the chain, the knock of the deadbolt, and then the door was open and Kurt was looking at him.

"Dad." He moved aside, welcomed Burt into the room.

The blankets were tangled on the bed, the TV was playing on low, and there were crumpled tissues in a pile on the nightstand.

"You're not okay." Burt didn't need to ask.

Kurt flopped onto the bed and grabbed a tissue, blew his nose. "I don't know why this is happening. It wasn't *bad*. He didn't – it wasn't –" he stammered.

"You saw him."

Kurt nodded. "We, um." His cheeks went almost brilliant red, and he lowered his eyes to his lap. "Yes."

Burt was pretty sure he didn't need any more elaboration about what had gone on that afternoon. "You guys were good to each other?"

Kurt nodded, twisted his tissue in his hands. "Yes. And he said— he told me—" Kurt scrubbed at his cheek with his knuckles, drew in a shuddering breath, and tried again. "It felt like it was his goodbye, and I asked him if he was leaving me. He told me no."

"But?" Burt prodded, because Kurt had always been good at listening to his instincts and he clearly needed to talk out his worry.

"He wouldn't admit it, but he was letting me go. I just know it, but he won't tell me until he's ready. What do I do, then?"

Burt rocked back and forth from his heels to the balls of his feet. He wanted to grab Kurt and hold him close, comfort him, reassure him that everything would be okay. But his boy was on the edge of becoming a man, and Burt knew that they both needed to learn to stand on their own a little bit more, even if it broke his heart to do it.

"You keep going," he said finally. "You hold on to him for as long as he'll let you, and then you let him go."

Kurt sighed, light and sad. "I don't know if I can."

"If you love him, you'll have to. I'm not sayin' it's not going to hurt, but that's what you have to do when you love someone."

"Set them free and all that?"

"Yeah." Burt thought about Molly, about what it had been like watching her slip away in that hospital bed, feeling the better part of his heart drift off with her. "You do love him, right?"

Kurt nodded. "I wouldn't have— we wouldn't have—today, if I didn't love him." He paused, closed his eyes for a moment. "Is it supposed to feel this way?" Kurt asked, finally. "Is it supposed to change you?"

Burt gave in, then, and sat carefully on the edge of the bed next to Kurt. He wrapped his arms around his son, and held him close. "Yeah," he said, his voice rough into Kurt's hair. "Yeah. When it's right, it changes everything."

Blaine and his parents took the week before the convention in Tampa and went home to Maine. He'd hoped for a real vacation, but he supposed that Kennebunk was just as good a place to sleep and read than any.

After the first night he had to admit that it was a lot better than staying in yet another hotel.

The town and the beaches were still packed with tourists getting in a last stab at vacation before Labor Day, so Blaine spent most of his time at home in the hammock his dad had strung between two backyard trees the summer after Blaine finished middle school. He would rock himself with his bare toes against the rough bark of the maple, watch the sun through the leaves, listen to the birds. He felt new and changed, since Atlanta, but he also felt wrecked; there weren't words, only the empty aching memory of what it had felt like, Kurt inside him and against him. The memory of the thing he wanted so deeply but knew he couldn't keep having. He spent his days in silence, emailed Kurt and researched colleges and acted like a hermit until a text from Tara drew him out of his exile.

You didn't even tell me you were coming home, she sent on Wednesday. Meet me tomorrow, 9 am, Dock Square or Chase Hill, you pick.

Blaine propped his phone on his stomach and thought about Tara's invitation. There would be tourists around, and he'd have to have an agent with him, and it was just so much *work* going out in public. But Chase Hill had amazing pastries, and he supposed that it would be nice to talk to someone who wasn't really involved in the crazier parts of his life. *Chase Hill*, he sent back. *I'll be there with my very own brute squad.*

Don't be late, she scolded. I have to work at noon.

Blaine just rolled his eyes and went back to his reading.

It actually rained the next morning, so Blaine couldn't ride his bike like he'd planned. Instead, he fixed his dad coffee and an English muffin and brought him both breakfast and the Boston Globe into the office. "May I borrow the car for a few hours this morning? I'm meeting my friend Tara for breakfast in town, but I can't bike because of the rain."

Blaine's father flicked his glance from his computer screen to the plate Blaine had fixed. "How long will you be gone?"

"She has to work, so I'll be home by noon."

His father nodded once and reached into his pocket for his keys. "Where are you going?"

Blaine frowned. "Chase Hill." His father had never really cared before, at least not before Kurt.

"If they have cranberry orange scones, will you bring me one back? Theirs are the best," he said with a little smile.

Blaine couldn't help it, he smiled back. "Sure." He took the keys, and moved toward the door. Then he turned back. "I didn't know you liked cranberry orange. They're my favorite, too."

His father nodded. "That doesn't surprise me. We're a lot more alike than I ever realized," he said, but it sounded more like he was talking to himself than he was to Blaine. "Have fun. Drive carefully, and don't drive Max crazy."

"I won't. And Dad?"

"Yes, Blaine?"

"Thank you."

His dad took his glasses off, set them atop the folded newspaper. "You're welcome."

Tara was already waiting, her nose in a fat paperback with a black cover, when Blaine arrived at Chase Hill. She set the book down when Blaine slid into the chair across from her, glanced from him to Max and back again, and then frowned at Blaine. "You're an ass, you know. You could have *called* me, you jerk."

Blaine just stared at the black-and-white photo of old military bombers on the book cover. "I didn't know what to say," he finally told her. "I feel like I don't know how to be around regular people."

Tara shifted in her chair. "None of us are *regular people*, Blaine. What the hell is going on?"

"Kurt and I, we, *you know*. It sort of changed everything. I didn't expect it to. I don't know what I expected, really, but it wasn't—" he waved his hand over the table, let it fall with a thud. "I don't know."

Tara shook her head at him. "I need coffee and chocolate for this talk. What do you want?"

"I'm the jerk, let me buy. What do *you* want?" He was already out of his chair, caught Max's eyes scanning the room.

"Chai latte and a chocolate croissant, please."

Blaine nodded and took a spot in line. Once he'd ordered, it took two trips from the counter to bring their drinks and their pastries to the table. When Tara had taken a first sip of her chai and a bite of her croissant, Blaine set his elbows on the table and frowned at her.

"I think I have to break up with Kurt," he said without preamble.

Tara dropped her croissant to her plate. "What kind of a dumbass idea is *that*? And who told you to do it?"

"Nobody," Blaine defended. "I decided on my own."

"You're a fucking *idiot*." Tara positively *glared* at him. "He's clearly the best thing that's ever happened to you and you're going to walk away because, what, you're scared?"

"Yeah," he whispered, embarrassed that Tara was able to call him on it so quickly.

Tara peered at him over the edge of her cup. "I think fear is normal, but it's not a reason to walk away from the good parts of life."

"You don't understand." Blaine felt his leg shaking under the table. "He's the only one who knows what it's like out there. There's press, all the time, and the agents." He tipped his head toward Max, still standing solid and silent near the door. "And always, *always* my mother and her expectations. We aren't going to be able to keep the secret much longer."

"Would that be so bad?"

Blaine shrugged. "I don't want us to be poster boys for anything. I just want to love him, and I'm going to lose him. Is it better to walk away before we get pulled apart?"

"I guess that's your choice," Tara said. "Nobody can make it but you, but you might think about how *he's* going to feel, if you break up with him. Love isn't one-sided."

"You think I'm being selfish."

"I didn't *say* that. I think you should really be sure about this, before you say anything to him. Take some time, think about it," Tara urged.

Blaine knew rationally that she had a point, but he couldn't help feeling like he didn't have a choice: he was flying to Tampa on Sunday with his parents for the convention, his mother was going to accept the nomination, and Burt Hummel was going to do the same in Charlotte in two weeks; he was going back to school and applying to college and he had no idea how to make what he wanted with Kurt fit into the lives they were *both* going to be living after the next weeks.

Blaine just looked at her silently.

"Do you think you can do that?" Tara asked.

"I can try," Blaine finally agreed. "What're you reading?"

Tara launched into a description of the book, time travel and history and *it's so good, Blaine, even if you don't like sci fi.*

They made small talk for a while, and then Tara gathered up her book and her purse to walk down to the dock for her waitressing shift. Blaine went back to the counter, ordered half a dozen pastries to take home, including the scone for his dad, and followed Max to the car.

When Blaine had pulled out into the slow slog of tourist traffic through the center of town, Max turned his attention from the people on the street to Blaine.

"I'm not asking because I want to pry, but are you okay?" he asked gently.

Blaine gripped the steering wheel. "Why?"

"You just haven't seemed like yourself since Atlanta. Whatever is happening with you and Kurt, that's your business, but I wanted to make sure you were taking care of yourself."

"I'm trying," Blaine sighed. "That's about all I've got."

"Part of my job is staying impartial, but if you ever need anything you can always talk to me. I know it's a lonely place to be, where you are right now."

"Kurt's the only one who understands, and I don't think I can keep doing this. There's no way to keep this a secret."

Max was silent, stared out the window while they drove slowly back into Kennebunk. "We could work something out, if you want. Kurt's agents and I, we can help."

Blaine shook his head. "I don't know. I don't want to cause trouble."

"It wouldn't be trouble," Max said. "Honest. Just think about it and let me know."

"I will," Blaine said, but just like with Tara, he felt like all he was doing was delaying the inevitable.

PART FOUR

Conventions

Being at the convention was nothing like Blaine had ever expected. Whereas most of his involvement in the campaign had been watching from a distance, the convention meant that he had to show up polished and perfect and be a gentleman.

It wasn't hard at all, it was just boring.

His mother's running mate, Governor Matt Halstead of Kansas, was young and handsome and a little too publicly perfect. His wife was pretty, blonde, and impeccably dressed. After they met the first time, Blaine ducked into a secluded alcove and texted Kurt. *OMG, you would **love** Trina Halstead. She is a woman who knows how to dress, she's got a wicked sense of humor, and I might secretly be in love with her.*

They had a trio of children under five years old, and Blaine discovered that a lot of the delegate-schmoozing went a lot better when he sat on the floor with the Halstead boys, coloring or building Lego towers or running Matchbox cars up and down the walls. Trina seemed to sleep as little as Blaine did, and they ran into each other in the hotel coffee shop the second morning at an obscenely early hour, both of them a little ragged over books and double-shot drinks.

"You're too young to look so stressed," Trina had teased him, and bought him a muffin.

He broke it into pieces on a napkin and frowned. "You'd be stressed too, if your boyfriend were hundreds of miles away," he snapped. He blinked, swallowed. What the hell was he thinking? "Fuck. I didn't— you didn't— *shit*." Oh, god. He hadn't meant to say anything. "I didn't just say that."

"Oh, honey." Trina clucked, which made Blaine feel like he was about as old as one of her sons. "I had no idea."

"Nobody does. I mean, *clearly* nobody does, outside of my parents." Blaine tucked a piece of muffin into his mouth and mashed it with his tongue. When he tried to swallow, it got stuck in his throat.

"That doesn't matter to me," she said soothingly. "I knew Matt was conservative when we met, and I married him anyway," she said with a shrug and a smile. "I love him, but this is one area where we disagree."

Blaine nodded, and washed his muffin down with a large sip of too-hot mocha. "I don't know why I said anything at all. I'm sorry. I don't want you to get involved in my mess." Because it *was* a mess, and the last thing Blaine wanted was to drag anyone else into complicated parts of his life.

Trina frowned at him. "You don't have a lot of friends, do you?"

"No." Blaine blushed, embarrassed and incredibly self-conscious. It was an unexpectedly difficult thing to admit to someone he admired. "It's hard to know who to trust, especially now."

"Well," Trina said as she snatched a stray piece of streusel topping off his napkin, "I'll keep your secret, and if you ever want some girl talk, just call me."

"You're not going to ask for details?"

"That's your business, Blaine. You'll tell me if and when you want. Until then, I'll forget I heard anything, okay?"

Blaine sighed and slumped back into his chair. He wasn't sure if the shaking in his body was from the adrenaline of confession or from the caffeine he was drinking.

Maybe it didn't matter.

He'd added to the circle of people who knew his truth, and the world still hadn't crashed around him.

Felix Diaz, the cameraman on the floor for MSNBC, was exhausted. He'd spent the week capturing video of ecstatic delegates and the smiling candidates and their perfect polished families, and it was making him itchy. He'd been to Baghdad with Rachel Maddow and Richard Engel, for fuck's sake, and the overly-produced feeling of the whole event was just too much.

He kept his camera trained on the stage while Elaine Anderson made her way to the podium, but once she started speaking he panned the camera through the crowd looking for something – *anything* – that might be interesting to the viewers at home.

He zoomed in for one of the many obligatory shots of the candidate's family, and almost lost his focus. Elaine Anderson's enigmatic teenage son Blaine was seated between his father and Trina Halstead, and he was holding the Halstead's toddler, Connor, on his lap. The boy was giggling, and Blaine's hands were busy; they were playing some kind of counting game, or maybe singing a song, because when Felix zoomed in it looked like both of their lips were moving.

It was a money shot, and Felix knew it. He held the camera there for longer than he normally would have, and he could hear Rachel, and Chris Matthews, and Al Sharpton, exclaiming over it in his earpiece.

The boy had just humanized the entire campaign.

