

Shining Upon the Waves

**by
out_there**

AU || Explicit

Not even Kurt Hummel can spin a three-month stint as a piano player on a cruise ship as a logical next step to fame and success.

out-there.dreamwidth.org/ || out-there.dreamwidth.org/1227687.html

PDF by klaineficspdfs.tumblr.com || klaineficspdfs.livejournal.com

Contents

Part One	- 3 -
Part Two	- 81 -

Part One

It's not Broadway, Kurt knows. It's not Off-Broadway. He can't, in all honesty, even say it's virtually Off-Off-Broadway because a show there still has the potential to be a stepping stone – it could be seen by someone who matters, could be that missing step between high school dreams and achieving stardom on the musical stage. Not even Kurt Hummel can spin a three-month stint as a piano player on a cruise ship as a logical step to fame and success.

"It's a paying gig, and it'll be good experience for me. There's free travel. I don't have to share the limelight with anyone," he tells his dad, twirling the phone cord between his fingers. If his father were here, he'd know the fidgeting for what it is: a sign that Kurt's treating the truth like cheap Lycra, stretching it to its limits. That nervous tell got Kurt grounded more than once. (Four times, to be precise. He was a good teenager but impetuous and prone to over-dramatics.) "Just me, a piano and a crowd of adoring passengers."

"If you say so, kid." His dad sounds amused but there's an edge of wariness. Even half a country away, his dad still has an unfailing knack of knowing when Kurt's being less than honest.

"It's not a dream job," Kurt admits. He's already been warned. He doesn't get to choose the music, he doesn't get to choose the venue and he's pretty sure most of his audience will pay more attention to their drinks than his performance. He'll be working a minimum of ten hours a day, through storms and calm seas. There's a possibility that uniforms may even be enforced. "However, it's not hospitality or retail and those are the alternatives if I want to make next month's rent."

"If money's tight, just say the word. You can pay us back when you make it big."

His dad's been making the same offer since Kurt came to New York. When he was at NYADA, working with Rachel in a café they both considered acting experience (after late nights and endless rehearsals, it took talent and determination to act as if they liked the customers), he took the money gratefully. When he graduated, he promised himself that if he stayed in New York to pursue a stage career, he was going to make it on his own.

"Thanks, but it's not necessary yet. I've already visited my favourite designer stores to exchange tearful farewells with the sales staff. It would be anticlimactic to change my mind now."

Opportunity can come from the strangest of places, and this one had come from Santana Lopez. He'd had a call at three in the morning and was still half asleep when he picked up and heard a vaguely familiar voice say, "Hey, Porcelain, I can't believe Finn has the same cell number from high school. You still play piano like the delicate princess you are, right?"

"...Santana?"

"Really? Have you already blocked those years of glee club from your memory? Or should I be worried about that WeHo club scene of yours?"

"WeHo is LA, Santana. West Hollywood." Sitting up, Kurt pulled his phone away from his ear to check the time. "And if it wasn't the middle of the night, I would have recognized your voice sooner. Why are you calling?"

"Musical emergency. Our replacement piano player broke his wrist. In five days, we're going to have a bar, a piano and no piano man to provide dull and ignorable background music. The musical director asked if anyone knew anyone and Brittany said Lord Tubbington liked the way you played Chopsticks. It's a three-month contract, if you still play piano."

Kurt rolled his eyes. "Of course I do, but you haven't asked if I'm available. I could have a part in an exciting new production."

"Please. Like I'd have paid for a second call if Finn hadn't blabbed that you haven't sung a solo on stage all year." Santana laughed and Kurt pretended it wasn't at his expense. "So, are you in?"

The first time he sees the cruise ship, Kurt stops pulling his wheeled suitcase and stares. The sky is a sharp cobalt and the sea is a murky grey-green, and out of it, rising on defined, gently curving lines is a goliath of white and royal blue. The thing is massive. He can count five or six rows of windows peeking out of one

side, and above that, there are balconies and decks with people walking or standing at the railing. It's huge.

He can't help thinking of the first shot of the boat in *Titanic*, but unfortunately there are no fabulous sun hats anywhere around him. No vintage cars, either.

He pulls his luggage closer, and the dramatic, elegant lines become less impressive up close. Possibly because he can see the slightly damaged white paint at the bottom of the ship, proof it's been repainted without the surface being prepared first. (The voice inside his head that points it out sounds a lot like his dad.) There's a small amount of rust and seaweed on the huge chains that disappear into the water and the wood of the gangplank (do they have those on cruise ships or is that only in pirate films? Kurt doesn't know) is faded with use.

He follows the signs to the staff entrance and the pale guy in the navy and fluorescent yellow security jacket smirks at his luggage. "Entertainment staff?"

Kurt glances down at his one-of-a-kind, bedazzled, appliquéd, originally bought at K-Mart suitcase. In his dreams, it would be Louis Vuitton luggage with a Chanel overnight bag but he can't justify spending half a year's rent and utilities bills on something likely to be thrown around by airport handlers. Someday, when he has a Tony on his shelf and "featuring Kurt Hummel" on an original cast recording, he will have every beautiful thing he's dreamed about. Right now, he has his Bedazzler, his sense of style and an ability to sacrifice comfort and leisure hours for fashion. He makes do.

"New piano player," he says and shows his offer letter and passport. He takes one deep breath before stepping onto the gangplank (the runway? He'll have to ask someone what that's called) but he doesn't allow himself any other dramatics.

He gets a room to himself. It makes his dorm room from college look spacious. It makes his tiny, two-room apartment in Brooklyn look palatial. It's got a single bed, a bedside table, a closet and not much else. There's no TV, there's no desk and there's no window. The plain white walls make him think of a mental institution from some teen horror film. (He's not sure which one. He's not a horror fan, and the ones he has seen were mostly due to dubious celebrity crushes.)

He's so glad he packed sticky tack and removable hooks. His first shopping priority, whenever and wherever the opportunity arrives, will be to find some way to translate this space into something he could call home.

He's still staring in mute revulsion when there's a knock at his door.

He opens it and smiles. Santana looks the same as she did in high school. She's wearing a sleeveless summer dress so red and so short it might as well be a Cheerio uniform, and the same red lipstick and false lashes (surely those must be false). It's not that she looks like a teenager; it's that she spent most of high school looking like a sultry twenty-something who could have her wicked way with any straight guy within a mile radius.

He says as much and she laughs. "When you've got it, you've got it, Hummel. Now come on, you might as well meet everyone worth knowing."

He navigates the hallways, trying to get used to the floor moving beneath him. It's like being drunk, without the fun that's supposed to come first. When the waves swell up, he has to grab for the handrails. Conveniently, there's always something to hold on to. Beside him, Santana sashays easily, rolling her hips with the movement.

According to Santana, a cruise is essentially high school on the high seas. The performers are the Cheerios ("Popular, fun and awesome."), the naval crew are the geeks ("The ones who understood math and all that calculus crap.") and the entertainment officers are the yearbook kids ("The ones who want everyone to smile and pep up, even at five in the morning. I'm telling you, they're freaks.").

"What about the rest of high school?" Kurt asks. They've passed waiters and housekeeping staff, cooks and maintenance crew, but Santana hasn't mentioned them.

"They're the rest of the high school freaks. The unimportant ones you don't pay attention to."

She hasn't asked about Rachel or Finn, or anyone else from high school. It's so unlike the gossipy, interfering Santana he used to know. "So I guess you've heard about Rachel?" Kurt offers. Rachel's the easiest one to talk about because she's the only one who's made it. (The only one so far, he has to correct

himself.) She'd gone from student production to major role on Off-Broadway to minor role on Broadway, and on to solos Kurt occasionally wants to rip from her cold, dead hands. Most of the time, he's not jealous of her. He's her friend and he's happy for her, even if he sometimes has to grit his teeth and force the smile.

Santana does a precision 180-degree turn, spinning on one foot as neatly as if Coach Sylvester were insulting her choreography from the bleachers. "This is your first cruise, so let me break it down for you. Three months is a long time and nothing gossip-worthy ever happens on this ship. If you have juicy hometown gossip, you don't blurt it all out on the first night. This stuff needs to be savoured, comprende?"

Everyone worth knowing turns out to be the dancing troupe. There are ten of them, four guys and six girls, and Kurt's amazed to see a few friendly faces in the crowd. "Mike? Brittany?"

Mike grins, giving a complicated, formal bow while Brittany nods a little vacantly and says, "It's like dancing on a rocking chair."

"It's a steady job and I get to dance every day," Mike says, which makes a little bit more sense. "I'm the production manager—"

"Which just means he can boss the rest of us around when we skip practice," Santana interrupts. "It's hardly a position of great responsibility."

Mike shrugs, as easy-going as ever. "After my first cruise, I let Brittany and Santana know about the next auditions and we fluked it into the same group. Cool, huh?"

Kurt nods. "It feels like a glee club reunion tour."

"Speaking of glee club, do you know--"

"Uh-uh!" Santana waves a cautionary finger in Mike's face. "You know the rule. No talking about home until day three of each cruise."

"I'm not allowed to tell Lord Tubbington stories until day fifteen of each cruise," Brittany says sadly. Kurt wonders if that cat is still alive, and if so, how. Brittany's lovely but she's not... well. There are a lot of things she's not. "I want a croissant," she says brightly, looping a hand around Santana's arm and walking off with her.

That probably explains why Santana's here.

"I thought these were two-week cruises," Kurt wonders out loud.

Mike raises both eyebrows. "They are. I'm not sure if Brittany's realized it yet."