Dev tried not to listen to the voicemail Kurt left for Blaine, but it was hard to ignore in such a small space. He muted the post-speech play-by-play and focused on the latest round of polling, tried not to hear the loneliness and hurt in Kurt's voice. He wasn't going to say anything, not until Kurt came to *him*, but he hated watching Kurt barely hold himself together.

He was good at pretending, so he kept working until he heard Kurt quietly snuffling over the whine of Chris Matthews' less than righteous indignation. Then he got up and sat on the edge of his extra bed, where Kurt was curled up into a little ball, crying. "I miss him," Kurt kept saying, over and over.

Dev didn't know how to reply. What *was* there to say to a teenager whose heart was breaking?

He just rubbed gently on Kurt's back and told him everything would be okay.

He'd never told a lie that hurt as much as that one did.

Kurt kept fidgeting. He *never* fussed at his clothes, but he suddenly felt like Finn, unable to contain himself. He smoothed his hands over his vest, tugged at the knot in his tie he *knew* was perfect because he'd

checked it 10 times before leaving the room. He even peered down to check that his shoes were still tied, even though he'd double-knotted them out of caution.

He was going to be fine. He *had* to be fine. The whole campaign had been for this moment, for the biggest speech of his *and* his dad's life. Dev had told him it was unusual for a candidate to be introduced at the convention without a video, but his father had insisted. *I want Kurt to tell our story. It's the words that matter.*

Dev had proofed Kurt's speech three times, and he'd read it for his dad and Carole and Finn the night before. Even Finn had cried.

"Here," Finn said from his left side, pressed a cold bottle of water into his hand. "Drink."

Kurt took the bottle with trembling hands, took a shaky sip, and handed it back to Finn. He didn't trust himself to be able to get the lid back on.

"And this," Finn said, holding out something large and round. Kurt had to blink twice before he figured out what it was.

"I can't—" he started. "I shouldn't wear that." It was one of the white buttons they'd had made, with the campaign logo in rainbow colors and *GLBT for Hummel* at the bottom. Kurt had one on his messenger bag, but it felt inappropriate to wear it on the stage.

"We're all wearing them," Finn said, and turned so Kurt could see *his* button, so close in design to Kurt's that it took him a moment to realize that Finn's said *PFLAG for Hummel*. "Mom and Burt have them, too."

"Shit." Kurt blinked away tears, and tried to take the button from Finn. "Okay."

"Dude. Let me. You'd never let me hear the end of it if you stab yourself and bleed on your shirt."

Kurt rolled his eyes, but he let Finn put the button on his vest anyway.

"There you go." Finn patted his chest, and pushed him a little closer to the wings of the stage. "I'll be cheering you on, man. You're gonna do so great."

Kurt shook his head, couldn't speak. Felt like he was going to throw up or faint, or maybe both.

"I can't," he finally whispered, waited for Finn to answer him, but Finn wasn't there anymore.

"You'll be fine, Kid," his dad said. "I love you. I'm so proud of you."

Kurt's reply was swallowed up by the roar of the crowd. His dad's hand was firm on his back. "Go."

Kurt took three steps and walked into the spotlight.

Kurt was still riding high from being on that stage; he was practically bouncing off the walls in the holding room waiting for his dad to finish speaking, when his phone buzzed in his pocket.

There was a text from Blaine, who as far as Kurt knew was in Houston for two days. *I think we're crossing paths in Colorado next week. We should get together, talk. You were great tonight, btw.*

Kurt sighed. He'd been expecting that, but expecting didn't make it hurt any less. *Thanks, and we'll make plans for Colorado later?* he sent back, but he didn't have a chance to read Blaine's reply until much later, after another trip to the stage and talking to reporters, and a very illegal half-glass of celebratory champagne back in their suite with his family.

Okay was all that Blaine had to say. Kurt sighed and put his phone away.

He didn't want to let his relationship problems ruin such an amazing night.

A Tale of Two Teenagers

By Dan Hastings, Washington Post

Charlotte, NC – As the Presidential race tightens following both parties' conventions, the eyes of the nation are not on the candidates.

Instead, everyone is watching the candidate's sons. Both 18 years old, Kurt Hummel and Blaine Anderson are as different as two boys could be.

Anderson is a student at the prestigious Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, where he plays water polo and rows crew, and sings in the school's select choir. He has appeared at a handful of events since the fall, but he seems content to stay out of the spotlight. Anderson appears humble and gracious, and intensely personal.

Hummel is homeschooled, but before heading out on the road with his father's campaign last fall, he was a junior at William McKinley High School in his hometown of Lima, OH. He was an honor student there, and a member of the school's competitive show choir. He writes his own speeches, and has written all of his father's between the South Carolina primary, though his father's convention speech was written by the campaign's new speechwriter Alexandra Jennings. Some would call Kurt Hummel a seasoned operative, even, since he's been working side by side with his father from Burt Hummel's first Congressional run when Kurt was 13. He's openly gay, and in recent weeks he's begun to talk in his speeches about the bullying that forced him out of public school, first when he was 12, and again just this past fall.

Both boys stepped onto the national stage at the conventions. Blaine was spied often in Tampa entertaining the young sons of Vice-Presidential candidate Matt Halstead, and on the night of his mother's speech Blaine sang and played games with little Connor Halstead when the boy's behavior threatened to become disruptive. Kurt introduced his father here in Charlotte last night. He was unexpectedly poised, though he joked with reporters later that he even tied his shoes in double knots to avoid tripping as he took the stage. His speech was emotional and poignant, and the perfect lead-in to what was a strong policy speech by his father.

When asked what he thought about Anderson's actions at the Republican convention, Hummel smiled. "It was sweet," he said. "It was very human. Sometimes, when you're in the spotlight as the child of a candidate, it's easy to hide all those parts of yourself. The pressure to be what everyone else wants is enormous. I think it was incredibly brave of Blaine to show himself that way."

We put in a request with the Anderson campaign to speak with Blaine and get his reaction to Kurt Hummel's speech. As of press time, we had yet to receive a response.

PART FIVE

The Fall

Elaine was already awake, her computer open to the *Washington Post* website and the TV on CNN, when there was a knock on her door.

"Elaine?" Her campaign manager, Eric, called. "Are you up?"

Elaine shrugged into her bathrobe and said a silent prayer that John was already down in the hotel's fitness center. She needed to diffuse things before he had a chance to get worked up, and that was going to involve talking to Blaine alone.

"Eric," she said as she opened the door. "You've seen it."

"Yeah. It's a problem, Lainey. He's taking attention away from you."

Elaine shook her head. "Really? I thought it was a fine article. Concise, and it was a nice profile of both the boys."

"It linked Blaine with the Hummel boy," Eric insisted.

"Oh, please, Eric. It was a fluff piece. It's harmless. And if what I've heard about Kurt Hummel is true, he's a smart, kind young man who clearly loves his father."

"He's gay."

"Yes." Elaine nodded. "And have you seen the polling since the end of the primaries? It doesn't seem to have made a difference for their campaign. I watch the same news you do. It sometimes feels like Kurt is *more* popular than his father is."

"Then maybe he should run for President. But he's not your son, and the Hummel campaign isn't *this* campaign. We need to stick to the talking points on this, and we need to take action." Eric paced slowly in front of the TV. The flickering around him was giving Elaine a headache, so she reached for the remote and turned it off.

"What *exactly* do you propose?"

"Blaine doesn't have a girlfriend. We should see if we can find someone to pair him with."

Elaine rolled her eyes, thought that Blaine would be proud of her. "Are you *kidding* me? We'll do no such thing. Blaine can make his own decisions about his own life. He's not a fundamental part of the campaign the way Kurt Hummel is. Let's just let things be."

"Elaine." Eric turned and stared at her, his hands on his hips. "I've heard rumors, seen reports of Blaine being friendly with the Hummel boy."

Elaine's stomach flip-flopped. Her instinct was to keep Blaine's secrets, the campaign be damned. "They're friends," she hedged. "When Blaine was out with John and me in the winter, they crossed paths a few times."

Eric looked at the floor. "I take it you don't know about Atlanta."

Elaine clutched the front of her bathrobe tight across her chest. "We're not having this conversation, and you're not having this conversation with anyone else. If I hear any gossip, you'll be fired."

"Is Blaine gay?"

"Don't ask me again or you'll be on the street faster than you can blink." Her heart was pounding in her chest, and the only thought running through her head was *protect Blaine, protect Blaine, protect Blaine*.

"If there's something I need to know, something we need Maureen to draft a press release for –"

Elaine swallowed. "There's nothing," she ground out. "Now please, get out."

She walked Eric to the door, and watched him walk past Blaine's room and round the corner for his own before stepping back into her room. She went into the bathroom and splashed icy water onto her face, took her key and went next door to Blaine's room.

She woke him, she was sure, pounding on the door. When he opened it, he was blinking the way he did when he didn't have his contacts in, and his hair was sticking up in chunks around his face. He had a pillow

crease on one cheek, and he was frowning. "What?" he mumbled. "I didn't miss a breakfast, I *know* I didn't."

"It's okay, Blaine. Sit down. We need to talk."

Blaine padded back to his bed and sat in the middle of the mess of his blankets, groped for his glasses on the nightstand, and slipped them onto his face. "Oh. That's better."

"I'm not a blob anymore?" she asked, and smiled. When he was barely awake, he looked so much younger than eighteen.

"No. Mom. What's *wrong*?" he stared at her bathrobe. "Is Dad—"

"He's fine, Blaine. I need to ask you something. I need you to tell me, what happened in Atlanta?"

"Kurt's my *boyfriend*," he said, defensive.

"I know. Apparently there have been rumors. Nothing outside of the campaign, I told Eric you and Kurt were friends, and he said that I clearly didn't know about Atlanta."

But she did know. Blaine had been different, since that trip, at once more withdrawn but also more secure inside of himself. She doubted John had even noticed, but she'd seen it and she had wondered, but she wanted to respect Blaine's boundaries so she hadn't asked.

"Kurt and I, we . . ." Blaine trailed off, and waved his hand imprecisely in the air. "I didn't think it was going to – that *I* was going to – be different, after. It was the most real I've ever felt, and I don't know if I'll ever get to have that again, with him."

"You love him." Elaine had watched Blaine from afar since he had left the campaign in March. He'd grown up so much in the intervening months, and whether that was because of Kurt or because he was finally learning how to be his own man or because he was back at school where he was happy, she didn't know. She *couldn't* know. She did know that Kurt was good for Blaine, and her party be damned, she wasn't going to make him give that up.

"I do." Blaine closed his eyes and sighed mournfully. "I love him, but I don't think I can keep doing this. It's different, now. There's going to be more attention, the media and god, if *Eric* knows . Who's going to figure it out next? I don't want to ruin this for you."

"You were so determined to come out before. What changed?"

"Everything. If I come out now, whether Kurt and I go public or not, it's going to be seen as a defensive move and I don't want people to think that this is something I'm ashamed of, even if it *is* something you and Dad are ashamed of."

"I'm not—" Elaine started to protest, but she caught herself. Blaine was right, she had been ashamed. Sometimes she still was, she didn't even really know why. There were so many layers to this thing that she didn't really understand, to her son who was nothing better than a stranger. Somewhere along the line, she'd just given up trying. "Okay," she finally sighed. "You're right. But I need you to hear this, Blaine. No matter how much I don't understand, or might wish that this wasn't who you are, I don't love you any less. And I respect you for standing up for what you believe in."

"What do you want me to do, about Eric and Kurt and everything?"

Elaine shook her head. "I can't decide that for you. I'll support you, whatever you choose to do, but you're a strong independent man and you need to do what's best for *you*."

"Except I *can't*," Blaine argued. "Because what's best for me isn't best for the campaign. I'm in an impossible position, Mom. Every choice is going to hurt somebody."

Elaine wanted to comfort him, but they hadn't had that kind of a relationship since Blaine was a toddler. Instead, she patted his knee. "I'll talk them through with you, if you want."

"No, thank you," Blaine said, and shifted away from her touch. "You're right, I need to choose for myself."

God, he'd closed down as fast as John did, as fast as *she* did, when she felt threatened. "Okay," she nodded. "I'll make sure the gossip stops, and I won't let anyone ask you about it." She owed him that much, at least. It felt like the only thing she could give him, anymore.

"Thanks," Blaine whispered, but he was already gone from her and back into the shell he kept around himself.

She was grateful he'd let her in at all.

Hearing his mother's words hadn't really helped Blaine at all. The hard decisions were still going to be hard. He still felt like he was going to betray everyone in his life.

He didn't care what happened to himself, but he didn't want to disappoint his mother and he definitely didn't want to turn the Hummel campaign into a joke.

He knew he was going hurt Kurt, but he just didn't see any other way around or out of the situation.

He spent the next six days stuck in his head, thinking and thinking and *thinking*, and by the time he made plans to see Kurt, he knew what he was going to do.

He hoped he was strong enough to get through it.

Kurt was pretty sure he knew how things were going to go when he met Blaine for ice cream on a golden afternoon in Denver. They sat outside on metal chairs like they were best friends having an after-school snack, as if it were that easy. Blaine told him when Kurt was halfway finished with his cone of Blueberry Cheesecake.

"It's too much," Blaine said. "It's too much pressure, especially after that *Post* article. It's too much sneaking around, too much *fear*."

"I've been afraid my whole life," Kurt said, because it was true. "But loving you doesn't scare me."

"I'm not you," Blaine retorted. "I can't do this, not now." He dropped his spoon into his empty cup, his cup into the trash, and then he was gone into the city.