Mike introduces Kurt to the other dancers but they blur together in Kurt's mind. Of the four girls, there are two brunettes and two blondes, and he's pretty sure they're Canadian, Australian, German and Dominican. Other than Kate (or was it Cathy?), he can't remember their names. Two of the guys are six foot, with red-brown hair and they're both Matthew. One's Irish and one's Scottish, but Kurt can't quite hear the difference in the accents.

The one guy who does stand out is memorable for all the wrong reasons. He's tall, with medium brown hair so full of product that Kurt feels sorry for his shampoo, and he looks Kurt up and down in a way that makes Kurt yearn for a shower. "Sebastian," he says, and shakes Kurt's hand for longer than necessary.

Kurt remembers Sebastian's name and face because he's met him before. Not this particular guy, but most gay bars in Manhattan seem to have at least a dozen men like Sebastian. Sleazy and flirtatious, the kind of guy who pops the collar of his polo shirt and talks about the difficult choice between spending summers on Long Island or Fire Island. He's the kind of guy who thinks spending ridiculous amounts of money on overpriced drinks and following some twink to the backroom is a fantastic way to spend a Saturday night, and who believes a long-term relationship is one where he waited the entire night to get into some guy's pants.

Not that Kurt knows from extensive personal experience, but he's tried the bars a few times and has always been terribly disappointed by all the Sebastians there. He'd grown up in a Midwestern small town and believed New York City would be a haven of sophistication and class, a place where he'd find other boys just like him. What he found was demanding divas in his performances classes and wannabe

fashionistas in his fashion classes, all far too much like him to want to date. The nightclubs that promised to be so glamorous had been Scandals with better décor and higher prices. His imagined nightlife in Manhattan had been *Sex and the City* fabulous, not *Queer as Folk* desperation.

He backs away from Sebastian's ridiculously flirty overtures as gracefully as he can, but Sebastian hardly seems fazed. "After a few weeks on this cruise ship and the lack of offers, you might change your mind."

Kurt sincerely doubts that.

Mike promises to introduce Kurt to the singers later ("Blaine's a good guy," he says, "but Nadja has Rachel's ego with half the talent.") and leads them down the starkly lit staff-only corridors to a small office. The room itself is unimpressive. There are two large corkboards covering the top half of two walls, bits of white paper pinned everywhere. Behind a desk, a dark-haired guy hunches over a laptop, clicking through something on the screen. He's mid-thirties with the kind of tan Kurt usually associates with tanning-bed addictions or *Jersey Shore* reruns.

"Hey, Mitch," Mike says, rapping on the door. "This is Kurt Hummel. New piano player."

Mitch looks up and his hands stop moving over the keyboard. He seems very serious, and he's wearing a navy polo shirt. Kurt has very definite opinions on grown men who consider polo shirts and khakis professional attire, but he stops himself from judging when he notices the cruise line logo on the pocket. It must be the dreaded uniform.

Finally, Mitch speaks. "Can you sing? At a professional level, I mean."

"Absolutely," Kurt says.

"In that case, let's lay down the rules."

The performance rules are fairly simple. He starts playing in the afternoon and plays through to midnight or early morning, depending on the schedule. There are six different bars on board: three have pianos. For

each bar and timeslot, there's preselected sheet music. The company's paid for the copyright usage for those songs – and only those songs – so Kurt can choose the order but he's only allowed to play those. There's enough of a selection that he won't have to play the same song night after night.

He doesn't have to wear the dreaded polo shirt, but he's given clear instructions of 'black suit, white shirt' for all performances. For the first night, Kurt follows both the letter and the spirit of those instructions and wears a sharp white linen shirt teamed with a black Tom Ford suit (found in a lucky second-hand shopping spree and now three seasons out of style, but a simple single-breasted jacket is a classic for a reason). He has asymmetrical jackets, ruched shirts and even a black kilt that he might try wearing later in the contract.

Mike offers to show him the staff cafeteria (he really is back in high school) but Kurt's too nervous to eat. He never missed a piano lesson, but it's been a while since he sat down and played for an audience. He can't remember ever having to sight-read music while playing in front of complete strangers but he doesn't have time to rehearse.

His first performance is a little rusty. He's playing – the first session of the night – at Colts, a tiny bar tucked around the corner on one of the mid-ship entertainment decks. The bar itself is quiet and small, barely two dozen comfortable-looking armchairs and coffee tables. There are eight people sitting there, and half of those are reading novels or e-readers. Kurt's hesitant playing gets a curious glance and a nod or two, but he's otherwise ignored.

Kurt Hummel is not used to being ignored.

Taking a calming breath, he uses the pause between songs to flick through the selection. He's been told to keep the music in this bar to "instrumental, background music" but if he's only playing for himself, he might as well find the songs he enjoys.

He gets a half-hour break between sessions. Surprisingly, it's Santana who comes and helps him find the next bar. It's two floors up, curving around the large glass atrium that spans four decks (named, imaginatively enough, the Atrium Bar). Like everywhere else designed for passengers, the carpets are richly hued in greens and reds, the walls are layered in marble and polished wood, and there's enough gilt along the banisters, ceilings and window edges to make Liberace jealous. There are fairy lights twisted

around the atrium levels and flickering LED lights in the ceiling, and glass elevators gliding slowly up and down.

As much as Kurt would like to pretend to be unimpressed by the gaudy imitation of class, he's a little charmed. The interior design is trying too hard to be luxurious and tasteful to succeed, but it's still charming in its superficial way. He especially loves the white baby-grand piano under a small, bright spotlight.

"Pretty, isn't it?" Santana asks. "More bling than a rapper's neck, but pretty."

"It makes Kim Kardashian look tasteful," Kurt admits and he's a bit surprised when Santana beams at him. "What?"

"I've missed having someone bitchier than me around. Don't get me wrong," she adds with a shrug, "Nadja is purebred bitch and she knows how to shriek and huff, but when it comes to nasty one-liners it's like trading quips with Finn."

"I'm both flattered and offended on Finn's behalf."

"Your brother couldn't string an effective insult together if he had paint-by-numbers instructions. I speak the truth."

"You always have." Kurt doesn't add that telling the unvarnished truth was both Santana's best quality and her worst. "But I'm still honour-bound to defend him. He's family."

"I get that."

After two instrumental sessions, Kurt finishes the night at the Wheelbarrow. It's the biggest of the three bars, enclosed in dark wood and lots of burgundy velveteen, one of those Ye Olde English Pubs with fake stained glass on the walls and pictures of riders with hunting crops. As much as Kurt approves of jodhpurs (in moderation) and riding boots (in excess), the entire theme seems out of place on a boat.

The piano keeps to the theme of dark wood and shadowed corners. It makes the music a little more difficult to read, but the selection for this bar is familiar. It's not the extravagant Broadway pieces that Kurt loves, but there's a lot of Billy Joel, the Beatles, Elton John and Bruce Springsteen. He grew up singing these with his dad when they were on the radio in his garage; they've sung them in the car with Carole and Finn. The melodies are familiar and the notes come easily to his fingers. He knows most of the words by heart.

He's supposed to play until midnight – he may have to adjust his moisturizing routine; his beauty regimen isn't used to such late nights – and the time passes surprisingly quickly. He loses himself in the known songs, having fun singing *Piano Man* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Halfway through the chorus, he looks up and sees Mitch standing by the bar, nodding along.

Kurt sleep late the next morning and gets up at lunchtime. He showers in the communal bathroom and applies creams back at his room. By the time he makes it to the cafeteria, he has an hour before he's working again.

He can't believe he's eating in a cafeteria full of plastic chairs and cheap tables, bright red trays and bored-looking cooks filling the buffet counter. There are a lot of things he doesn't want to relive from high school, and the food is certainly one of them. Admittedly, it's not at the top of the list. The top places are reserved for homophobic bullying, polyester cheerleading uniforms and ineffectual authority figures who looked the other way until Karofsky shoved him so hard that Kurt fractured a wrist and the school board had to expel him. Not that Kurt Hummel is still holding a grudge about high school, but it's a towering understatement to say those weren't his best years.

Kurt piles a selection of salads and grilled fish onto his plate and looks around for somewhere to sit. He's intending a quick lunch followed by some review time for tonight's song selection, but Brittany and Santana spot him in line and wave him over to their table. They're both wearing t-shirts and leggings, but their faces are fresh and their skin is clean. They're probably on their way to a rehearsal.

"Having fun?" Brittany asks, popping a curly fry into her mouth. She chews and smiles at him, and Kurt bitterly remembers how much fried food and refined sugar she ate in high school without gaining a pound. It's unfair how some things never change.

“Actually, yes,” Kurt says, surprising himself. “So far.”

Brittany and Santana set out the rest of the rules for him. While he’s on the ship (and it’s a ship, not a boat, apparently), there are strict rules about how to act in front of passengers. Santana summarizes it as: “If you wouldn’t do it in front of your judgmental, gossiping abuela, you can’t do it in front of passengers.” This includes but is not limited to: no running, no pushing, no drinking, no swearing, no making out and especially no making out with passengers.

“You can use the pool but not during ‘peak passenger times,’” Santana says, with sarcastic quotes clawed into the air. “If you can see five passengers in the pool, you’re going to get the stink-eye from the bar staff.”

“If you don’t mind the cold, 4 a.m.’s a great time,” Brittany suggests and Kurt makes a mental note never to go swimming with her.

“Mostly, if you dress like a passenger and only order water at the bars, you won’t get in any trouble. If you need to drink, and eventually everyone does, there’s a staff rec room.” Standing, Santana stretches her shoulders back, arms behind her back and poking her cleavage out. Glancing around the room, Kurt catches four guys in line staring at her. This really is like high school. “We’ve got to go. If we’re ten minutes late for Nadja’s rehearsals, she’ll sulk for an hour about it.”