Kurt just sat at the table, staring into the cloudless blue sky, until Ty tapped on his shoulder and offered him a handful of napkins to wipe off the ice cream that had melted all over his hands.

He nodded his thanks, cleaned himself up. Shut himself down, small and silent and *alone, again*. He needed to figure out how to be in the world without Blaine, and he had to do it fast.

Dev had taken a break, had a swim in the hotel pool and a late lunch, and was Skyping with Byron when there was a knock on his door.

"Dev?" Kurt called, and Dev knew something was wrong. Kurt's voice sounded choked.

"Hold on," he called, and then looked back into the webcam at Byron. "I think it's an emergency, babe."

"It's okay," Byron's image wavered. "Talk with you tomorrow?"

"Yeah." He waited until Byron had ended his side of the session, and closed the lid on his laptop.

He opened the door on Kurt, pale-faced and crying. "He said he can't do this now," Kurt said through his tears, bursting into the room. "What the fuck does that mean? I know he's scared. I know he's feeling pressure from everyone around him. But what the hell, Dev. He can't do this now? Does that mean that he *could* do it after the election? In six months? Never? He didn't even give me a *choice*. He didn't let me fight for him, for us. He just told me and walked away like some kind of terrified little boy."

Dev watched Kurt pace and wave his arms, and eventually settle into a less forceful rage. When he finally slumped into one of the arm chairs, Dev felt it was safe to approach him. "I'm sorry," he said, and it felt like the least helpful thing he could have done, but there was nothing else to say.

"I knew this was going to happen," Kurt said, leaning his head against the back of his chair and closing his eyes. "There was no way we were going to be able to keep things going, not with all the damn secrets and the new attention after that article and the agents and *everything*." He sighed dramatically.

Dev bit back a faint grin. Kurt really could be a drama queen when he tried. "Knowing it and the reality of it are completely different, though."

"Yeah." Kurt blinked, and Dev could see the tears welling in his eyes again. "I didn't expect it to *hurt* this much. We didn't have a lot of time together, how did I let him get so far inside of me?"

"Oh, honey. You love him. Please don't beat yourself up over this." Dev settled into the other chair and reached his foot out to tap Kurt's ankle. "He's allowed to make his own choices, and that sucks and it hurts, but you have to keep moving forward. Give him a little space, maybe he'll change his mind."

Kurt huffed. "So what, I'm supposed to wait around until he decides that he deserves more than spending his life living it for everyone else?"

Dev shook his head. Sometimes it was so easy to forget how young Kurt was. "He's a people-pleaser. It's not that he doesn't think he deserves more, he just doesn't know how to have what he wants without disappointing everyone else."

"Well, he disappointed me." There was so much anger in Kurt's words, they made Dev wince.

"Do you regret it?" Dev asked gently.

"No." Kurt was vehement. That was something, at least. "I won't ever regret it. How could I? I *love* him." He sniffled, and wiped at his cheeks. "And now I want to drown my sorrows in Ben and Jerry's and *Queer as Folk*."

Dev laughed. "How very teenage boy of you."

"Please tell me you can oblige, or else I'll have to go back to my own room, and I *really* don't want to be alone right now."

Dev winked at him and picked up the room phone. "Here's hoping room service has Ben and Jerry's."

Blaine didn't even get two blocks from the ice cream place before he was leaning against a lamp post gasping. *Fuck fuck fuck*. What the hell had he done? It felt like someone was squeezing all the air from his body, and he could feel the tears on his cheeks, but he couldn't stop crying.

Max was right there, pressing a handkerchief into his hand and talking into his microphone. "I've got Dawson. We're two blocks down, northwest corner."

Blaine blinked through his tears. "*Dawson's Creek*? Really?"

Max smirked at him. "You'd prefer Hair Gel?"

Blaine didn't have any kind of a polite retort, so he just took the handkerchief and wiped at his cheeks before blowing his nose. "I think I really fucked up, Max. I shouldn't have done that, but there's no choice. We can't keep seeing each other and not expect this to positively implode, not right now."

Max just looked at him, and at the car pulling up to the curb. "Get in."

Blaine wanted more, *needed* more. "That's all you're giving me?"

Max opened the door to the back seat. "I don't know what you want to hear, and I'm probably not the person who should be telling it to you anyway. Impartiality, remember?"

Blaine crawled in and across the seat and buckled his seatbelt while Max settled in and shut the door. "I feel like my heart is breaking."

Max just nodded. "Yeah. It happens like that. You should call your girlfriend."

"Huh?"

"You know, Heather."

Blaine shook his head. "Who?"

"Trina."

"Why is her codename Heather?"

"Her agent is a fan of '80's movies. Netflix it."

Blaine still didn't really understand, but he nodded and then curled up on his side of the car. He didn't feel like he deserved to think about anything other than how devastated Kurt had looked, or the multitude of ways everything about the situation just sucked. He didn't want to call Trina, or Tara, or Callie, because he didn't want to feel better. He just wanted to be sad and miserable and small for a little while.

He went back to school after Denver, and he tried to get lost in the rhythm of the new academic year. He liked his new classes well enough, especially Developmental Psychology, Passing in Literature and Film, and Music and the State in the Twentieth Century. Water Polo gave him an outlet for some of his hurt, but it wasn't enough. He was just sad and lonely, and all the swimming and baking and schoolwork in the world wasn't going to help with the bitter reality of his situation.

Blaine was lost without Kurt, and nothing could fix that.

The third weekend in September, Blaine had enough. He was so lonely he couldn't breathe without his chest aching, and he felt a little reckless and a lot stupid so he signed himself off campus on Friday night without notifying his security detail. He took the commuter train down to Boston, to an all-ages club he'd found on . He fidgeted while he waited in line to show his id and pay the cover, shifting from foot to foot and fiddling with the hem and cuffs of his jacket. He'd never been to a club, gay or straight, and he didn't know what to expect.

He felt so out of place in so many areas of his life, he didn't want to feel out of place in a club, too.

The club was warm and pulsing with people, light, and music. Blaine paused near the bar, bought himself a Sprite, and took a few minutes to bolster himself, to put on the patented Anderson Mask of Confidence that he'd grown up wearing. "You can do this," he whispered to himself as he downed the last of his soda and trapped an ice cube between his molars. The crunch and the cold snapped him out of his head a little more, and he tossed the plastic cup into the trash on his way to the dance floor.

The last time he'd really danced had been at the ill-fated Sadie Hawkins dance with Daniel, what felt like a lifetime ago back in Kennebunk. He'd taken Bridget McAllister from his Bio class to the winter semi-formal the year before, but there were rules and protocol for things like school dances, and none of that had prepared him for this. None of that had prepared him for the pulsing of the music and the crowd, the way the lights caught and glinted off of hair and jewelry and the bare skin of men who'd taken their shirts off to dance.

It was exactly what Blaine had been looking for, and everything he never knew he wanted. It felt primal, on some level, and intimate even in the anonymity of it. Blaine took a deep breath and hurled himself into the crowd on the dance floor.

The kids in a cappella always teased him for being too enthusiastic when he danced; he always felt the music deep in his body, and he knew he tended to lose track of where he was, or even that there were other people around him. He didn't want to look like a weird, silly, *too young* kid.

His crazy-stupid dancing didn't matter, apparently, because three songs in Blaine noticed a boy – a man, really – staring at him from near the bar. He was tall and slender and not unlike Kurt in the way he looked. Blaine nodded at him in invitation and the man made his way through the crowd to meet him.

"You're cute. Haven't seen you here before," the man said, low into Blaine's ear over a dance mix of *Ray of Light*.

"First time," Blaine told him, closed his eyes and spun his body around. If he didn't pay *too* much attention, maybe he would be able to ignore the fact that the man was really *nothing* like Kurt, even though he moved a lot like him, too.

After three songs, the man pulled Blaine close against, him, his chest to Blaine's back. His lips were millimeters from Blaine's ear. *I'm Ken*, he whispered.

Of course you are, Blaine thought. "Uh huh," he said.

"You gonna tell me your name?"

Blaine shook his head and tried to ignore the way Ken's hands were holding him, a little too forward at his hips.

"A man of mystery. I can respect that. You wanna?" He tipped his head toward the back hall, where it was dark. Blaine knew he had an out. He was pretty sure he could say no, say *I don't want to* or *I don't even know you*, but he didn't. He didn't because even though Blaine didn't really *like* what Ken was doing, it was so much better than feeling empty and alone so he followed Ken to that hallway.

Blaine followed, and he still didn't say no when Ken's hands were bold and roaming, strong on Blaine's shoulders and at the small of his back. Blaine tried to give in to it, but when Ken touched the back of Blaine's neck Blaine almost wept. Ken's hand was ghostly, almost in the right spot but not quite, and almost the right amount of pressure but not quite. The memory of Kurt holding him like that made him break. He twisted away from Ken, lurched through the club, and came back to himself leaning against the wall outside, choking on sobs.

He took a cab back to campus, shaky and terrified and completely aware of how dangerous a thing he'd done. Back at the dorm, he showered until his skin was hot and pink and raw, and then crawled into bed and cried himself to sleep

Monday morning he was minding his own business in English class when the photos broke, grainy and dark, Blaine backed against the wall with Ken's body tight against him.

It's good they're so dark, his mother said when she called. *We can deny it, because nobody can prove it was you.*

I'll support you, whatever you decide to do, Trina had texted.

And then there was the awkward email from Kurt, six words: *I'm so sorry. I love you.*

Blaine denied it was him, of course, because he *had* to. It wasn't just because the debate was coming up or because the polls had the race in a dead heat. It was because he felt violated from the double betrayal of Ken *and* the pictures, because he didn't want to drag his mother or anyone else further into the mess he created, and he really didn't feel like he deserved anyone's sympathy.

He hated himself for lying, was violently ill before every public appearance, but there was nothing to do. Without Kurt to worry about, he could betray himself because his own truth didn't matter anymore.

They were in Topeka, a brief stop between Kansas City and Santa Fe, when Dev pulled Kurt aside to show him the pictures. They were dark, grainy, and Kurt wanted to believe that someone was making it up.

"I thought you should know," Dev said, a hand on Kurt's shoulder. "I'm sorry."

Kurt could barely breathe. He recognized the tilt of Blaine's hips, could almost feel the skin and muscle of his body. "It's not your fault."

"You need to be prepared for the fall out," Dev warned, tucking his phone back into his pocket.

"I'll be okay," Kurt insisted, because he believed it. The pictures weren't of him, nobody outside of either campaign knew that he and Blaine even *knew* each other. The fall out wasn't going to touch him.

Except that it *did* touch him. He listened to every denial, judgment and speculation. Maybe the rest of the world had believed Blaine, but Kurt knew the truth and he hated it. He hadn't been able to even think about who the other man in the picture must have been, the things he and Blaine might have done because it hurt too much. By the fifth day he'd gotten angry, not at Blaine or his mother or the Anderson campaign but at the tabloids and the gossip sites and the blogs and the damn stupid entertainment TV shows. In the absence of anyone else to verbalize his anger at, he'd lashed out at Dev.

"Nobody cares about *him*," he'd railed, pacing the length of Dev's hotel room in Salt Lake City. "They should be protecting him, but they're protecting *themselves* instead. I know we've put ourselves out here, but don't we deserve an assumption of privacy too?"

"I agree with you," Dev sighed, "but a lot of people out there feel that you gave up any right to privacy when you started campaigning for your father."

Kurt mulled that over for a moment. "I did, I guess. But Blaine didn't. Blaine doesn't make choices, that's kind of his deal. "

Dev shrugged. "Nobody made him go to that club or do whatever he did."

"Stop." Kurt put his hand up. "Just stop. He went someplace where he thought he'd be safe, where he didn't think he'd be noticed. Why should he be crucified for it, or outed for it? Why should any of it *matter*?"

"Preaching, choir," Dev told him, and Kurt didn't know what else to say. He knew he was getting way too worked up about it, but he hated the way Blaine was being vilified.

"I just wish someone were looking out for *his* interests instead of their own."

Dev just nodded, and then changed the subject to Kurt's college search.

The first of October found both campaigns back in Denver getting ready for the first debate. Kurt tried to wash away the bitterness of memory with an extra-chocolate mocha, but it didn't help.

His worries about Blaine increased with each day; the text he'd sent right after the pictures broke had gone unreturned, which wasn't unexpected but stung nonetheless. He was unsure about what it would be like, seeing Blaine again after everything.

He wasn't sure he'd be able to act like there was no history between him.

All the nervous energy made him snappish again, and he spent the day before the debate picking and poking at his father, at Finn, at Dev, until Dev finally sent him away *until you can get your head back in the game, Kid*.

The morning of the debate, Kurt was contrite and apologetic, but it didn't really matter in the end because Dev had come to him and his dad with an idea. "I know someone who knows someone, and I can get you an interview," he told Kurt as the three of them drank coffee looking out over the mountains west of the city.

"To talk about what?" Kurt hadn't really done a solo interview before. All of his press contact had been with reporters in the pool following the campaign.

"All of this mess with Blaine. The photos and all."

Kurt curled his lips around the rim of his coffee cup. "You just want me to rant at someone besides you, huh?"

"It's a good interview, if you want it. Friday, in New York."

"You're not going to tell me who, are you?"

"No." Dev shook his head. "I want you to decide based on the merits of the things you have to say, not who you'll be saying them to or not."