The ‘no making out with passengers’ rule is a bit of a shame in Kurt’s opinion. Admittedly, this opinion only makes itself known when he notices the cute guy sitting in the back of the Wheelbarrow, mouthing along the words of the song. He’s sitting mostly in shadow, but the tinted glass catches his cheeks and mouth in a stripe of red and a patch of blue. He really is cute, in a young Jesse Bradford kind of way.

Kurt’s had a slight crush on Jesse Bradford ever since his sophomore year in high school. It’s Coach Sylvester’s fault. Her enforced viewings of *Bring It On* used to be followed by speeches on why winning was more important than honesty and that midnight practices could and would be used if their pyramids didn’t improve. During his and Mercedes’ short stint on the Cheerios, he’d been forced to sit through that movie five separate times. That was five times of watching Jesse Bradford play a confident, musically

inclined outsider who won over the girl with sarcasm, flowers and writing a punk-rock song about her pompoms.

Kurt's sure he wasn't the only fifteen-year-old to harbour a harmless infatuation. It's a little silly to watch a guy in a bar because it reminds him of a teen crush, but he still does it.

True to her word, on the third day Santana, Brittany and Mike demand details of who's doing what. Kurt's woken up by their insistent knocking. He opens his door and glares at them. It's ten in the morning, but he was playing until half past two so it's unreasonably early. "I haven't even showered," Kurt growls at them.

Santana snaps her fingers in his face, saying, "Quit your yapping, get to the gossip," as she pushes past him.

It's a small room, so they end up sitting along Kurt's hastily made bed, all side by side. Kurt insists on applying moisturizer before the conversation really starts, so he's smoothing an oil-controlling serum onto his T-Zone (the horror of combination skin is the simultaneous threat of breakouts and dry patches) when Brittany says, "Do you think your bed gets lonely?"

"What?"

"Your bed," Brittany repeats slowly as if Kurt's being obtuse. "In our room, we have two beds and they're pushed together. They spend the whole day cuddling."

"That's... nice for them," Kurt manages, trying to focus on his face in the mirror (and not give into the temptation to look behind him). "I'm sure my bed's fine. If I can survive without being hugged daily, I'm sure my mattress can too."

"Oh," Brittany says, and there's a creak of movement from the bed and then there are arms coiled around Kurt's chest.

Kurt's first, natural instinct is to freeze, to push her away, to point out that if he'd wanted a hug he'd... be home with his dad. But he pushes it down, and tries to pat Brittany's hand instead. "Um, thanks."

"You're welcome," Brittany says, blonde ponytail sashaying as she bounds the few steps back to the bed and sits beside Santana. Kurt doesn't miss the way their pinkies intertwine.

They share tales of former glee-clubbers. Mike tells everyone about Tina: they've stayed in touch even though they broke up in college; despite dreams of singing, Tina's doing post-graduate study at MIT. Santana talks about Puck, who's moved to California to be closer to Beth and now has a full-time pool cleaning business. Quinn's living in Chicago, engaged and planning to marry next year.

Kurt talks about Mercedes, who stayed with Shane through Ohio State and getting drafted. She still talks about singing but Kurt doesn't mention that he thinks she's already given up on it. She and Shane are happy and successful, and if the success came from his ability to chase a ball rather than her ability to belt out amazing notes... well, he's still pleased for her. She's still his favourite window-shopping partner, even if these days she could afford most of it without blinking.

Kurt talks about Rachel and her rise to success. He manages to sound proud of one of his best friends, rather than jealous. It's an accomplishment.

He also talks about Finn, who's virtually running Hummel Tires and Lube these days. His dad's still a congressman (and who would have ever guessed that Burt Hummel would spend a decade in politics? It still amazes Kurt) and the garage is doing well.

No-one knows what happened to Matt, Lauren, Artie and all the others they once shared a stage with. Before they can get too philosophical about short memories or the fleeting nature of fame, Kurt kicks everyone out so he can shower and change. He might be spending hours performing for people who mostly ignore him, but that's no excuse not to look his best.

While there is a staff rec room, Kurt discovers that it's frequently empty. There are big, comfortable couches that could easily seat fifty people, and a clear space in the middle that would be a good dance floor, but the first time he walks in, there's no one there. Out of curiosity, he starts stopping by before and after his performances. A few times, a handful of housekeeping or wait staff sit on a couple of the couches,

sharing drinks and quick conversations in languages Kurt doesn't speak (anything other than English and French). More often, there's no one there at all.

There are close to two thousand passengers on the ship, and there are over four hundred staff members. It's a limited space and yet the staff living areas are a ghost town. After four days, the only people Kurt's talked to are Mike, Brittany and Santana and that's only when he sees them in the cafeteria. Well, he's also shared a lunch with Sebastian (nodding when someone says hello is not inviting them to share your table; clearly, no-one's ever explained that to Sebastian) but there's only so long Kurt can discuss gay clubs in NYC without wanting to tear his hair out.

That's why Kurt brings up the empty rec room as a topic of conversation. Sebastian shrugs and gives a smug, weaselly smile. (It's probably not intentionally smug. It's not Sebastian's fault that his face is smug and weasel-like.) "The kitchen shifts start at five. Waiters and Housekeeping start working at eight. They work fourteen hour days and spend their time off eating or sleeping," Sebastian says, grimacing like the subject is terribly dull.

"What about leaving the boat?" Kurt asks. The performers work afternoons and evenings, so he was promised that full days could be spent playing tourist ashore. Originally, Kurt was looking forward to seeing Caribbean islands and Canadian ports. After days of staying up past midnight and trying to sleep while the waves lift and drag him down, he suspects he'll sleep right through the landing days. He's got three months of the same few itineraries. There's plenty of time for him to see them when he's well rested.

"I think they get an hour off here and there." Sebastian rolls his eyes. He's exactly the kind of self-centred asshole who would be bored discussing the working conditions of what he's previously called 'maids at sea'. Even loneliness is no excuse for having to talk to this guy.

The cute Wheelbarrow guy comes back.

It's Kurt's seventh night, and it's still his first cruise. He can't believe he's got another 84 days of his contract to go. He's tired, the salt-air and constant air-conditioning are drying out his skin more than he'd expected, and he still hasn't managed to be awake and functioning early enough to want to step on land. The big attraction to a cruise ship is supposed to be the ability to travel and see the world, but instead,

Kurt's still getting used to the gravity swelling with each wave and the artificial lighting that makes the inside of the ship constantly feel like early evening.

He woke up on the wrong side of bed; today feels bleak and joyless. He's playing to people who are drinking and talking, ignoring him completely. He goes from bar to bar, and he's the live action equivalent of a jukebox.

Kurt's feeling underappreciated and disrespected, and he's considering closing the piano half an hour early. He's at the Wheelbarrow and the background chatter is loud enough that he doubts the piano music will even be missed. (The bar staff, on the other hand, will probably notice. And tell Mitch.) So Kurt doesn't leave his post but he does spend an extra few minutes rearranging the sheet music to find something he won't detest playing.

"Bad night?"

And there, resting a casual arm on the piano's edge, is the cute guy from earlier. Last time, his hair was a messy bunch of dark curls but tonight it's gelled down to a severe, old-fashioned side-part. There's no logical reason for Kurt to like him a little bit more for that, but he does.

"Long night," Kurt says with a smile. He doesn't want to sound like he's complaining. Not while he's talking to a boy with soft-looking lips and warm eyes beneath those dark brows. Kurt can't help but think how good he'd look in some sepia-toned screwball romantic comedy. Clearly, his tastes were formed by watching too many old movies at an impressionable age. "But I'm still here for another hour so the finish line's in sight."

The guy – who doesn't offer a name, Kurt notices – grins. It's friendly and boyishly charming, and Kurt's not sure if this is Fate trying to spark up his boring night or if Fate's having a good laugh at his expense. "If you're struggling, I could always help out."

"As much as I appreciate the offer, I don't think I could get someone else to do the job I'm technically being paid to do. It might show a lack of professional ethics."

"Well, I wouldn't want to ruin your reputation."

"I'm not that kind of boy," Kurt replies. He's never been much of a believer in subtlety and certainly not when it comes to flirting with hot guys. He's flirting with someone he's not allowed to kiss and probably will never see again, so he's going to enjoy it.

"Do you think a duet would show a weakness of character? I can't vouch for my piano playing, but I can definitely carry a tune."

"I feel like all I do is sleep and sing," Kurt complains to Santana when he sees her the next day. He could say that the best part of last night was talking to a boy he's not allowed to date and probably won't see once this cruise is over. But he knows what Santana's like. If he says that, she'll tease him about it mercilessly and maybe say something in front of the guy in question, and then Kurt would have to slink off somewhere to die of embarrassment.

Plus, it wouldn't be strictly true. The best part of the night was after singing *Don't Go Changing* when said cute guy (and Kurt still doesn't know his name) helped himself to Kurt's piano stool and spent the next half hour pressed knee to hip against Kurt, shoulders sometimes touching as Kurt played and they both sang. Then he'd stood up and thanked Kurt, saying it was fun, and Kurt had played the rest of the songs in a bit of a trance, flipping over sheet after sheet while thinking of that rather pleasant tenor. He'd accidentally played for an hour more than he had to.