Kurt went away and spent the whole day thinking about it, about what he'd want Blaine to do for him if their situations were reversed. When they gathered in front of the hotel to go to the University of Denver for the debate, he grabbed Dev's arm and held him back while his dad, Carole, and Finn got into the car. "I'll do the interview," Kurt told Dev, "but you have to promise me that I won't be asked to out anyone, because I don't do that."

"Don't worry," Dev promised. "She'd never ask."

"She?" Kurt was intrigued. "I'm going on a news show, right?"

Dev grinned wickedly and nudged Kurt into the car. "You worship her."

Kurt settled in against the leather seat and closed his eyes. "You didn't."

"I did. Don't worry, kid, you'll be great."

Kurt just moaned and muttered to himself. "I think I'm gonna be sick."

It was a foreign policy debate, not Burt's strongest suit, but he did okay. Elaine Anderson had been a double major in Politics and Foreign Relations, so it was only timing and sheer dumb luck that kept him from having his ass handed to him.

Consensus during the post-game was that he held his own, and that he would turn the tables in the following week's domestic policy town meeting.

What nobody said, what nobody wanted to admit, was that no matter how much they liked Blaine and how hard it had been for Kurt since they split, they were collectively glad that the media explosion happened when it did and that it was Blaine and not Kurt who was under scrutiny.

Even so, Burt could see that Kurt was deeply affected by Blaine's struggles and the accompanying media circus.

He pulled him aside on the plane out of Denver the morning after the debate, shooed everyone else away. "Hey," he said, staring into Kurt's eyes. "You okay?"

Kurt's eyes were bloodshot, sunken into dark circles. "No," he rasped. "I didn't sleep last night."

"Blaine looked rough last night."

"Yeah. We didn't say anything. I couldn't— I didn't know what to say." Kurt fiddled with the plastic straw in his cup of soda. "This isn't my fight, why is it bothering me so much?"

"Because it could just as easily be you, and because you care about him." Burt wasn't sure of much, but he was sure of that.

"Yeah," Kurt sighed, and closed his eyes.

"Do you wanna go home for a couple of days?" Burt wished he wouldn't, because he really wanted to be able to keep an eye on Kurt himself.

Kurt shook his head. "No. No, I just need to keep going."

"If you're sure," Burt said, but Kurt was already asleep. Burt found a blanket and tucked it over Kurt's curled form. He ruffled his hair lightly, while he could. "Sleep well, buddy," he whispered.

Seeing Kurt at the debate hurt a lot more than Blaine had expected, mostly because he'd felt desperate for some kind of acknowledgement from Kurt, some kind of recognition that they still mattered to each other even in the chaos. Instead there had been nothing, just the press of Kurt's hand against his own and an awkward and silent one-armed hug that sent Blaine reeling, bowled over by the memories brought by the spicy scent of Kurt's aftershave.

He kept it together there, in the lecture hall, in front of all the cameras. He kept it together on the walk back to the car and on the drive to the airport. He even managed to keep stone-faced and steely-eyed until the plane was in the air, somewhere over Nebraska or Iowa, until his mother slid silently into the seat next to him.

"You did well, tonight," she said softly. "I know this hasn't been easy for you. I want you to know, I appreciate it. Your father and I *both* appreciate it."

Blaine blinked away tears and stared out the window. "Do you even know why I did it? The pictures?"

"No," his mother answered. "I know the pictures weren't your fault. You didn't *ask* for that."

"I went out that night because I couldn't breathe. I thought—" he paused, tried to hold the tears in, but he couldn't. "I thought if I just went somewhere with people like me, I could forget a little bit."

"Forget what?" His mother sounded confused.

"That I walked away from Kurt, and that I'm alone and *lonely*."

"Did it help?" Oh *god*, Blaine knew his mother was trying, but she *really* didn't get it at all.

"No, it didn't help," he snapped. "I was stupid and I made a mistake, and some stranger decided that it needed to be out there for everyone." He was crying for real, then. "I *hate* this."

"You didn't have to lie. You could have told the truth," his mother said.

"No, I couldn't have. Yeah, I had the choice, but it wasn't *really* an option and we both know it."

He watched his mother's reflection in the tiny window. She shook her head and frowned at him sadly. "I suppose you're right. I'm sorry about that. I wish things could be different for you."

"Do you? Do you *really*, or are you just saying that to make me feel better?"

"I really do wish that. I just don't know how to give you what you need, Blaine."

Blaine sighed. He felt like he'd lived ten years in last ten days. "I don't think anyone can give me what I need. I think I have to figure that out for myself."

His mother patted him awkwardly on his forearm. "I think you're right, and I'm proud of you for recognizing that. I'll support you however I can."

Blaine closed his eyes. "You'll support me even if I decide to come out?"

His mother was silent, so he rushed to fill the space between them with reassurances. "I don't know if I will, I mean I probably won't, but if I decide that's what I *need* to do, it would— it would mean a *lot* to know that you would stand by me."

His heart was pounding. He didn't want to hope too much, but it felt like he and his mother were gradually reaching some kind of peace with each other and he wanted to keep building that, not shatter it before they even got started.

"Slow down," she said. "Breathe. Give me a chance before you start putting words in my mouth." She actually rolled her eyes at him. "You're as bad as your father, that way."

Blaine shuddered, because he didn't really want to be like his father at all.

"Hey," his mother said, firm but gentle. "You're a lot more like both of us than you know. Don't be ashamed of that." She paused, like she was considering her words carefully. "*I'm* not ashamed of you, Blaine. I love you, and if you decide that coming out is what is best for you, then I'll support you in that."

Blaine's breath caught in his chest. He was admittedly surprised. "Thank you," he whispered. The relief he felt was sweet and unexpected. "Thank you," he said again.

"You're welcome, Blaine," his mother replied. She stood, smoothed her skirt and adjusted her blouse. "Get some rest, it's a long flight and you have school in the morning."

Blaine didn't sleep, he *couldn't*. He wished he could call Kurt and talk about it, but he felt like there was nothing left to say. He was going to have to figure everything out on his own.

Dev flew with Kurt to New York on Friday morning, got them checked into the hotel, and then took Kurt for an early lunch. Kurt tried not to be nervous, but his stomach was in knots and he picked at his lunch until Dev frowned at him.

"You need to eat. I don't want you to pass out on the air."

Kurt poked his fork into his salad, stirred the dressing, and speared a bite. "I'm too nervous."

"You're going to do fine," Dev reassured him. "I wouldn't have set this up if I didn't believe in you."

"I'm worried that I'm going to slip up and give something away. I want to make things better for him, not worse, and I want him to know that." Kurt set his fork down and sipped at his water.

"So tell him," Dev said, like it should be so straightforward.

"We haven't talked in weeks. We didn't even talk at the debate, because I didn't know what to say. I really just wish this wasn't happening."

"To him, or at all?" Dev ran the end of a French fry through a shrinking pool of ketchup and popped it into his mouth.

"At all." Kurt held his BLT in one hand and contemplated it. "It could just as easily have been me. It could still *be* me."

"It wouldn't, though. You're already out. There is no story, where you're concerned."

"Not unless it comes out about . . . us. Him and me."

Dev nodded, his face serious. "And even then, I'm pretty sure that *he'd* be the story, not you."

"That's so wrong," Kurt said, took a bite of his sandwich and chewed carefully.

"Then make sure you talk about that tonight. It's going to be fine."

Kurt tried to hold Dev's words of encouragement close through the rest of the day, but he was shaky with nerves while he paced the length of the green room, a half-full water bottle clutched in his hand. He needed to let Blaine know what was happening, and he had to do it before he went into the studio.

He stopped at the window, looked out over the sparkling city below him. Took his phone and typed carefully. *I'm doing an interview tonight*, Kurt wrote. *I'm going to have to talk about us being friends, but I'm going to do my best to protect you. MSNBC, 9 pm, replay at midnight.*

He hit send as there was a knock on the door. "Come in," he called, and the door swung open. Rachel Maddow stood in the space, her face scrunched into a grin.

"Kurt, it's a real pleasure. You ready to do this?"

Blaine watched the live airing alone in the living room of his house with Callie, who had banished the rest of the guys to anywhere else and who sat next to him and rubbed his back through the thick fabric of his sweatshirt.

"When is he on?" Callie asked while Ed Schultz finished up his closing monologue.

"Don't know," Blaine shrugged. "The interview is usually in the second half hour."

Blaine was shocked, though, when the camera slid over to Rachel Maddow in her studio. She clapped her hands together and smiled. *"Tonight, we have an exclusive interview with Kurt Hummel, the son of Democratic Congressman and Presidential candidate Burt Hummel. He'll be talking with us about being out on the campaign and, in light of recent events surrounding the Anderson campaign, the responsibility of the media as it relates to outing. He'll be our guest for the whole hour, and I'm very excited. If you don't already love Kurt Hummel, you will after this. He'll be here with me after the break."*

Blaine sighed and curled into the arm of the couch. Callie tugged the chenille throw off the back of the sofa and draped it over his shoulders. "I'm not sure I can watch this," he muttered.

"You don't have to," she said. "You can read a transcript later, or I can watch and tell you about it, or you could watch clips on YouTube."

"He said he was going to protect me," Blaine said. "I need to watch it."

He waited while the commercials ended, and tried not to react to the sight of Kurt, in tight dark jeans and a purple button-down under a black vest, leaning against the desk and sharing a light laugh with Rachel. He would have looked completely at ease to most people, but Blaine could see his foot shaking lightly under the desk. "He's nervous," he said to Callie.

"Wouldn't you be, too?"

Blaine laughed at her. "I wouldn't even be able to talk, I'd be so scared."

Kurt took a deep breath. He was going to be okay. Rachel had gone over her questions with him, and they'd talked about how he might answer.

"I'm so excited to welcome Kurt Hummel to the show tonight."

Kurt smiled at the camera. "I feel like I'm on *Inside the Actor's Studio* or something."

Rachel winked at him with a gleam in her eye that seemed to ask *c'mon, play along*. He nodded minutely and she began. *"What's your full name?"*

Kurt laughed, and felt his body relax a little. He could do this. "Kurt Elizabeth Hummel."

Rachel did a double-take. *"Really?"*

Kurt shrugged at her. "It's Elijah on my birth certificate, but Elizabeth was my mom's middle name, and my dad let me change it legally after she died."

"Where and when were you born?"

"May 4, 1994 in Lima, Ohio."

"What is your favorite word?"

Kurt paused, tipped his head. "Love."

"What is your least favorite word?"

Kurt stared at Rachel and swallowed hard. "Faggot."

Rachel nodded. *"Okay. You've been vocal about having been bullied in school. How old were you when it started?"*

"I don't think there was a time when it didn't happen. Even if it wasn't kids in my grade, there were always older kids who knew where to find me on the playground or in the cafeteria or on the way home. For a long time it was just words."

"Words can hurt," Rachel said. *"But it progressed from there?"*

"Yeah. It became physical in middle school, and when the school didn't respond my dad decided that I would homeschool. "

"You went back, though, to high school?"

"I did," Kurt nodded. "For two years."

"But you left again, once your dad entered the race. Was that because of the opportunity, or because of something else?"

"A little bit of both," Kurt admitted. "This experience has been invaluable, but I wouldn't have been so ready to leave home and my friends if I'd been safe in school."

"What happened?"

Kurt frowned and hedged. He'd told Rachel that he wasn't going to tell other people's secrets, but he wasn't sure how to do it diplomatically. "I'm sorry," he said finally. "I can't tell you about that because it's not just my story to tell. No matter how much I hate what happened to me, I don't believe in telling other people's secrets."

"Okay," Rachel nodded. "We're going to take a break and when we come back we're going to talk about coming out and being out on the campaign trail."

Rachel shuffled her notes in front of her until they were clear from the camera. "You're doing fine," she told him and pushed a mug toward him. "Have some water."

"Thanks," he said, lifted the mug to his lips and sipped. "I hope that was okay, I just can't tell his story."

"No," Rachel replied. "Don't apologize. I get it, I really do. That's why we're talking about outing next."

"I might get ranty," he warned. "That's why Dev set this up in the first place, he was sick of me yelling at him about it."

"Feel free to talk about whatever you want. I can always reign you in, I've had lots of practice."

"Okay." Kurt took another sip from his mug and pushed it aside, resettled into his chair with one leg tucked underneath him.

Rachel turned and looked into the camera. *"We're back with our exclusive guest this hour, Kurt Hummel. Kurt, you came out when you were pretty young, right?"*

"I was twelve. It was something my father said he'd always known, and I think *I'd* always known." He lifted one shoulder in a halfhearted shrug. "The kids at school always knew, at least." *Oh, god, he sounded so bitter.* "Sorry. I like to think I'm beyond all that, but sometimes . . ." he trailed off.

"Things like that stick with us. But you never had reservations about being public about your sexuality? Because you were out when your dad ran for Congress the first time."

Kurt nodded. "We decided as a family that it was the best thing for us, not to hide. My parents and my brother aren't ashamed of me, and I'm not ashamed of who I am. We've seen it, during the campaigns, especially in Ohio. The more people know, the less they're afraid."

"You say your family isn't ashamed of you, and you're not ashamed of who you are. Do you think that people who choose not to come out do so because they're ashamed?"

"No, no. Not at all. There are so many reasons people choose to come out or not, and I think that as a community we need to respect that. Sometimes it's not safe for someone to be out, because of their family or home situation, or they need to protect their livelihood. I know that I'm incredibly lucky, being able to be publicly out the way that I am, but that's a decision I made, that my *family* made with me. It's not something I took lightly, it's not something I will ever take lightly."

"Do you feel a responsibility to the gay and lesbian community, to be a kind of a role model for glbt youth?"

Kurt chewed on the inside of his lip. It shouldn't have been a hard question to answer, but it was. He reached for his mug and drank to buy himself a few seconds.

"It's a lot harder to answer that than I thought. I guess I'm a role model whether I want to be or not. I don't know that I feel a responsibility, per se, but I also know that being seen that way, as a role model, doesn't feel like a burden at all."

"So you don't feel pressure to behave a certain way, because you're in the limelight?"

"No, there's definitely pressure to preserve an image, but that's the choice I made when I came out on the road with my dad. Let me say that again: that's a choice that *I* made for myself, and I accept whatever responsibility or pressure that choice brings."

"After the break, I want to talk about that choice, and the recent media storm surrounding the Anderson campaign."

"Okay," Kurt nodded, and waited until Rachel gave him the signal that they were off the air again.

"You alright?" she asked, and reached under the desk for something.

"I think so," he said, and took the small square of chocolate she slid across the desk to him. "Why, do I look like I'm going to pass out or something?"

Rachel shook her head. "No," she smiled. "Just a little pale. I know it's hot under the lights."

Kurt didn't answer, just chewed on the chocolate and took a sip of his water.

"You sure you're okay talking about Blaine Anderson?"

Kurt nodded. "I kind of have to be. I mean, that's mostly the point of me being here."

"I'll follow your lead, then. You can always change the subject."

Kurt raised an eyebrow at her. "Really. I thought *you* were in charge here."

"I am—" she began, but was interrupted by a signal from the cameraman, and she turned on her show face again. *"Okay, welcome back. Two weeks ago, controversy rocked the campaign of Republican nominee Elaine Anderson. The tabloids printed pictures of someone rumored to be Anderson's son Blaine, inside a gay club. The Anderson campaign has denied that the unidentified young man in the pictures is Blaine, and there has been no statement from the campaign regarding Blaine Anderson's sexual orientation. You know Blaine, correct?"*

Kurt drew in a breath. "Yes. You could say that he and I are friends. We met several times during the primaries."

"Have you talked with him since the pictures were released?"

"No. I wanted to give him some space, some privacy."

"Do you think it's him, in the pictures?"

Kurt shook his head. "I'm not going to speculate. Whether Blaine is gay or straight is none of our business, frankly. He's not running for office, he's not obligated to share those parts of his personal life with the world. And whoever took those pictures, put them out into the world like that, that is *such* a violation of privacy. It doesn't matter *who* is in those pictures, really, because the person who put them out there has outed *somebody*, and there's no excuse for that. Coming out is such an intensely personal choice and experience. Nobody has a responsibility to come out, nobody should be made to feel less than or ashamed for *not* coming out. And nobody, not the mainstream media, not the glbt press, and certainly not anyone with a cell phone camera and a penchant for gossip, has the right to out *anyone*, public figure or not."

"What if you'd gone out like that and it was your picture in the tabloids?"

"That's different."

"How so?"

"Because I chose this for myself. I put myself out there, in the public eye. I chose to be out as a gay man, I chose to open myself up to the scrutiny. If I went out to a club and someone took pictures and gave them to a tabloid, that's a reasonable thing to expect given the choices I've made. Look, I was watching some old *West Wing* episodes the other night, and Jimmy Smits' character told the Democratic convention that every one of us is broken, and expecting our public officials to live some kind of idealized, perfect life is really hypocritical. I feel that way about this situation; we're all imperfect, no matter whether we're private citizens or public officials, but that doesn't diminish our fundamental right to privacy. It's possible in Hollywood, there are plenty of actors who go to work every day and then go home and keep their private lives private. We should all be able to choose for ourselves how public we want our private affairs to be. I've made my choice, my family has made their choices. Blaine Anderson and his family deserve that same choice, and we should all respect that."

"Thank you, Kurt. I think you've given all of us a lot to think about. Is there anything you'd like to say to Blaine Anderson, if he's watching?"

Kurt turned and faced the camera. There were so many things he wanted to say, but most of them weren't appropriate for public consumption, so he just stared at the camera like he wanted to stare at Blaine. "You know how to find me, if you want to talk."

Rachel focused her own attention on the camera. "That's been the Rachel Maddow Show for Friday, October 5th 2012. Thanks to Kurt Hummel for spending the hour with us, and to all of you for sticking around. Have a good weekend, and I'll see you all back here on Monday. Next up is *The Last Word* with Lawrence O'Donnell. "

Once they were done, Rachel unclipped her microphone and then leaned across the desk to help Kurt with his. "Thanks," he said once the microphone was on the desk in front of him. "I hope that was all okay."

Rachel grinned. "I think it was awesome. You're really pretty incredible, you know."

"Thank you," Kurt said, because he couldn't formulate a better response.

"You're staying the night in the city, right?" she asked.

Kurt nodded. "Yeah. The campaign is traveling tonight, so Dev and I will meet them in the morning."

"Want any restaurant recommendations or anything?"

Kurt paused, thought for a moment. There *was* something he wanted to do, he just hoped it wasn't going to push the envelope more than he already had with the interview. He decided to take the chance.

"I want to go dancing," he told her.

" . . . put on your shades cause I'll be dancing in the flames tonight yeah, baby tonight, yeah baby. It isn't Hell if everybody knows my name tonight . . . " Kurt shouldn't have been surprised that the small, over-18 club would be playing Lady Gaga, but he'd expected something a little less . . . *predictable* . . . from a club in New York.

Nonetheless, Kurt felt free, felt like he belonged somewhere, *to something*, kind of like the way he did when he talked to GSAs or PFLAG, or introduced his dad at events. The men at the club were sweet, they knew who he was, and he felt like a little brother or a mascot or something for the first hour, until he pushed his way onto the dance floor and lets loose. He didn't think, he just moved, lost himself in the lights and the music and the pulse in his head. He danced until he couldn't move, and as he made his way back to the bar for a soda he heard the whispers: *who knew the baby queen was such a hottie?* and *such a shame*

he's always so buttoned up. His agents just watched from the darkest corners of the place, and when they'd hustled him into the car at closing, Ty had winked and smiled at him. "Looked good out there, Kid."

Kurt leaned against the side of the car, brushed his sweaty hair off his face. "Can I petition to change my code name?"

"Nope," Ty smirked. "If your father has to be Papa Bear, then you have to be Kid."

Kurt watched the city pass by him in the car on the way back to the hotel. He thought about Blaine, wondered where he was and what he was doing, if he was okay. He'd looked rough, at the debate, like he hadn't been sleeping.

When the car paused at a stoplight, Kurt pulled his phone out of his pocket and fired off a short text. *Just thinking about you, hope you're hanging in there.*

"Your guy?" Ty asked once the car was moving again.

Kurt shook his head. "He's not my anything anymore."

Ty didn't respond, so Kurt just kept staring out the window and tried *not* to think about Blaine anymore.

After the first airing, Blaine pushed himself off the couch and went into the kitchen, turned the oven on and pulled one of the logs of cookie dough out of the freezer. He worked in silence, alone, but he could feel Callie watching him from the living room.

There was so much he wanted to say, but the only person he wanted to say any of it to was Kurt, so he didn't say anything at all.

He watched the midnight replay of the interview alone, Callie and everyone else gone to bed.

He watched it alone, and only there in the darkness did he let himself cry.

He was still awake after 2 am, watching the *West Wing* episode Kurt had referenced in the interview, when his phone buzzed with a text from Kurt.

Just thinking about you, hope you're hanging in there.

Fuck.

All the words he wanted to share were right there. He could have written volumes to Kurt, whole sonnets or a short story. Maybe even a novel, if he'd had enough time, but when he tried to type it out the words were just gone, so he tucked himself into his blankets, into his head, into his heart, and tried to find a way out of his self-made mess.

Kurt had hoped that the interview would get Blaine talking to him again, but it didn't. Blaine maintained his silence and solitude, and at the last two debates, they shook hands like they were supposed to, proper and distant and friendly for the cameras and the public. Kurt had no way of knowing if he was the only one ignoring the sparks between their palms each time they shook hands; Blaine never offered him anything more than polite greetings and a wooden smile that made Kurt want to grimace.

Kurt felt like Blaine was somehow doing this *for him*. Or maybe for his dad, he didn't know for sure. All he knew was that everything felt wrong and there was nothing he could do about it. Instead, he turned his attention to the last 15 days, the final push through. They'd come this far, he and his dad and their little upstart campaign, and damn *anyone* who got in their way. Kurt was going to do everything he could to make sure his dad won the whole thing.

Blaine went back to school after the last debate, tucked himself away out of sight. He had a paper to write for his English class, and the last edits to do for his Early Action application for University of Virginia, which was due by November 1st. He still didn't want to deal with people a lot; when he was honest to himself and to Callie, and to Trina during their daily phone calls, he told them that he didn't really trust anyone, didn't even really trust himself. "I make bad choices," he told Trina on Halloween night, after she was home from trick-or-treating and had put the boys to bed. "I thought I was doing the right thing by breaking it off, but it was probably the stupidest thing I've ever done. And now, after the club and everything, if my mother loses I'll feel like it's all because of me."

"No," Trina reassured him. Something plastic crinkled in the background and then Trina was mumbling. "If your mother loses it's because the people didn't like her policies or her priorities. It's not a value judgment on you, or at least it shouldn't be."

"Are you raiding the kids' candy?"

"Mmm, Teddy's allergic to peanuts, so I need to get all the Reese's cups out of *all* the baskets. Good thing they're my favorite."

"Mine too," Blaine sighed, and tucked his phone into his shoulder. His application for UVA was up on his computer screen. He just needed to click send, but he couldn't make himself do it. "Tell me I can do this," he asked Trina after a moment of silence.

"Do what?"

"UVA. Tell me to send it."

"Oh, honey. For the education program you told me about?"

"Yeah." Blaine knew it wasn't something his parents approved of, but it was what he wanted to do and where he wanted to be, and he had to at least *try*.

"Send it. Send it right now, and if you don't do it I'm going to hang up on you."

Blaine rolled his eyes and let his finger hover over his mouse pad. "What, Tee, are you *twelve*?"

"No. Just *send* it already."

Blaine took a deep breath, rolled the arrow over the *send* button, and clicked. "Done." It felt like the first step in his next journey.

"Now what?" Trina asked, mumbly again around what had to be another mouthful of peanut butter cup.

"Now I figure out how to get Kurt back."

PART SIX

November and Everything After

Wednesday November 1, 2012

Blaine's eyes were gritty when he rolled out of bed half an hour before his first class. He didn't even bother fighting with his contacts, so his glasses drew strange looks from his classmates as he took his seat in English. They were doing peer reviews of their papers, and his hands trembled when he took his required copies out of his backpack and set them in front of him on the table.

"You okay, Blaine?" Justin, who rowed with him on crew team asked cautiously.

"Oh, yeah," Blaine replied absently. "I was up late finishing a college app that had to be in today." It wasn't entirely a lie.

"Where are you applying? I decided not to bother with any early apps, my first one doesn't have to be in until January."

"UVA," Blaine said, ran his finger along the thick edge of the paper in front of him.

"Cool," Justin smiled. "What do you think you're gonna major in? My mom thinks I should do business or something like that because I'm good at math, but I think I really want to do sociology or psychology."

Blaine took a breath, held it for a moment, and let it out. "I'm going to be a kindergarten teacher."

"Oh." Justin paused. "Okay. That's , um. Different."

Blaine's heart sunk a little at Justin's reaction. He knew his aspirations weren't typical for an Andover kid, or at least they weren't ones that most people would admit to, but he was just *so tired* of lying and pretending.

The paper in front of him was proof of that, as was the email he'd sent right before he'd gone to bed, seven words to Dev, *who do you know at the Times?*

Mr. Buonano strode into the room then, set his briefcase onto his desk with a thud. "Okay," he began, "who wants to go first?"

Blaine raised his hand. "I'd like to, please," he said, calm and polite.

Mr. Buonano nodded at him. "Blaine. What's the topic of your paper?"

Blaine handed his stack of papers to Justin, to his right. "The ways that passing gives our secrets power over us, and whether we can be freed by telling the truth."

"In relation to what?" Mr. Buonano asked.

"Sexual orientation and gender identity," Blaine answered, and he was stunned that the words didn't get stuck in his throat.

"What texts did you evaluate?"

Blaine tapped his fingers on the table. "Contemporary movies and novels with gay and lesbian content. Most of the books were young adult novels: *Annie on my Mind* by Nancy Garden, *Boy Meets Boy* by David Levithan, *Keeping you a Secret* and *Luna*, both by Julie Anne Peters, and *Parrotfish* by Ellen Whittlinger. I also referenced *Stone Butch Blues* by Leslie Feinberg, because it deals with many of the same themes as *Boys Don't Cry*. As far as other media is concerned, *Milk*, *Latter Days*, *Brokeback Mountain*, *Saved!*, and two different story arcs on *Queer as Folk*, one surrounding disclosure of HIV status and the other about homophobia and being closeted in professional sports. I know it's a little unorthodox, but my paper also contains some personal narrative. It's . . . well. Let's call it relevant."

Mr. Buonano nodded. "Your recent, ahem. Situation."

"Yes."