"Are you really whining about that?" Santana keeps playing with a beaded bracelet on her left wrist. It's mismatched, made of sparkling glass beads in pea green, sky blue, mustard yellow and scarlet, and spells out "B+S4EVA". The one thing Kurt knows is fashion taste, and he's known Santana for years. Santana would never choose something so bright and clashing, but she keeps toying with it. She tends to smile as she runs her fingers over the little silver cubes of writing.

"I take it you and Brittany visited a bead store." He knows they both went ashore yesterday so it's hardly a leap of deduction.

Santana's gaze flicks up and for a moment, she's sharp and wary and the girl he remembers from senior year. In her dark eyes, there's a warning and a threat of violence, there's the girl who hit Finn and didn't hold anything back, who snarled at Karofsky until he backed down. Then she purses her lips and rolls her eyes to the ceiling. "Well, duh. I didn't just magically wish for glass beads and find them under my pillow."

“She’s why you’re here. She’s the reason, right?” Kurt asks, more gently than he ever would have as a teenager. He’d been too full of his own resentment to find any kindness for the supposedly popular kids. “I never pictured you dancing as a career.”

“I suppose you’d pictured me with two brats screaming around the kitchen, a third on the way, packing on the pounds to become the next big Latina mama?” The words are tossed out, carefree and fierce, and Santana stares him right in the eye as she says it. It’s a challenge so Kurt doesn’t look away. “My family did. My parents were pretty cool about it, but everyone else? Everyone wanted me to be married by now. It’s not like I had any desperate reason to stay in Lima.”

Kurt’s stuck chewing a mouthful of crispy salad, so he doesn’t get a chance to say anything.

“Brit loves dancing,” Santana continues, as determinedly protective of Brittany as ever. “Seasickness, long working hours and ugly-ass rooms aren’t worth complaining about when it makes Brit happy. It’s worth it, you know?”

Kurt can empathies with the statement, but wishes he knew. He wishes there were someone he felt like that about.

The next two nights Kurt plays at the Wheelbarrow, he keeps searching the crowd. His cute, unnamed duet partner doesn’t show.

Kurt’s a professional. He keeps smiling, keeps singing and if he gets a little wistful singing *Blackbird*, it’s not as if the audience is listening enough to notice. But between songs, he keeps watching the doorways and hoping.

On the third night, his vigil is rewarded. Kurt tries not to grin when he spots the familiar face walking into the room (grinning gives him crow’s-feet around his eyes and makes him look about twelve years old; as a rule, he tries to avoid the expression). He schools his smile into something friendly and welcoming, rather than obsessive or maniacal, and tries not to be disappointed when the guy gives him a nod and then sits at a dark table in the corner.

The one light in Kurt's tiring, dull routine should sit close enough for Kurt to check him out between songs. Kurt really doesn't think that's asking too much. It's not like he was going to break any of the rules or act inappropriately. At the most, it would have been some harmless flirting.

At the table, the object of his affection (well, attraction would be more accurate) sits staring into his clear glass. He's not even looking at Kurt. No, he has an arm propped up on the table and his stupidly good-looking face is half covered by the hand he's leaning on.

Kurt opens his mouth to sing and realizes he must have been focusing a little too much on the cute boy. He realizes because his fingers are picking out the notes to *Defying Gravity* and he's singing the memorized lines without even thinking about it. He's on the third line and he can't pretend he wasn't performing it, even if it's not on the approved songs list. He thinks back to NYADA, thinks of his singing tutor telling him, "The audience doesn't know it's a mistake until you stop and correct it," and decides he might as well make the best of it.

Closing his eyes, he sings. He finds the music by feel and lets the emotions come through the crisp, clear notes. His voice soars, wrapped around words that still make his eyes water, that still feel as real and tangible as they did the first time he heard them. He hits that last high F, pitch-perfect and strong.

When he opens his eyes, the conversation is a little quieter than usual, but most of the passengers are talking among themselves. Most of them are sitting at tables, paying attention to each other, or standing at the bar with their backs to him. He always loved performing to an audience and forcing them to pay attention and hear him, and this is nothing like that.

The only person looking at him – and possibly seeing Kurt Hummel, Talented Performer – is the cute guy. He's staring at Kurt now, eyes wide open and impressed, but reaching one person isn't the same as reaching an entire audience.

Kurt starts playing the next piece of sheet music in front of him, follows the words mindlessly and tries to ignore the crowd.

The next day, Kurt finds Mike. He's not in the cafeteria or the rec room, so Kurt tries the dressing rooms tucked beside the theatre's stage. He finds Mike standing centre stage, long legs arcing through the air in

balletic leaps. He spins, and his whole body twists and turns. He glides from pose to pose, limbs flowing like water around him.

Mike Chang in high school had been a straight-A student and a football jock. He barely spoke but he was friendly when he did. He never participated in the bullying that overshadowed Kurt's first few years of high school, but Kurt had still made judgment calls based on the letterman jacket. The first time he saw Mike dance on his own, the first time he saw how Mike could translate emotions into physical movements, he'd been shocked. He'd been amazed to find his own stereotype of jocks proved wrong.

These days, Kurt's not shocked at the quality of Mike's dancing. The power and beauty is breath-taking, and the sheer control of his talents is superb.

At the end of the routine, Mike finishes at the far left of the stage, head bowed and arms hanging straight at his sides. He holds the pose for a moment and then turns to smile at Kurt. "You could have said hi."

"Didn't want to interrupt," Kurt says as Mike wraps a towel around his shoulders and walks over to him. "I just had a quick question."

"Shoot."

"You know the approved song list for each session?" Kurt asks and waits until Mike nods. "On a scale of zero to Rachel style hissy fit, how bad would it be to go off-script and sing something else?"

"If it was a song approved for a different session, it's about a one. They like a certain mood for each bar but it's not a big deal."

"And if it wasn't approved?" Kurt asks as they walk to the changing room. "Say, a Broadway song sung accidentally?"

Mike's eyebrows shoot up, and he lays one heavy hand on Kurt's shoulder. "That would be a Coach Sylvester level meltdown. They pay about nine million a year to be able to use those songs."

That's... not great. "Any advice?"

"I wouldn't admit it unless you get caught. The bar staff probably won't know what's approved and it's unlikely any of the passengers would mention that one song to Mitch."

Kurt lets out a long sigh. It's worse than he hoped but with any luck, it won't be a problem.

"Having said that," Mike says, pausing as he picks up a gym bag and catching Kurt's eye in the well-lit mirrors, "try not to do it again. They'll terminate a contract for that stuff."

Knowing Rachel throughout his college years has had an impact on Kurt. He knows the importance of preparation for a winning performance. Kurt gets serious about it.

Instead of hovering around the cafeteria tables, talking to Santana or Mike, he takes his breakfast back to his room. He pulls out his highlighters and coloured pens, and starts making notes. He looks through the sheet music and writes himself lists of songs for each session and then colour-codes each session. He sorts the music into songs he knows and songs he needs to practice, then starts organizing set-lists for the next few days.

Kurt's here to earn rent money for the next few months. That won't happen if he keeps paying more attention to cute guys than the music he's being paid to play.

"I thought you'd fallen overboard," Santana says when she sees him at the cafeteria. "I would have sent out a search party but I didn't care that much."

Kurt knows she doesn't mean anything by it, but he still shoots her a dirty look. "I've been prepping my performances. I think it adds a certain something to play without shuffling through sheet music or forgetting what the next song should be."

"You don't have to give it that much effort. It's only background music."

"It's a paid performance," Kurt snipes back, but his heart (or maybe his spleen) isn't really in it. "I've decided to take pride in my work."

Santana eyes him and then very slowly grins. It reminds Kurt of a hyena. “You’ve spent a lot of years around Berry. It’s starting to show.”

Kurt could ask if Santana’s spent more than a few weeks away from Brittany since they were in middle school, but that would be petty. And would probably lead to Santana boasting that at least her constant exposure comes with sex, rather than diva-offs and questioning the other’s fashion choices.

“Look on the good side, Ladyface,” Santana says, using the old insult with affection. Moments like this make Kurt wonder why he agreed when Santana offered this job; right now, he could be exploring the fascinating hospitality industry and trading insults with people less likely to have razor blades hiding in their hair. “It’s the last night of this cruise and the passengers have to pay their accounts by eleven. Meaning they can’t buy alcohol after that. By midnight, the bars will be empty.”

Santana’s right. The crowd at the Wheelbarrow is the smallest Kurt’s seen and people start leaving after ten. By half past eleven, there are four bartenders and ten passengers left. By midnight, the only passenger left is his mystery cutie. By a lovely coincidence, he’s also the only person paying any attention to Kurt.

It makes Kurt brave enough to smile and crook a finger at him, inviting him to come closer. If the closest he gets to romance for this entire job is one cute guy, that’s fine. But he can’t tell Mercedes the story without even knowing the guy’s name.

The cute guy stands, raising one dramatic eyebrow as he does so. Kurt’s always adored a touch of drama.

Kurt tries to look at him objectively. He’s wearing a plain grey t-shirt that cuts rather flatteringly across well-muscled biceps. He’s wearing cargo shorts and tan leather sandals (following this season’s trend of wide straps and rough edging, Kurt notices), but the lighting is too dim for Kurt to make any judgments on his calves or feet. He’s still very conventionally handsome: dark hair curling across his forehead, strong nose and chin, very kissable lips.

Very kissable.

“When I get back to New York,” Kurt says, making sure he’s looking at the guy’s eyes, not at his mouth, “I’m going to tell my best friend about my sole devoted fan.”

His mystery man laughs. “I’m sure I’m not your only fan. Not with that range.”