"Okay." Mr. Buonano waited while everyone took a copy of Blaine's paper, and he took one for himself as the stack made its way around the table. "Does anyone have any questions for Blaine before we move on?"

Sasha raised her hand tentatively. "I saw all the news, with those pictures. And last year, you went to an Alliance meeting once, but you never said. Are you- are you *gay*, Blaine?"

Mr. Buonano put his hand up. "I think that's a little inappropriate, Sasha."

Blaine pulled his glasses off and pinched the bridge of his nose. "No, it's okay. I mean, I bring it up in my paper and I opened the door on my own." He put his glasses back on and looked around the table. "Did any of you see Kurt Hummel's interview on Rachel Maddow a couple of weeks ago?"

About half the class nodded. Blaine set his mouth in a line and nodded back at them. "Then you heard what he was saying about privacy and choices. Please, I need you all to respect my privacy. To answer Sasha's question, yes. I'm gay, but that isn't for public discussion. Not yet."

"Oh, my god," Lucas groaned from across the table. "You're asking us to keep your secret so it doesn't impact the election. That's pretty hypocritical, don't you think?"

Blaine smacked his palms hard on the table and felt the vibration up his arms and into his head. "Way to jump to conclusions, Lucas. It's got *nothing* to do with the election and everything to do with the fact that this isn't just my secret. There are other people affected by what I say and when I say it, and there are things I need to say to them before this goes beyond the fifteen of us." He pushed his chair away from the table and grabbed his backpack from the floor. "Maybe this was a mistake."

He started toward the door. "I can't— I need to go."

"Blaine, wait." Mr. Buonano was on his feet too, following Blaine out of the classroom and into the hall.

Blaine got three classrooms away before he stopped and sort of staggered against the wall, let it take his weight. "I'm sorry." He waved his hand in the air. "It's just all kind of a lot, you know."

"I do." Mr. Buonano nodded. "I'll talk to them."

"Thank you." Blaine really did appreciate it.

"Are you okay? This is a really brave thing you're doing. Do you have a support system in place?"

Blaine thought about Tara, Callie, and Trina. About Dev, and about what Kurt would think, whether he'd still want to be there if Blaine needed him. "I do," he nodded, and he realized that for the first time in his life he really *did* have a support system. "I *do*," he said again, and the world didn't feel quite so enormous and he didn't feel quite so adrift.

"Good." Mr. Buonano smiled at him. "I'll excuse you from class for the rest of the period, but make sure you're ready to discuss your paper tomorrow, once everyone has had a chance to read it. I'll put your copies of everyone else's in your box in the lounge by lunchtime."

"Thank you," Blaine said. "Just— *thank* you."

He stood there, against the wall, until Mr. Buonano had retreated back to the classroom, and then he pulled his phone out of his pocket. *Please*, he pleaded silently. *Please, Dev, give me something.*

He *did* have an email from Dev, there in his inbox between one from his mother and one from Tara.

He clicked on Dev's first. There was nothing but a name and contact information. *Bill Reed, 781-555-4944; wreed .*

Blaine stared at his phone and tried to calm his breathing and his frantic, terrified heart. He needed to make the call now, before he lost all of his nerve. There wasn't enough time to walk back to his dorm, not if he was going to make it to Psych on time, so he found a secluded bench outside the main building, huddled into his coat against the cool air, and dialed with shaking hands.

"Bill Reed," a man answered after two rings.

"Mr. Reed," Blaine began, "my name is Blaine Anderson."

"Mmm," Mr. Reed made an affirmative noise in his throat. "Devin said you might be in touch. What can I do for you?"

"I-" Blaine stammered. "Um. I need to come clean about some things before the election. I'd prefer to do an interview as soon as possible, and I'd really like it to be with the *New York Times*."

"Why?"

"Why what? Why the interview, or why the *Times*?"

"Both. Either." Blaine could hear computer keys clacking in the background.

"The interview, because it's time and there are no obstacles in my way now. The *Times* because when the pictures came out your paper didn't fall into the gossip the way the rest of the press did." God, Blaine hoped he was saying the right things. He *really* didn't want to have to try the *Washington Post* or the *Chicago Tribune*.

"Are you able to get down here for an interview?"

Blaine shook his head even though Mr. Reed couldn't see him, which made him chuckle lightly to himself.

"Sorry. I can't, I have school; I've missed a lot already this year."

"Okay. Hold on." The line went silent for a long minute before Mr. Reed was back. "I can come to you. You're in . . . Boston, right?"

"I go to Andover."

"Andover. How's Saturday, around lunchtime?"

Blaine ran through his schedule in his head. He had a meeting for his psych class at 9, and he wanted to swim laps before lunch. "I could meet you around 12:30 at Good Day Café." He was suddenly *very* happy that water polo was done for the season, or else he would have been tied down to a match on Saturday.

"That sounds perfect. I look forward to hearing what you have to say, Blaine."

"Thank you, Mr. Reed," Blaine let out in a rush. "I really appreciate it."

"Please, call me Bill."

"Bill. Thank you."

Mr. Reed – *Bill* – laughed. "Go back to class, Blaine," he scolded, and Blaine felt himself blush.

"Yes, sir. See you Saturday." He hung up, and shouldered his backpack. He'd expected to feel a little frantic at the idea of telling all his secrets, but he just felt sweet relief.

He looked at his phone as he pocketed it; if he hurried, he'd be able to get a cup of coffee in the senior lounge before Psych.

He took off across campus with a little bounce in his step.

Kurt leaned against the window of the car and closed his eyes. He didn't need to see the details. All the highways looked the same, anymore, and it almost didn't matter whether they were in Pittsburgh, Norfolk, Cleveland, Miami, or Denver. The words were the same, the crowds felt the same, and Kurt was equally exhausted no matter the time zone.

They were so close he could almost taste it, and all he wanted in the world was his own bed and a bowl of Carole's chili with too much cheese, green onions, and sour cream.

"Are we ever going to go home again, Dad?" he whispered into the space between them in the back seat.

"We'll be home in five days, buddy. Can you hang on until then?" His dad's voice was hoarse, and even though Kurt hadn't opened his eyes he could feel his dad rubbing at his hand, which was stiff and sore from all the hand-shaking.

"You'll ice that when we get to the hotel, right?"

"Yeah."

His dad sounded as weary as Kurt felt. "Do you need to work tonight?" he asked tentatively.

"Nah," his dad said, a little too quick and a little too confident.

"I know when you're lying," Kurt called him out.

"I'm not lying. I really don't have to work tonight. There haven't been any changes to the speech, and I think the rest of them are as tired as we are. Why?"

"Pizza and a movie?"

"Sure. My room or yours?"

Kurt wished he knew why he was feeling so damn lonely. "Actually," he said, tentatively, "would it be okay if we shared a room this time?"

"Missing your old man, huh?" His dad's words were light, almost teasing, but they caught Kurt right in the middle of his chest. Before he knew what was happening he was crying, deep and hard.

"Yes," he gasped. He tried to curl into himself, to protect the tired and upset and alone parts of his heart, but he never had been able to hide from his father.

"Okay, kiddo. C'mere." His dad's hands were busy unbuckling Kurt's seatbelt and tugging him across the length of the seat. He pulled Kurt into his chest as well as he could in the cramped space of the car. His hand was warm and soothing against Kurt's back. "I know you're having a rough patch. Do you want to go home?"

"No," Kurt said, defensive and rushed in a way that was to convince himself as much as he wanted to convince his dad. "No," he said again. "You and I have come this far together, I want to finish it."

"Can I do anything to help?"

"I don't think so," Kurt shook his head against his dad's dress shirt. "I think I just need to be sad for a little bit."

"Okay," his dad said, and kept rubbing Kurt's back. "Sounds like a plan to me."

The trees and the buildings looked distorted from the angle Kurt's head was at, and even though he was sure he'd seen it all before their surroundings somehow seemed foreign.

"Where *are* we?" he asked finally when he couldn't stand it anymore.

"I gotta tell you, Kurt, I have *no* idea," his dad admitted, and his chest shook with laughter.

Kurt snorted and struggled to sit up, found his face wet with tears again, but they were *good* tears and he didn't feel quite so bad in that moment.

Friday November 2, 2012

Kurt and his dad were in State College, PA, as it turned out.

They'd shared a half pepperoni and pineapple/half mushroom and pepper pizza, and Kurt had fallen asleep in his clothes not even halfway through *The Hurt Locker* on HBO. When he woke the next morning, his dad was gone and Kurt's phone was ringing.

Kurt scrambled to grab it and knocked it *and* his glasses off the nightstand. "Fuck," he swore, even though there was nobody there to hear him. He climbed out of bed and snatched his phone off the floor. "Hello?"

"Check your email," Dev ordered.

"What?" Kurt blinked, rubbed at his eyes. His computer hadn't even made it out of his bag the night before.

"Check your email. Read it, and then call me back." Dev hung up abruptly.

Kurt sighed and stumbled over to his bag, fumbled with zipper and clasp, and wrestled his laptop out of the snug padded sleeve. He put his glasses on while it booted up, and started the room's tiny coffeepot with a single-serve packet of dark roast. He clicked thorough to find and access the hotel's wifi, and opened his email. There were too many, since he hadn't checked since before their flight the previous morning, but the one at the top was surely what Dev wanted him to read.

From: banderson13 at andover dot edu

To: kurt_e at hummel dot net, devin_j at hummel dot net

Subject: Things are changing

Attachment: paper dot docx

Kurt and Dev-

I'm giving an interview tomorrow that should run on Sunday.

Attached is a copy of the paper I'm writing for my English class.

I know it might be too little, much too late, but I'm doing what I need to for myself.

I'm so sorry, Kurt, for everything. I hope someday you'll forgive me, and that we can be friends again. I miss you.

Dev, thank you for your help.

-Blaine

Kurt clicked to open the attachment and got up to fix his coffee while the paper downloaded, and then he settled back against his pillows, laptop on his knees and mug in his hands, to read.

When he finished, he dialed Dev back. "He's going to come out," Kurt said in lieu of any greeting, "if he hasn't already."

"Kid's got balls, I'll give him that. My friend Bill, he won't go easy on him in the interview."

"You knew?"

"Not really," Dev deflected. "He emailed yesterday asking if I knew anyone at the *Times*. I suspected, but I didn't know."

"Wow." Kurt didn't know what to say. He was proud of Blaine, hoped he was happy, hoped he was making the right choice for the right reasons, but all of that was useless to Dev; the only one who needed to hear those things was Blaine.

"You need to be prepared, Kurt. Just like with the pictures, this could turn into a big deal for you, too. I know the past few weeks have been hard, just- take *care* of yourself, okay? And no matter what comes out in that interview, don't take it personally."

"I'll try not to," he sighed. He tried not to take *anything* Blaine did personally, but he was just so exhausted that he couldn't make any promises.

"Hey." Dev's voice was gentle. "You okay?"

"No. Yes." Kurt sighed heavily. "I have no idea."

"What's wrong?"

Kurt set his computer aside and burrowed down under the blankets. "Nothing. Everything. Just tired and ready to go home, mostly." And he missed Blaine, missed his friendship and his sense of humor and his kindness, missed what it felt like to hold a piece of Blaine's heart so carefully, what it felt like knowing Blaine held a piece of his.

"Just a few more days. We're almost at the finish line. Look, why don't you take today off? Catch up on some of the sleep you've been missing."

"I can't," Kurt argued. "I've got a GSA this afternoon, and if nobody else gets to take a day off then I don't either."

"If you're sure." Dev sounded doubtful.

"I'm sure."

"In that case, I'm hungry. Meet me downstairs in half an hour and I'll buy you pancakes."

Kurt tossed the covers aside and rolled out of bed with heavy sigh. Four more days. He could *do* this. "Chocolate chip pancakes *and* extra crispy bacon and you've got a deal."

Blaine holed up in his room after dinner on the pretense of getting ahead in his schoolwork, since he was going to be missing at least two days of school the following week. The first thing he did was check his email for the hundredth time that day, in anticipation of an email from Kurt that he was sure was never going to come.

Then he sat straight and still at his desk and stared at his phone. He needed to tell his mother. He needed to warn her, needed her approval, needed to know he was making the right choice.

He dialed with shaking hands, and his mother answered after three rings.

"Blaine? What's wrong?"

"Mom." Blaine's heart was racing in his chest. "Everything's fine. I just- I need to tell you something."

Elaine ended the call and walked back through the suite into the bedroom. John was still fussing with his cufflinks, but she didn't offer to help him. She stood in front of the dresser, in front of her open and entirely inadequate purse, and removed her compact and lipstick, the tiny bottle of ibuprofen, her driver's license and her spare pantyhose. She frowned at all of it, left the pantyhose and the compact on the dresser and returned the ibuprofen, her license, and her lipstick to the purse. She shoved her phone in and tugged the tiny zipper closed.

"We're going to be late," she said, wheeling to face John and frowning at him; his cuffs were *still* undone.

"Are these the only cufflinks I have?"

Elaine strode toward the door. "I don't know," she snapped. "I've been a little busy, John. I don't really have time to keep track of *your* accessories, I can hardly keep track of my own. I'm going down, I'll meet you in the car."

"Lainey," he called out when she was three steps into the living room. "Is Blaine okay?"

Elaine felt a small smile tug at her lips as she turned to face him. "Yes, I think he finally is."

"Finally? What do you mean by *finally*?"

"For Christ's *sake*, John. I don't think Blaine has been okay in years, and we've both been blind to it."