Kurt shifts across the piano stool and pats the vacant spot beside him. He’s never going to see this guy again; he can be a little forward. “You noticed that?” Kurt asks, as the guy sits down beside him. Kurt glances down to where those biceps lead to strong, shapely forearms.

“Most guys can’t hit a high F.”

The guy knows his musical notes. He didn’t suggest Kurt sings like the wrong gender. Kurt isn’t a hopeless romantic and he doesn’t believe in love at first sight, but there’s a small part of him that would like to propose to this boy right now.

“What can I say? I’m talented.”

“Hence, the existence of admiring fans. I’m happily resigned to being one amongst many.”

“Amongst?” Kurt repeats, nudging his shoulder. “Who uses amongst in casual conversation?”

“Those of us with a quality education,” is the cheeky reply. “Or those of us who strive to be devoted and articulate fans.”

“Consider me impressed,” Kurt says softly. He’s leaning closer, they both are, and it’s not appropriate. This isn’t a blind date. “Still, it’s going to add so much to the story of my adoring fan if I can actually tell her your name.”

“Blaine,” he says and it seems familiar to Kurt. Before Kurt can place it, he sees Blaine’s eyes go wide and his mouth drop open in surprise. Then Blaine hides his face in both hands.

It’s over-dramatic but it’s an adorable reaction. After living with Rachel during college, melodrama tends to make Kurt fondly nostalgic.

“I didn’t introduce myself,” Blaine says, head still buried in his hands.

“No,” Kurt agrees. “If you had, I wouldn’t have asked your name.”

“I meant to. Mike said so much about you and how talented you are, so I thought I’d stop by and check you out. I mean, hear you sing,” Blaine corrects quickly, as if they hadn’t been flirting five minutes ago. Blaine drops his hands, and Kurt finally sees his sheepish expression. The few stray curls across his forehead are looking a little wild. “The next time I was in here, you looked like you were having a hard time and it’s not always easy getting used to life on board. But I didn’t introduce myself. I just sat down and started singing.”

It’s the mention of Mike that gives Kurt the clue he was missing. “You’re the lead male singer of the performance group.”

“It’s not really a lead role. There’s a male singer and a female singer, and ten dancers. I’m not leading a chorus,” Blaine demurs politely. “But I am one of the other entertainers working here, rather than some strange passenger who mistook your piano playing for open mike night.”

If this happened to someone else, Kurt would laugh right now. Anyone else and he’d absolutely be laughing. He’s not because he keeps thinking his cute guy isn’t a passenger. His cute guy isn’t leaving the ship tomorrow. His cute guy isn’t off-limits for dating and making out. Kurt wants to celebrate and break into a happy dance, but that’s the sort of reaction that tends to make cute guys back away very quickly.

So Kurt keeps a friendly expression plastered on his face and changes the subject. “If you’re one of the crew, how come I never see you in the cafeteria?”

“That’s a secret.”

“Then you have to tell me. After all, you know I sang something we don’t have copyright clearance for. It’s only fair I have equal leverage.”

“I don’t know if that’s fair,” Blaine says, leaning closer and dropping his voice to a whisper. “How do I know I can trust you?”

“Look at this face,” Kurt says, and Blaine does. His gaze travels from Kurt’s Kennedy-esque hairline down to Kurt’s mouth and... pauses. Licking his lips, Kurt adds, “This is a trustworthy face.”

There's a loud bang from the bar, something dropped, and they both turn to look at it. It breaks the mood.

Blaine stands up and leans against the piano. "There's not a lot of alone time here, so I have my own morning routine. I could show you, but you'll probably be disappointed."

"Try me."

Blaine promises to pick Kurt up at his door at half-past nine the next morning, so Kurt sets his alarm for eight. The shrieking noise interrupts his sleep far too early and it kills Kurt to drag himself out of bed, but he knows how to play up his best assets. He pulls together a casual, 'what, this, I've had it for years' outfit that looks like he doesn't put any effort into looking this good. He picks skinny jeans to lengthen his legs and white Doc Martens ankle-highs to add some contrast. He wears a wide-necked sea-green top that shows off his shoulders and his eyes, and is made of cotton so thin that it begs to be touched.

He spends twenty minutes arranging his hair into an artful 'just rolled out of bed' look, making sure to keep the product usage to a minimum to maintain the illusion.

When he sees Blaine, he's glad he put the effort in. Blaine's dressed in red capris with a burgundy and white plaid short-sleeved shirt, and bare feet in canvas loafers. He's carrying a large white canvas bag. It's a look that suggests summers in Italy in the late 1950s, fun holiday wear from a different time. Kurt heartily approves.

"First stop," Blaine says, "the kitchens on deck 14."

On the way, he explains that this is the passenger buffet but crew are allowed to eat there. "Usually, it's only the navigation officers in their white uniforms that eat here, but everyone's technically allowed. It's just easier to go through the kitchens and get food there."

Blaine knows the kitchen staff by name, and calls out friendly hellos as they pass pastry chefs and kitchen hands. He makes his way to a large steel fridge and pulls out a pile of wrapped sandwiches. "I did say this was a routine of mine," he says, and it's almost an apology.

“Go ahead. I’m intrigued.”

After that, Blaine leads him through maintenance stairwells, trudging up and up (and Kurt does enjoy the view of Blaine leading the way) until the stairs end at a door. There’s a warning label stuck to the handle, stating the possibility of high wind pressure outside, but Blaine ignores it and pushes through.

The fresh air hits Kurt with a shock. He’s spent more time indoors than outside, but that’s mostly because the decks crowded with passengers are a bit overwhelming. Now, he’s standing on a tiny edge by a maintenance door and he’s not sure where he is.

“The main pool’s that way,” Blaine says when Kurt asks. He points behind them. “That’s the screen for the outdoor films. They need access in case the speakers need to be fixed but almost no-one comes up here.”

Then he takes Kurt’s hand, and leads him around the other side, to a small clearing with two deck chairs already laid out. When Kurt sits down, he can’t see the decks and the ship below them. All he can see is the bright, endless sky above them and the sea embracing the horizon. “I feel like we’re the only people here.”

Blaine grins at him. “That’s why I come here. To relax and get away from everything. And to read in peace.”

“Is that what’s in the bag?”

“Blankets, in case the wind picks up,” Blaine says, holding out one of the standard red and blue plaid ship blankets. He pulls out another for himself and sits down on the other deck chair. “And you might laugh, but it’s a guilty pleasure.”

From that unassuming canvas bag, Blaine pulls out the latest editions of French and US Vogue. As much as Kurt prides himself on being calm, cool and collected, the squeal of joy gives him away.

After that, Kurt gets serious. Blaine is cute, and sings, and treats Vogue with the respect and adoration it deserves. Kurt needs to know everything he can about the guy.

He asks Mike, since Mike apparently talked him up to Blaine first, but Mike's responses are depressingly sports-focused. "Used to play polo and fence, still boxes. He's a Buckeyes fan but isn't interested in basketball or soccer."

"And you think that's the information I want to know about him?" Kurt wonders out loud, and Mike shrugs.

Santana, the former queen of all malicious or sexual gossip, doesn't know much more. "He's pretty clean cut," she says, like it's the most boring thing in the world. "Bit of a goody-two-shoes but he works hard enough. And he's patient."

"Patient?" Kurt asks, as Brittany sits down with an entire plate full of golden, deep-fried shapes.

"What are we talking about?" Brittany asks.

"Blaine," Santana replies. "Because Kurt's got a great big gay crush on him."

"Two of those adjectives were untrue and one didn't need to be said," Kurt replies. He's not going to waste breath denying that he has a crush.

"He's teaching me how to fold a crane," Brittany says.

Santana nods, mouthing, "Patient," at Kurt.

"I keep forgetting how to do the second wing."

It's sheer desperation that makes Kurt ask Sebastian. Well, desperation mixed with Kurt's complete disinterest in Sebastian himself. If they have to talk, he'd rather talk about a guy he actually likes.

"Oh, you met *Blaine*." Sebastian drawls out Blaine's name, and it's like the guy is trying to give Kurt extra reasons to dislike him. "He's a hottie."

"I noticed," Kurt bites back. Then he remembers he's trying to play nice. "Know much about him?"

"He has an ass that won't quit and a mouth that was made for—"

"I'm not blind!" Kurt interrupts before Sebastian can finish that god-awful sentence. "I meant, personally. His background. Romantic history. Likes and dislikes."

"Awww," Sebastian says, leaning across the table to patronizingly pat the back of Kurt's hand. "You mean would he date a twink like you?"

It's amazing how much Kurt truly, deeply despises him. But he also really wants to know more about Blaine. Kurt swallows down his disgust and sweetly smiles. "Feel free to answer the question."

"He's involved. And monogamous."

There's a lurching beneath him and for a moment, Kurt wonders when the seas outside got so rough. But everyone else seems fine, so it must be disappointment making his stomach churn. "He has a boyfriend?"

"At Stanford, and Blaine doesn't feel comfortable cheating on him." Shrugging, Sebastian adds, "I pointed out that what his boyfriend doesn't know won't hurt him, but Blaine still wouldn't go for it."

"What a pity," Kurt manages. He has a crush on a boy who's lovely in so many ways (faithfulness included) and completely unavailable. He's had more hopeless crushes, but that's a lot like looking at one of Rachel's outfits and saying she's worn worse. It's hardly a consolation.

Sebastian takes his words at face value. "I know. He's at sea for seven months at a time. Someone should be hitting that."