"Is this about his gay thing again?"

"Seriously? His *gay thing*? Blaine is gay, and we can't change that. *He's* tried to. He's tried to keep it a secret for us, for my career, but it's been hurting him."

John stared at her. "What the hell is going on? He's not going to come out, is he? Not now, not when the election is so close. We're almost there, Lainey. We almost have everything we've ever wanted, you can't let him do that."

Elaine shrugged. "He's already made the arrangements, he was just calling to tell me what he was going to do."

"You talked him out of it, I'm sure."

"No, John." She shook her head. "Blaine is his own man. I told him weeks ago that he was capable of choosing for himself, and that if he decided to come out then I'd support him because he's my son and I love him."

"He's going to ruin this for us."

"No he's not. And even if he did, what does it matter? What does any of it *matter*? We could have lost him any number of times since that beating. What matters now is that he's learning how to be happy, and he's learning how to make his own choices."

"What did you tell him?"

Elaine let her purse fall from her shoulder. She grabbed the skinny strap in her hand, twisted it between her fingers. "I told him that I love him, that he's so brave, and that I am incredibly proud of him. I'm going to stand up for him, John. You can make your own choice about that."

"I can't give him that," John said. He jiggled his cufflinks in his hand and set them carefully on the bedspread next to him. "I can't."

Elaine nodded. She'd expected as much. "I think I should go to this dinner alone."

John nodded carefully. "If that's what you think is best."

"I do." She was a little surprised that he wasn't fighting her harder about the dinner, but he was a man who cared too much about appearances and they both knew there was no way they were going to be able to hide their disagreement, not when it was so fresh.

"Have fun," he told her as she walked away.

Elaine frowned. The dinner wasn't going to be fun. The attention surrounding Blaine's interview wasn't going to be fun, and the fallout from this fight with John most *definitely* wasn't going to be fun.

She was just ready for it all to be over.

Four more days. Four more days and it would all be over.

Saturday November 3, 2012

Bill Reed worked the Saturday crossword in pen while he waited for Blaine Anderson. He'd already set out his notepad and his micro recorder, but he didn't want to order until the boy got there, in case he was hungry. He figured he owed Blaine a meal, at least, since he was giving Bill the biggest interview of his young career.

He'd just filled in 7 down, *in the midst of, 6 letters* when the bell over the door jingled and Blaine rushed in. His cheeks were pink from the cool air and he had a dark green knit hat pulled down over his hair. Bill waved, and Blaine nodded, made his way across the room.

"I'm sorry I'm late. My study group ran late, and then I wanted to swim my laps." He tugged his hat off, revealing damp and wild curls that were very unlike what Bill was used to seeing when Blaine had been out at campaign events.

"It's fine," Bill said. "Are you hungry? I haven't eaten yet, I wanted to wait to order."

Blaine settled back into his chair, tugged his Andover Crew hoodie over his head and then stuffed it under the table with his backpack. "I'm always hungry," he smiled, and Bill was almost instantly charmed. This boy, here at the table, was so different from the Blaine Anderson he thought he knew from the media.

"I take it you've eaten here before." At Blaine's nod, Bill continued. "What's good?"

"The chicken salad is awesome. The Pilgrim, the Bullfinch, the Club." He cocked his head at Bill. "Sometimes my inner five year old likes the Nutella with bananas."

"What do you want? My treat."

Blaine chewed a little on his bottom lip, bopped his head from side to side in thought. "The Pilgrim, a bag of salt and vinegar chips, and a Coke, please."

"You got it."

Bill put in their order, and watched out of the corner of his eye as Blaine turned the folded crossword around and picked up the pen. He worked carefully, pausing to think, and when Bill returned to the table with their sandwiches Blaine had filled in five more clues.

"Sorry," he told Bill, pushing the paper and pen aside. "I can't resist a crossword."

"No worries," Bill reassured him.

"My dad and I—" Blaine started, and paused. "My dad always did them, when I was a kid. I wanted to make him happy and be close to him, so I learned how to do them, too."

Bill hadn't known what to expect from Blaine. He'd assumed that the boy would be the same buttoned-up, stoic, silent figure that had been almost invisible behind his parents all summer, but he'd *hoped* that he'd share a hint of the boy who'd been so gentle and playful with Connor Halstead at the convention. What he was seeing here was something else entirely. *This* Blaine Anderson was loose and casual and open, and Bill wondered aloud how many people got to see that.

Blaine opened his chips and crunched one thoughtfully. "One," he answered after a moment. "Only one person has ever seen this me, and I let him go because I was too scared."

"Him." Bill stared at Blaine. "So you *are* gay?"

"Yes." Blaine's voice was strong, but his hands betrayed his nerves, shaking around his can of soda.

"Okay." Bill nodded. "May I?" he gestured to his recorder.

"Please," Blaine said.

Bill clicked the *record* button and they began.

Four hours later, Bill raced through South Station and out onto the platform. If he hadn't been on a deadline, he would have stayed, would have talked more with Blaine Anderson, but he *had* to make the 4:35 if he was going to get the interview into the morning's paper. The finer details of their conversation were running on a constant loop in his brain, and he couldn't *wait* to transcribe the recording.

Thank god for the 4 hour trip back to the city.

He opened his laptop on the tray table, plugged his ear buds into his recorder, and got to work.

Sunday November 4th, 2012

New York Times Politics Section B

The Prince of the Party

Bill Reed, Staff Writer

Blaine Anderson has been the subject of much attention recently, from his sudden emergence onto the national stage at the Republican Convention and the gossip surrounding his alleged presence at a Boston gay club in September. Behind all of that media perception is a complex young man who is struggling to balance a public persona with the same trials facing most 18 year olds.

I met Blaine at a café in Andover, MA, where he's a senior at Phillips Academy Andover. He was late to our meeting after a busy morning of a study group and his daily swimming routine. He was relaxed and affable, and much more giving of information about himself than I had anticipated. In short, the boy I spent better than three hours with was nothing like I expected, based on what I'd seen of him in the political arena.

BR: Why did you decide to give this interview?

BA: I'm tired of hiding. I'm tired of being scared all the time. I'm tired of living every day trying to meet everyone else's expectations of who I should be and how I should think and act.

BR: So this is an act of defiance?

BA: No. No, it's not. This is me finally standing up and telling my truth.

BR: You have lots of public faces. Until the convention, you seemed very composed and closed off, but your behavior with Connor Halstead showed the world a different side of you. Talk to me about that.

BA: I spent a lot of time with the Halstead boys that week. Those events, with all the delegates . . . it's hard, because the candidate's whole family is expected to be there, but those aren't events for little kids, and the Halsteads don't have a nanny or a babysitter. I like kids a lot, and I've been pretty much not involved in my mother's career until recently, so those meet and greet things are really weird for me. It was so much easier

to play with the kids. As for the night of my mother's speech, we'd all been "on" for hours. It was late, way past Connor's bedtime, and he was getting really antsy.

BR: What were you two doing?

BA: We were doing this little finger-play one of my old nannies used to play with me, "Five Little Ducks."

BR: It was pretty sweet.

BA: (blushing and ducking his head) Thank you.

BR: People have made a big deal over comparing you with Kurt Hummel, because you're the same age and are both, obviously, children of candidates. Do you think it's a fair comparison?

BA: No, it's not a fair comparison. Kurt and I are very different people. Other than both being 18, seniors in high school, and having parents running for President, we're really nothing alike.

That doesn't mean that I don't respect and admire Kurt, because I think he's amazing. He's smart and funny and creative and so incredibly brave, to live his life openly and honestly in the public eye.

It's just, anyone who bothers to dig beneath the superficial similarities will find out that Kurt and I have had drastically different upbringings, and that has influenced who we both are today.

BR: You're friends with Kurt Hummel, correct?

BA: Yes. We met a year ago at a campaign stop in New Hampshire. He's been a good friend to me.

BR: Tell me about your childhood, about the things that make you different from Kurt.

BA: I think everyone knows his story by now, so I won't rehash that. My story is pretty different. My mom was elected to her first local office when I was a toddler. I was raised by two awesome nannies, Isobel and Sarah, until I got to middle school. Then I was old enough to be home alone after school, so I raised myself the rest of the way. I came to Andover when I was 15.

BR: You're a year older than the rest of your classmates, correct?

BA: Yes.

BR: *Why is that?*

BA: *My Freshman year, I was at the public high school back home, and there was an incident at a school dance. A friend and I were attacked outside the gym, and I ended up with some fractured ribs and a concussion. (Blaine curled and flexed his hand, and frowned at it) They busted my hand up pretty good, too. I had to have surgery, and physical therapy, and I had these headaches from the concussion. It was just better to take the year off and start fresh.*

BR: *Why were you attacked at the dance?*

BA: *Because I brought a male date.*

BR: *So you're gay?*

BA: Yes.

BR: *Why did you keep it a secret?*

BA: *I didn't feel safe to come out. The reaction I got from my family after the attack made me feel like being gay was something I needed to be ashamed of. I mean, I knew it wasn't, but I didn't want to disappoint anyone else.*

BR: *And the pictures?*

BA: *Yeah. That was, well. I think everyone can agree that I was epically stupid. But making that decision, going to that club, there was so much else going on. At the beginning of September I broke up with my boyfriend. We'd been together 9 months, and I was feeling pressure.*

BR: *Because of the campaign?*

BA: *Yes and no. Because we were keeping our relationship a secret, and there was so much at stake if it got out. Not just because I was closeted, but because of things happening in his life, too. At the time, it seemed like the kindest thing to do for both of us, even though it hurt like crazy.*

It still hurts like crazy. I know I made a mistake, breaking up with him. Going to that club, being in a position to have those pictures taken.

And I can't tell you how badly I feel, lying about it. But I want people to understand that I never lied because I was ashamed. I lied to protect the people who matter to me. For me, coming out isn't just about me because my decision affects my mother, affects her campaign, affects the way the people out there see me and my family.

BR: Why did you decide to come out now?

BA: *I'm taking this English class on passing in literature and film. I realized that by denying who I am, I'm effectively passing, and that gives my secrets power over me. I'm just tired of being afraid, tired of hiding, trying to be someone I'm not.*

I was also waiting until my mother and I had a chance to talk about it. She told me a while ago that I'm my own man, I can make my own decisions, but in this case I needed her to know what I was doing because this decision affects her as well.

BR: What was your mother's response?

BA: *I called her last night, to tell her I was doing this. She told me she loves me, that I'm so brave, and that she's proud of me.*

BR: That seems quite different from what you said her reaction was after you were attacked.

BA: *It is. My mom has come a long way in the past year. I don't know if it matters, but I'm proud of her, too.*

BR: Do you worry that this will be seen as a political move?

BA: *A little bit. But it's really not.*

I know there are people who are going to read this and think I'm doing this to get attention, or to influence my mother's campaign one way or another. I know lots of people aren't going to believe me when I say that I'm honestly only doing this for myself, but it's true.

Back in October, Kurt did an interview with Rachel Maddow.

BR: I saw it.

BA: Yeah. So, in that interview he talked about how there are a lot of factors that go into deciding if, or even **when**, to come out. This isn't a decision I made lightly. This is something I've been working toward for over a year, but it's taken me this long to finally gather the last bit of courage I needed.

BR: What tipped the scales for you?

BA: It was a lot of things. Kurt's interview, the support of some friends. Finding the courage to chase my dream.

The night before I contacted you, I finished a paper for that English class and I sent off my application to my first choice college. I just decided that it was time to start living my own life for me. I know it's not going to be easy. There's a lot I don't know about how to do that, but I won't learn unless I try, right?

BR: Right. So you're applying to college. Where do you want to go, and what are you planning on studying?

BA: I don't want to talk about where I'm applying, though I'm sure anyone in my classes could tell you if they wanted to. I'm hoping to major in either early childhood or elementary education.

BR: Is there anything else you want to tell anyone?

BA: I want to thank Tara, Callie, and Trina for being my support system through everything; my mom for being patient and loving me; Daniel, for being the first person I told; and Kurt, for being my friend and protecting me, and for still being there for me despite all my stupidity.

Elaine read the interview over a cup of tea and a muffin in the hotel coffee shop in Canton.

When she finished, she dabbed at her eyes with one of the napkins. "Oh, Blaine," she whispered . "You don't need to be proud of me."

Kurt sat cross-legged on his bed in the hotel in Pittsburgh and read the interview aloud to his dad and Dev.

"Your boy really stepped up," Dev said.

"He hasn't stopped loving you, you know," his dad told him.

"I know," Kurt said. "I just don't know what I'm supposed to do now."

"Let him know you heard him, and then you wait." His dad patted his knee and smiled. "I don't think you'll be waiting long."

Trina read the interview once she'd fed the boys breakfast and gotten them settled in front of some *Bob the Builder* on the room's obscenely large flat screen. Matt was racing around trying to get ready for his rally.

"You sure you can't come with?" he asked. "The hotel has that day care, I'm sure the boys would be happy."

Trina shook her head. "I told you I wasn't going to abandon them for this campaign. I promised the boys we'd take the T to the Science Museum." She really just wanted Matt to leave so she could finish reading in peace.

"We're still on for dinner, right?"

"Yeah," Trina nodded, and kept on reading. She'd just finished when Matt leaned over to kiss her goodbye. He drew away and frowned at her.

"You okay?" he asked. "You're crying."

"I'm fine," she reassured him. "It's just- god, Matt, I hope that someday our boys are as strong and brave as Blaine."

In Jackson, Mississippi, 15 year old Natalie Jansen followed a link off her tumblr dash and read the article with her bedroom door closed and locked. She printed the article off when she finished, folded the paper carefully and set it into the little locked box she kept in the top corner of her closet with her old board games and a box of mangled Barbie dolls.

She wasn't ready, not yet, but every time someone else *was* ready it gave her courage, too.

In Berkeley, California, Daniel Morey grabbed the *Sunday Times* on a whim when he stopped for a coffee between his dorm and his job at the library. He didn't get to page through it until he took his lunch break, leaving Cora to deal with the irate engineering student whose classmates were apparently hogging the reserve materials he needed to complete his assignment.

He munched on his granola bar and flipped past the first section. He really just wanted the book reviews, but he stopped and gasped when a picture of Blaine Anderson stared up at him from the first page of the Politics section.

He'd spent years trying not to think about Blaine, or about the way he'd put his life on the line to protect Daniel that night when they were still practically babies. He'd spent two years in therapy talking about the attack, about the guilt he felt for putting Blaine in that position of needing to protect him, about the guilt that dogged him every day for not being able to change who he was.

He'd wondered, often, whether Blaine remembered him, if Blaine ever thought about him or wondered where he was and what he was doing.

He took a deep breath and opened the paper.

Cora found him there, staring at the end of the interview and dripping tears all over the newsprint well past the time he was due back from his break.

She asked him what was wrong, and even though it felt strange, Daniel smiled. "He remembered," was all he could say.

Monday, November 5th 2012

Transcript of NBC Nightly News

Brian Williams: *I'm here with NBC political director Chuck Todd, who's going to talk about this last set of polling data. Chuck, on Friday the polls showed the race as a dead heat. Is that still the case?*

Chuck Todd: *Yes, Brian. I was anxious to see what, if any, repercussions the Anderson campaign was going to face from the tell-all interview Blaine Anderson gave to the New York Times, but at least in our polling the interview hasn't hurt Elaine Anderson at all.*

Brian Williams: *So what does the map look like tonight?*

Chuck Todd: *Honestly, no different than it did on Friday. There are still multiple paths to 270 for each candidate. If Florida, Pennsylvania and Virginia get called early, they'll probably go to Burt Hummel, in which case it will be a very good night for him. If they remain too close to call well into the night, that might mean good things for Elaine Anderson. Polls close in Colorado at 9 pm Eastern, so if those three East Coast swing states haven't been called by then, we'll have all eyes on the Rocky Mountains.*

Brian Williams: *Is there still a chance that the electoral college could split and give us a tie?*

Chuck Todd: *It's possible, but that would mean a lot of unusual results tomorrow night, and I just don't see that happening.*

Brian Williams: *What can we expect from the campaigns tomorrow?*

Chuck Todd: *The Hummel camp is headed back to Ohio tonight after a day spent in Colorado and New Mexico. It's expected that they'll have a family day before being joined by Vice Presidential candidate Rita Montero and her family for a gathering in Columbus tomorrow night. The Andersons, including their son Blaine, are at home in Kennebunk, Maine tonight. Matt and Trina Halstead and their boys will meet the Andersons for their party in Portland.*

Brian Williams: *Thanks, Chuck. Chuck will be back with us tomorrow night beginning at 6 pm Eastern. We'll be on the air all night tomorrow night, and we look forward to seeing you then.*

Tuesday, November 6th 2012

Kurt slept in on Election morning. He and his dad hadn't gotten home until after 1 am, and god, his bed felt so good he *never* wanted to get out of it.

The house was quiet when he woke. Finn had classes at OSU all day, and was going to meet them at the Marriott late in the afternoon. Carole was working. She'd had several coworkers offer to trade shifts with her, but she'd told Kurt that she wanted to stay busy as a distraction.

His dad was at the kitchen table with a plate of toast and a cup of coffee when Kurt finally stumbled downstairs a little before 11 am. He snagged a mug out of the cabinet and poured his own coffee before settling into the chair across from his dad.

"Toast?" His dad pushed the plate over to him, and Kurt took a piece and nibbled on the edges.

"Thanks." The house felt oddly unfamiliar, and that in itself made Kurt uncomfortable. They'd been on the road so long, he'd forgotten what it felt like to have roots anywhere. "It's so weird, being here."

"I know," his dad nodded. "This morning I had to ask Carole which drawer the spoons were in. I felt so silly."

"So it's not strange that this doesn't feel like home anymore?"

His dad downed the last of his coffee and shook his head. "I dunno, Kurt. I don't think I'm one to talk. I have no idea what we're even supposed to *do* today. I haven't had a day that wasn't planned down to what I ate and when in months. Do you think things will ever be normal again?"

"What's normal?" Kurt asked around a mouthful of toast, and his dad laughed.

"Good point. I do know one thing we need to do today. It's your first election, kiddo, and I need to vote too. How 'bout we go do that and then I'll take you to lunch?"

Kurt nodded. "As long as I don't have to dress up."

"Hell, I'm wearing my rattiest flannel shirt and my work boots. You could wear a paper bag and I think it would be fine today."

He didn't wear a paper bag, just the only clean pair of jeans he had and one of Finn's too-large McKinley Football hoodies. His dad wanted to drive, but the agents refused , so they rode the three blocks to the volunteer fire station that his dad had been voting at since *his* first election. Kurt was a little embarrassed, getting out of the car and having to wait while the agents cleared the polling place. It felt like such a production, too much of a show for Lima.

Kurt had always felt different there, but at least he'd known he was still a part of the town. Now he didn't feel like part of anything, he just felt sort of lost.

When Carole got home from work, they got back into the car and caravanned to Columbus. Dev was already there, had spent the previous night at the hotel and was working with the volunteers to get ready for the party. They'd booked the ballroom, and John Mellencamp was going to perform. Win or lose, Kurt knew it was going to be a hell of a party.

He really just hoped they would win.

Blaine was unexpectedly on edge all day long. He knew, rationally, that there wasn't going to be any decent election coverage until early evening, but he couldn't help flipping between CNN and MSNBC all day long. His father passed through the living room once around noon, frowned at Andrea Mitchell on MSNBC, and retreated into his office with a stack of long-neglected medical journals. His mother joined him for half an hour while she ate her lunch.

"I hope my interview doesn't hurt you," Blaine told her once her sandwich was reduced to crumbs and he'd eaten half her chips.

"It doesn't matter," she said.

"Of course it does!" Blaine argued.

"No," she said with a shake of her head. "It really doesn't. What matters is that you're healthy and learning how to be happy, and that you and I are starting to know each other again. If I win the election, fine. If I don't, I've already won because I have you back."

Blaine rested his head against the back of the couch. "He hasn't called or emailed," he said, giving voice to the fear that had plagued him since Sunday. "I thought I'd hear from him. Maybe he doesn't believe that I'm sorry. Maybe he doesn't..." he trailed off.

"Maybe he doesn't love you?" his mother asked.

"Yeah. Maybe he doesn't love me."

"You love him, right?"

"Yeah," Blaine said softly. "I do."

"Have you wondered if he's waiting for you to go to *him*? You called most of the shots in the relationship. He played it your way, so maybe he wants you to be ready."

"What if I'm ready and he's changed his mind?" Because Blaine knew he'd gotten so much stronger, but he really didn't think he'd be able to handle that rejection.

"That's a chance you have to take if you really do love him."

"So what do I do now?"

His mother smiled at him, a little sparkle in his eye. "The campaign isn't over yet. There's still a plane."

Two hours from Portland to Columbus, and Blaine was on the edge of panic for every minute.

He *hated* his mother for convincing him it was a good idea.

He hated Trina for siding with his mother.

He hated himself, honestly, for being so scared and unsure that he'd let Kurt go in the first place.

"I can't do this," he mumbled to Max as the plane began to descend, the lights of Columbus glittering in the early darkness.

"Of course you can," Max encouraged him. "You'll be fine, trust me."

Blaine just felt like he was going to be sick, and he was pretty sure it *wasn't* from motion sickness.

Kurt sat on the floor of their suite next to Rita Montero's 12 year old daughter Debbie and carefully painted her nails red, white, and blue while they waited for something more exciting than the predictable returns out of the Northeast. MSNBC was running the same graphics over again, and Kurt sort of wanted to close his eyes until more polls closed at the top of the hour, but he was interrupted by Dev tapping his shoulder.

Kurt tightened the lid of the blue polish and turned to look at Dev. "You're interrupting manicure time," he teased.

"We ordered pizza, do you think you can go down to the lobby and get it?"

Kurt didn't understand. "Why do we need pizza? There's so much food already."

Dev shrugged. "Talk to your brother. Please just go get it?"

Kurt sighed and rose to his feet. He smiled at Debbie. "When I come back I'll put a clear coat of the glitter polish on top, okay?"

Debbie beamed up at him. "Thanks, Kurt," she said.

It took almost 10 minutes to get down to the lobby, once Ty and one of Finn's agents cleared the elevator and then made sure there was nobody suspicious waiting in the lobby. Kurt looked around and didn't see a pizza guy. The only people down there were the two desk clerks, a businessman talking loudly into his phone, and a teenage boy staring at one of the terrible paintings on the wall. He had curly black hair, a backpack over one shoulder, and his hands stuffed into the pocket of a –

Oh.

Oh.

Kurt knew that hoodie.

Kurt knew that hoodie and those curls and that *boy*.

He didn't even realize he was moving until he was there, next to Blaine.

"Hey," he said softly.

"Hey." Blaine said back, turning to look at Kurt. Kurt's heart almost broke. Blaine looked tired and pale, and his eyes were bloodshot.

"Don't take this wrong," Kurt said lightly, "but you look like shit."

"So do you," Blaine said.

"I know." Kurt paused. He didn't know what to do or say, and he hadn't even really hoped too hard that something like this might happen. He'd worried that his distance and silence would keep Blaine away.

"You came," he said finally.

Blaine smirked at him. "My mother made me, I think she was tired of me moping around."

"I'm sorry I didn't call, after your interview. I didn't know what to say, and I wanted you to be ready. I couldn't- I couldn't give you my heart again, not until *you* were sure."

"I'm sure," Blaine said, low and soft. "I'm sure and I'm ready and I'm not ashamed of you. I've never been ashamed of *you*," he insisted. "I was just scared, and I didn't want everything to explode around us."

Kurt reached out and took Blaine's hand. It was cold, and it trembled in his own. "Come up with me, watch the returns. It's going to get exciting soon."

"I'd love that," Blaine said, and he followed Kurt into the elevator. "I love *you*," he added once the doors closed.

Kurt closed his eyes, pretended that there weren't two agents in the elevator with them. He leaned in and kissed Blaine soft and so so sweet. He felt like something that had been adrift inside of him settled, and he sighed with the relief of it. He pulled away, rested his forehead on Blaine's shoulder. "I love you, too."

Epilogue

January 21-22, 2013

Kurt smoothed the lapels of his tuxedo jacket and gave his bowtie one last tug. He twirled, and grinned at the way the wide pleats of his kilt flared around his knees. "You don't think it's too much, do you?"

Blaine shook his head. "I think you look amazing. I hope you warned Carole, though. I bet more people are going to be talking about your outfit than they are her dress."

Kurt shook his head. "Her dress is *incredible*. Have you seen it? All those beads, and the way the silk drapes?"

"She was still getting ready when Ty brought me through. How many of these things do we have to go to, anyway?"

"Dad and Carole have to go to all of them. We're going to the Ohio ball, the Commander-in-Chief's ball, and the Triangle Ball." Kurt was *really* looking forward to the Triangle Ball. "Dad even dropped my curfew for the night, so we can stay out dancing as late as we want." He bounced on his toes a little, turned to his nightstand and retrieved two skinny flutes of sparkling cider, and handed one to Blaine.

"What's the special occasion?" Blaine eyed him warily.

"Besides the fact that my dad was inaugurated today? Well. A little birdie told me that someone got accepted to UVA, and I got some good news myself on Friday."

"Oh!" Blaine exclaimed. "You got into American?"

Kurt grinned and nodded. "I did." He held his glass up for a toast. "To new beginnings."

"New beginnings," Blaine repeated. "To love."

"Love," Kurt echoed. He downed his cider in three gulps, and then tugged Blaine against him for a deep kiss.

They were interrupted by Kurt's dad coughing in the doorway. "Um, boys?"

Kurt broke away and glowered at his father. "Dad."

"You guys ready? We've got a tight schedule."

Kurt held Blaine's gaze, waited for his nod and his smile. "Mr. Anderson," he said, offering Blaine his elbow. "Our limo awaits."

Kurt and Blaine followed his dad and Carole through the residence and out to the waiting car. The city was alive and energized, and Kurt could feel it in every heartbeat.

Everything felt rich and new, and Kurt never wanted to lose the feeling of wonder he had at that moment, his boyfriend and family with him and Washington lit up and welcoming.

He was finally home.

"Today we reaffirm that the battles we've fought these last four years were not in vain. Today we stand together in the shadow of history and declare that we did not give up when times were dark. We did not abandon our brothers and sisters when they were far from home. We did not turn our backs on our neighbors when they needed lifting up, and we did not rest until all of our children were viewed as equal citizens worthy of safe schools and communities, and the ability to build their own brilliant lives with whomever they love."

-Burt Hummel, 2nd Inaugural Address, January 20, 2017