So the guy of Kurt's dreams has a boyfriend. This is not the end of the world. Objectively, Kurt knows he has a simple choice to make. He can sulk about the unfairness of life and spend the rest of the cruise sleeping, singing and moping about being single forever and dying alone, unloved and unappreciated for his talent. Or he could recognize the fact that one of the reasons he likes Blaine is because they have a lot in common and therefore could be good friends.

Back in high school, he would have sulked and schemed. He can remember his all-consuming crush on Finn Hudson, and how happily he would have pushed both Quinn and Rachel in front of traffic to have a

quarterback to call his own. And now Finn's his brother. He's living proof that an ill-advised crush can become someone permanent in your life, someone you really care about, without sex or dating ever being involved.

So even though Blaine doesn't explicitly invite him, Kurt shows up the next morning with freshly stolen cookies from the kitchen. Blaine has a blanket over his lap and he turns his head, blinking as the breeze pushes his curls across his forehead. Kurt's nervous for a minute but when Blaine sees him, he grins so brightly Kurt has to glance away before the image is burned into his retinas.

"I didn't want to presume," Kurt says, but Blaine assures him that he's welcome. Then Blaine asks for his opinion on the roughly hemmed asymmetrical jackets that seem to be an emerging trend, and they spend the next twenty minutes discussing the abhorrence of the entire concept.

"There's a third option," Santana says, halfway through Kurt's rant about the relative unimportance of sex compared to having a life full of people to care about. "Sleep with him."

"He has a boyfriend," Kurt repeats, in case Santana missed that point the first dozen times he complained. It would be a hard fact to miss since it has been the one recurring theme of this conversation, but Santana's spent a lot of time around Brittany. A low IQ could be contagious.

"So? Throw him onto a bed, ride him until his eyes roll back in his head, and then ask if his boyfriend can get freaky like that."

Santana says it like it's nothing, but it takes Kurt a moment to blink past the mental images – because, yes, it's all too easy to imagine pushing Blaine down into a mattress, and the image of Blaine shirtless and flushed beneath him, eyes dark and half-closed, mouth parted... Well. It takes Kurt a moment to reply.

"This is not the Sexual Olympics," Kurt says. "The best contender does not win a gold medal and choice of boyfriend."

"I saw the Sexual Olympics once," Brittany says. She looks from Santana to Kurt, and then she looks confused. "Had a lot more wheelchairs than I expected."

“That’s the Special Olympics, Brit.” Santana smiles, but it’s not her usual smile, the one that promises sarcasm and a world of hurt to everyone around her. It’s not the kind of smile people usually have around Brittany either, the one that says she’s sweet and vacant and they’d like to talk to someone else now. This is a soft, delighted smile and in Kurt’s heart of hearts, it makes him a shade jealous. “I think they’re called the Paralympics now.”

“Huh,” Brittany says. “So that’s why there weren’t any blowjobs. I was sure they’d be part of the Sexual Olympics.”

“I’m sure they would be,” Kurt agrees, “if the Sexual Olympics actually existed.”

“They should. I’d be a gold medalist.”

Brittany says it calmly and Kurt could accept that without trouble – mostly – if Santana didn’t leer and add, “She really would be.”

“You two are no help at all,” Kurt says, turning and walking down the hall. Unfortunately, they’re in the crew quarters at the end of the hallway devoted to the entertainment staff. There are no passengers to overhear and therefore nothing to stop Santana from continuing the conversation.

“Just go find Blaine and blow him,” Santana hollers after him. “I’ve seen how your jaw unhinges to hit those high notes. It’s bound to impress him.”

Of course, this is when Sebastian sticks his stupid head out of his room. He laughs and calls out, “He hasn’t got a chance, Santana. If that technique worked, I’d have rocked Blaine’s world months ago.”

Santana yells something back, but Kurt’s pointedly ignoring them, keeping his chin up and watching the end of the hallway. He spots a quick blur of movement – someone stepping around the corner and hurriedly stepping back – and he’s pretty sure he recognizes the height and the hair colour. He quickens his steps to the corner, and finds Blaine standing there, leaning against the wall.

“Discretion is the better part of valor?” Blaine asks hopefully but he looks terribly embarrassed. His cheeks are blotchy and red, and it’s not a good look.

Kurt feels for him. He knows Santana and Sebastian don't mean to be offensive, but it feels one step away from high school bullying, from nasty questions hissed in a hallway. "I know the most atrocious people," Kurt says, putting a hand on Blaine's shoulder and steering both of them to the elevators at the far end of the ship. "I really don't know what I ever did to deserve their company."

"Do you think it's karmic punishment?" Blaine asks, falling into step beside him. The redness is fading from his cheeks, but he still looks a little self-conscious.

"I don't think I've ever done anything bad enough to warrant it. Unless you count the time I used *Grease* to try to sabotage a friend's crush," Kurt adds and then he tells the story. It's teenage-stupid and a little embarrassing, but he knows how to make it entertaining.

"How did you start working here?" Kurt asks one morning. The sea breeze keeps catching the magazine pages and threatening to rip them, so Kurt's given up reading as a lost cause. Now he's lying in deckchair, blanket snuggled around his shoulders and staring out at the sea.

"It was sort of an accident." Blaine shrugs but when Kurt raises an eyebrow at him, he continues, "I was a freshman at Stanford, business major, and part of the school's a cappella group."

Kurt tries not to make a face. (Business major? Kurt can't imagine anything more boring and less attractive.) "Go on."

"We heard about the auditions and decided to make it a competition. Everyone put in twenty bucks and the winner was whoever got disqualified last. There were about six rounds of auditions but it was four hundred dollars, which is a lot of money to a college student. I tried my best, and..."

"You won the bet?"

"I was offered a job." Blaine lets out a little surprised laugh, like he's still amazed by the story even though he lived it. "I was in the right place at the right time."

It sounds like there's more of a story there to Kurt. When he glances over, Blaine's staring out at the sea. The stark sunlight catches Blaine's hazel eyes, turning them golden and unreadable.

“It’s not high art,” Blaine says and he turns to Kurt with a polite, self-deprecating smile. “There’s no meaningful discourse on the nature of humanity. We dance around and sing pop songs that remind people of being young. But I love it, every performance.”

“Then that makes you pretty lucky,” Kurt agrees and Blaine’s smile softens into something real.

At first, Kurt’s conversations with Blaine revolve around fashion and music: what they like, what they don’t, what they’ve seen, what they’d (mostly, what Kurt would) kill to star in. It’s great having someone to talk to about his two favourite topics, and it helps Kurt miss Mercedes and Rachel a little less.

Kurt isn’t trying to stalk Blaine across the ship but he notices him. Kurt looks for him as he walks into a room or through a crowded corridor. He can’t help it. He pays attention when he hears Blaine’s voice, even if Blaine’s only talking to Mike about the Buckeyes.

He doesn’t think much of it until he stops for a post-midnight snack and finds Blaine sitting at a table with Brittany, discussing *Top Cat*. The cafeteria is never truly empty, but it’s quietest between midnight and dawn. There are only half a dozen tables occupied and Kurt barely has to eavesdrop to listen to the conversation.

“It was the hat,” Blaine says. He’s smiling, but there isn’t a trace of mockery there. “I think once you wear a hat, you’re bound to end up the leader of the group.”

“Kermit didn’t wear a hat,” Brittany says, shaking her head. “And he clearly led the Muppets. Even when they were babies.”

“Maybe it only works for cats.” Blaine glances over, spots Kurt and gives him a cheery wave. Kurt waves back, feeling like a creepy, eavesdropping stalker and takes his food to bed with him.

He brings it up the next morning. “Our discussions don’t have to be limited to clothes and musicals,” he says, and Blaine cocks an eyebrow at him.

“I thought it was something we had in common.”

Kurt nods because Blaine does have a point. Kurt's a NYADA graduate with a double major in fashion and vocal performance, and he's intensely passionate about both subjects. But that's not all he is. "I have strong opinions about a range of subjects and if you told me a little more about yourself, you might find we have more in common than you think." Kurt feels his cheeks heat because even by Kurt 'The E stands for Extravagant' Hummel standards, that's pushy. He might as well be the new kid in kindergarten begging Blaine to be his friend.

He doesn't want to force this and ruin it. He likes spending time with Blaine, even if it makes him smile a bit too easily and feel this warm, hopeful bubble in the pit of his stomach... and pay ridiculous amounts of attention to Blaine's mouth and the way his smile sort of freezes at the corners when he's uncertain.

Blaine's face is doing that now. He's still smiling and his eyes are still wholehearted and welcoming, but his jaw's tight. "Feel free to suggest another topic," Blaine offers.

Kurt has too many to choose from. He wants to ask Blaine to tell him everything he loves about this job. He wants to hear embarrassing stories from childhood (surely Blaine wasn't always so charming and debonair? The man must have been awkward at some point) and listen to Blaine tell him about falling in love. He wants to know everything, but starting small would probably be best. "SAT stress. How did you deal with it?"

Blaine lets out a surprised huff, eyes going wide. "I studied. My roommate and I had two weeks of sleeping six hours a night and cramming as much as we could into our heads. We were so sleep-deprived that we nearly came to blows two days before the exam. All over who had stolen whose yellow highlighter."

After that, they read less and talk more. Blaine tells him about going to an all boys' boarding school ("Contrary to what porn may suggest, boarding school is not full of sexual misconduct. It's full of sweaty teenage boys who don't pick up their socks, don't always remember to shower but have memorized the cheat codes to Mario Kart.") and his stories make it sound like something out of Wodehouse, a place where the highest scandal was sneaking into science classrooms after hours to make s'mores and trying to deal with the badly tempered mare when playing polo. It seems ridiculous, but Blaine is so well-mannered that Kurt only has to close his eyes to picture him there.

Kurt tells him about McKinley. He plays the horrors of slushies for laughs and talks about the overindulgence of the cheerleading team. He tells Blaine about his stint as a Cheerio, his even shorter stint as a football player (“The only game they won that season was because of me. I’m just that good.”) and he even talks about his brief Mellencamp stage. (“On the good side, Brittany gave me confidence when it came to kissing. On the bad side, can you imagine covering this hairline with a trucker cap?”)

“So that’s one more thing we have in common,” Blaine says.

“Growing up in Ohio?”

Blaine’s grin reaches comical proportions. “I was going to say making out with Brittany,” and then he tells Kurt about meeting Brittany in rehearsals, about going out for drinks with her and Santana. “She’d been talking about making out with every guy in her high school, which I thought was empty bragging—”

“It wasn’t. Apparently, making out with me gave her a perfect score,” Kurt confirms.

“I’d had a few drinks and Santana dared me to kiss her girlfriend, and then said she’d let a coin flip decide.”

Kurt knows Santana’s coin flips. “Let me guess. Tails you kiss her, heads she kisses you?”

“I didn’t realize it was rigged until the next morning,” Blaine says and laughs.

Mornings quickly become Kurt’s favourite time. Blaine doesn’t always make it to see Kurt’s last performance of each night – he has a heavy schedule of his own, but he shows up about a third of the time and it doesn’t take too much for Kurt to coax him into singing a duet or two – but Kurt can always find him in the mornings.

This morning, it’s bitterly cold and the sky is dark and overcast. Kurt’s freezing in his cardigan (chosen for the way it accentuates his shoulders, not for something as mundane as warmth) and Blaine notices. Blaine not only notices but he also shifts on his deck chair and calls Kurt over.

“Two of us won’t fit,” Kurt blurts out when he understands what Blaine means by patting the recently vacated half of his deckchair.

Blaine looks him up and down, and Kurt preens, just a little. “There’s hardly anything of you. It’ll be cozy but we’ll fit.” He tugs at Kurt’s blanket until Kurt gives in. There’s shuffling and that mortified laughter of suddenly being very, very close to someone you haven’t slept with yet and then Kurt’s tucked against Blaine’s side with both of their blankets wrapped around them.

Blaine curls his hands around Kurt’s cold fingers and holds them against the bare skin of his neck. “You’re a furnace,” Kurt says, because the heat’s incredible. He’s trying not to think about the movements of Blaine’s throat as he breathes and swallows. Or the way they’re both on their sides, arched into each other. He can feel the bony curve of Blaine’s knee against his thigh because Blaine’s sitting up higher, and the only real place for Kurt to comfortably rest his head is the stretch between Blaine’s shoulder and bicep.

“Says the ice sculpture,” Blaine replies so Kurt tells him about winters and bad circulation and how he loves wearing layers all year long. He talks about the best part of winter (scarves and hats and gloves that don’t look out of place).

“If we get another cold day,” Blaine says, with his mouth so close that Kurt can feel the hot air against his temple, “we’ll have to remember to huddle for warmth so you don’t freeze over. Be a terrible shame to have to search for another emergency piano player. We’d never find someone else as talented as you.”

From there, the conversation meanders to piano lessons and music teachers but the whole time, Blaine holds Kurt’s hands. They spend the entire conversation curled against each other, hiding from the icy wind.

Kurt hopes the next cold morning comes soon.

Kurt mentions Rachel in passing, but Rachel Berry isn’t the kind of personality that can be explained briefly. She’s grating and ambitious, obnoxious and driven, but she’s also talented and hard-working and has an unshakeable sense of self. Kurt tells Blaine about competing for *Defying Gravity* in high school and co-starring in *West Side Story* with her a few years later. “They split the roles,” Kurt explains, and he’s still slightly bitter over it. “The directors decided double-casting the role would be better than dealing with the nuclear fallout of scorned egos. When it came to Maria, they had trouble choosing between our two strongest female voices, Mercedes and Rachel.”

“The one disadvantage to going to an all boys’ school was the lack of high school musical productions,” Blaine says. He’s wearing a faded violet t-shirt, loose sleeves hanging down to his elbows, paired with denim shorts fraying just above the knee. He’s kicked off his sandals and keeps waving his bare toes in the sunshine. It’s not a lot of bare skin, but it’s enough to be distracting. “Was it the same issue with Tony?”

“Not exactly.” Kurt waves a hand, fluttering his fingers through the air. “I was considered a little too... let’s say ‘artistic’ for the role. There were concerns that I wouldn’t be a convincing love interest.”

“I have a hard time believing that,” Blaine says earnestly and then gives an embarrassed little shrug. “But I’m possibly not the target audience.”

Kurt doesn’t make the obvious reply that Blaine’s certainly his target audience. Partly because Kurt’s always aimed for classy rather than cheesy in his romantic overtures, and partly because Blaine’s stretched his arms above his head and there’s a gap between his t-shirt and shorts. A gap showing paler skin and a flat stomach and a light dusting of dark hair that Kurt would really like to trace. Blaine has his eyes closed against the sun so Kurt’s allowed to stare, but he doesn’t want his voice to betray his thoughts. “Rachel bullied her boyfriend at the time, my stepbrother, into auditioning but he only agreed if the role was shared. Since Puck refused to grow out his mohawk, it was Finn and me. Every first night, we had a Maria and Tony who were desperately in love even if Tony couldn’t dance and kept forgetting his spoken lines. Every second night, Mercedes and I gave stunning performances that were word and pitch perfect, if a little strong on the high notes.”

“You would have been a great Tony.”

“Usually, people say I would have made a great Maria.”

Blaine opens his eyes and squints over at Kurt. “I’m not denying that you probably have the range, but you’d be a much better Tony. Especially on *Maria*. And that sounded dirty but I meant the song,” Blaine adds quickly. “You should be kind and stop me from being embarrassed by redirecting the conversation now.”

“I’ve never really been known for my kindness to others,” Kurt says, tempted to laugh. “And we’re talking about what a wonderful performer I am, so I don’t have much incentive to change topics.”

“Then sing for me instead. They constantly play pop songs in the mornings,” Blaine waves a hand towards the decks below, where a faint Katy Perry chorus can be heard, “so no one else would hear. And I’d love to hear you sing *Maria*.”

Kurt’s always had a great memory for lyrics and melodies, and he loves showing the strength of his impressive range. But the real reason he opens his mouth and sings is the way Blaine watches him, eyes bright and interested. The way Blaine stares in awe as if Kurt were the most amazing thing he’d ever heard.

“First kiss?” Kurt asks, because while he could be reading, *Vogue* isn’t as charming as hearing Blaine talk. Kurt sometimes thinks that’s why he’s still single: there are so few men who are as interesting as an issue of *Vogue*. Blaine is a delightful exception.

Blaine grimaces, eyebrows drawn, his entire expression overdramatic and still surprisingly honest. “You’re here for another nine weeks, Kurt. Let’s save the really humiliating stories for later.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think I can keep being friends with you without a few embarrassing stories. So far, I’ve heard a lot about boarding school and overly strict choirs, but nothing that... hmmm.”

“Completely mortifies me?” Blaine suggests helpfully.

“I refuse to believe you are as gentlemanly and dashing as you appear, Blaine Anderson,” Kurt says it sarcastically but he’s mostly serious. Blaine is sweet and smart, he’s handsome and funny, but the guy has to have some serious flaws. So far, he has a boyfriend and a tendency to be so enthusiastic about singing that he forgets to introduce himself. He prefers P!nk to Lady Gaga and talking about the Beatles makes him do a ridiculous Liverpool accent, but those are minor weaknesses. Those are the kind of flaws you tease someone about and secretly find adorable.

Kurt’s looking for something seriously obnoxious or mean-spirited. Something unattractive to balance out... everything else.

"In that case, let me tell you the oft-repeated tale of my first serious crush. This has gone down in Warbler history as the worst possible way to approach someone and is the reason why singing back-up vocals in public must now be approved by a unanimous committee decision."

Blaine tells him about meeting a guy at a PFLAG group, about a teenage crush based on a handful of conversations over coffee. He makes fun of himself as he tells the story ("I'm sure I'm not the only fifteen-year-old to decide meeting for a third coffee meant we were soul mates, but I can claim the distinction of still being banned from a Gap store in Ohio.") and it sounds terribly awkward and embarrassing, especially when he mentions the song choice and chasing the poor guy around the store. He talks about being let down gently ("I got the guy fired. I'm amazed he didn't just tell me to get lost.") and the Warblers trying to help by workshopping the performance afterwards ("The next three rehearsals were spent reviewing why the performance failed to impress the intended audience. Wes made us work through an entire alternative choreography.").

Blaine grins and grimaces as he tells it, hands moving as he gestures. It's misguided and badly judged, but there's something sweet about it. It completely fails to make Kurt think any less of Blaine.

Kurt keeps meaning to ask about Blaine's boyfriend. He's got to be incredible because Blaine's amazing and Kurt can't imagine him being so devoted to a guy who didn't deserve him. Blaine and the other dancers have been at sea for three months, so he must be lonely and missing the love of his life, and he'd probably appreciate the chance to talk about him. All good reasons for Kurt to bring the topic up but...

Kurt really doesn't want to hear about the guy who took Blaine off the market. He's petty like that. He'd rather hear about Blaine.

He compromises by talking about college boyfriends. He tells Blaine about Thomas in freshman year. "Tall, loved fashion and aspired to be a model. He was also dumb as a post. At first, you think the cute surfer hair and the brave fashion choices will be enough and then you discover that he really doesn't understand why there are time zone differences across the country. But he was the first boy who asked me out and he was sweet, even if he didn't get most of the jokes in *Zoolander*."

"Well, *Zoolander* is a make-or-break point," Blaine says faux-seriously.

“After that, there were a few guys I dated for a month or two, but it didn’t mean much. No one I wanted to tell my dad about, and that’s always a clear test.”

There’s a difference between telling Mercedes or Rachel – both of whom can be fun for some ‘boys are bewildering but attractive’ chats – and telling his dad. His dad wouldn’t care if they were cute or good kissers; his dad would ask if they were good guys, if they were treating him right, if Kurt thought they were the one. His dad had asked him that about Thomas and in that sickening moment, Kurt had realized Thomas wasn’t Kurt’s one. He liked Thomas. He liked dating and having a boyfriend. He liked kissing and discovering that sex was fantastic and fun (he really had been missing out in high school). He liked telling someone about his day and curling up with someone on a couch, but he wasn’t thinking of forever. He didn’t want to spend his life explaining time zones and using the right cutlery and programming someone else’s TiVo. He didn’t love Thomas, not really, and once he realized that he had to break it off.

“Then in my junior year,” Kurt continues, “I met Adam in one of my vocal performance classes. He was smart and talented, and funny. He understood my sense of humour and was just as devoted to a stage career.”

“What happened?”

“We got very competitive and it... fell apart. We stopped being happy for each other. How can you be with someone when you secretly hate them for taking your role?” Kurt asks, and then hears how the words sound. It sounds like he didn’t care, but he had. He’d been with Adam for nearly two years and he’d thought it would last. “That sounds terrible. It’s not like we didn’t try to be happy for each other, but... There were some fights and horrible things said, and you can’t always take them back.”

He doesn’t want to talk about how heartbroken he’d been when one last fight had been too much. How he’d felt angry and sad and bitterly disappointed in both of them. Kurt still remembers retreating home, sitting on the couch with his dad’s arm around his shoulders and his dad trying to tell him that the pain doesn’t last forever, that every heart eventually heals. He remembers listening and not believing it was possible to hurt like that and ever recover.

As usual, his dad was right. It still hurts a little to think about – bruised ego and disillusionment – but it doesn’t ache. He doesn’t regret breaking up but he wishes he could have been civil about it.

Blaine watches him, quiet and steady, and Kurt finds himself thinking he'd tell his dad about Blaine. If there were anything to really tell him about Blaine. "Has there been anyone since?" Blaine asks gently.

"Not really. Not that I don't date when the opportunity arises, but there's a difference between a few dates and finding someone you really connect with," Kurt says.

It's the perfect opening for Blaine to talk about his boyfriend. Instead, he says, "It's never as easy as it looks in the movies. When you're a kid, you think everything will fall into place. You'll be at the right bar at the right time, and your eyes will meet and that will be it. You'll know."

"And then you grow up and find out that it's complicated. And even when you know, you're not always right."

The next day, Blaine tells him about the first time he went to a gay bar. He'd been in California for three months and two of his best friends from high school were at Stanford too ("It was a good high school," Blaine explains with a shrug and Kurt teases him that he'd expect no less from a boarding school with "Academy" in its name. "You'd be surprised," Blaine says dryly, "some of those boarding school academies are absolute dives."). Apparently, they'd gone out to the student bars and Blaine had been a wonderful wingman, striking up easy conversations with girls ("I was only saying hi, really. They looked lonely.") and it was decided that Blaine was owed a return of the favour.

From the way Blaine talks about his friends, Kurt already has a mental picture of them. Wes is serious and tall, takes the expectations of his Chinese parents in stride, and meticulously studies the rulebook of any situation. David tends to have big ideas but he also likes tradition, he wants to change the world but only through the thoughtful application of government. Blaine says that they took him under their collective wing when he was a freshman at high school, and being a freshman at Stanford felt the same, but with bigger parties.

"I was eighteen and I'd never even kissed a boy." There are times when Kurt forgets that Blaine grew up in Ohio. Right now, it seems so obvious. "PFLAG meetings are great and I'd been out for all of high school, but I never had a fake ID and I wasn't enough of a rule-breaker to try to sneak into the local gay bar."

"So Wes and David took pity on you?"

“They researched. They asked about different bars and found one ‘appropriate to the age group,’” Blaine says, using air-quotations to make it clear those aren’t his words. “They also watched too much *How I Met Your Mother*. I swear the phrase ‘Have you met Blaine?’ was actually used. Several times.”

“Did it work?”

“I spent most of the night dancing with a guy solely to avoid any more of those awkward, well-intentioned introductions. He invited me out the next weekend and said the music was much better on a Friday, so it worked well enough.” Blaine shrugs, scrunching his eyes for a moment. “Funniest part of the whole night was that nobody asked either of them to dance. Apparently, they’d rehearsed polite but firm refusals of attention, and were disappointed in the lack of unwanted interest.”

“I have to ask,” Kurt says, perching forward with his head on one hand. “Do you have ugly friends?”

Blaine laughs. “I had friends who spent the night standing shoulder to shoulder, whispering and plotting together. I had to explain how that must have looked. Although I let them stew for a few days before I explained it.”

He doesn’t spend every spare minute talking to Blaine, but Kurt does try to marry their spare time as much as possible. Even when they go ashore – Santana drags everyone off the boat to have lunch out and celebrate Irish Matthew’s birthday (it’s not until the cake comes out that Kurt finally confirms which Matthew is which) – Kurt still finds himself gravitating to Blaine’s side, talking as if they’ve known each other for years.

Sebastian’s already there, holding the table for everyone. As they walk over, he gives Blaine a slow once-over that makes Kurt’s skin crawl. “Don’t you look good enough to eat,” Sebastian purrs and although Kurt’s tempted, he doesn’t actually lean across the table and stab Sebastian with a fork.

“So does this menu,” Blaine says, picking one up and casually walking to the other end of the table. Kurt follows his lead and Sebastian gives them a strange look, but he doesn’t change seats.

Blaine's quiet for most of the meal and Kurt talks to two of the girls (he still doesn't know their names). Afterwards, they have a few hours before they're due back on board, so Kurt announces that he's going to find a fabric store and find a way to tone down the 'mental institution chic' of his room. When Blaine offers himself as company, Kurt's so pleased it probably shows all over his face.

Kurt's singing *Yellow Brick Road* when there's a stir amongst the dozen passengers sitting around Colts. When he looks to the side, he sees long tanned legs and wedged heels and very short skirts. Above the short skirts and tank tops, Santana and Brittany smile at him. Brittany even gives him a little wave.

At the end of the song, they sashay across to the piano. "To what do I owe the pleasure?" Kurt asks. Usually, the performance troupe spends afternoons practicing. It's rare for him to see any of them on the decks, and even Blaine usually only shows up after midnight.

"Party, yo!" Brittany says, with a funny hip-hop hand movement that would probably make Artie proud.

"Party. Tonight. Staff rec room." Santana's grin gets sharper. "Your big gay crush will be there."

"He has a name," Kurt replies.

"Yeah. It's Blaine Big Gay Crush Anderson."

"B. B. G.," Brittany says slowly, brows pulled as she thinks. "C. A. That's a lot of initials."

Kurt rolls his eyes. "That's not Blaine's real name."

"It's just Kurt's pet name for him," Santana adds. "Anyway, after your last shift, come to the rec room. Your boy is fun with a few drinks."

A staff party isn't the worst way Kurt could spend an evening, but there are certainly better ways to spend his free hours. Kurt has a laptop full of favourite films and a secret stash of Lindt hot chocolate mix. "You're not allowed to trick him into making out with Brittany."

"You don't show by twelve-thirty, my girl is going to make him question his sexuality. Guys may be cute and all, but they're nothing compared to the way Brittany kisses," Santana says, glancing over at Brittany who seems pleased by the comment.

"You do realize it's completely dysfunctional that your girlfriend finds a comment like that flattering," Kurt replies sharply.

Brittany shrugs. "I'm a really good kisser."

"If I agree to put in an appearance, will the two of you please leave?"

"Seriously, come." Santana rolls her eyes, but her tone is sincere. "It'll be a blast."

Kurt doesn't trust Santana's threats to ever be idle and if he doesn't get to make out with Blaine, no one else should. The performance show finished at eleven, so the party's in full swing by the time Kurt arrives (at twenty past twelve because it's a party and even if he doesn't want to be here, he still wants to look fantastic while he's not enjoying himself).

The lights are down low and the tables and couches have all been pushed back to the edges of the walls. In the middle of the room, there's a mass of people moving to the thundering beat of Top 40 songs. Most of those songs, Kurt doesn't really know. Somewhere between high school and paying rent for his own apartment, Kurt stopped keeping tabs on the latest music aimed at fifteen-year-olds. It makes Kurt feel simultaneously all grown up and way too old.

Kurt edges along the walls until he finds a table with drinks. There's a huge punch bowl full of deep red liquid, but McKinley High proms have taught him that an unattended punch bowl will always end up spiked. He finds a bottle of orange juice sitting near the vodka and pours himself a drink (heavy on the juice, non-existent on the vodka).

Nursing the drink, Kurt wanders around the room trying to spot Blaine. He's expecting Blaine to be sitting down at one of the tables, or maybe on the couches, but he's nowhere to be seen. Someone shrieks as a new song starts and in the centre of the floor, Kurt sees Brittany and Santana bounce along to the fast beat, arms high in the air. Kurt watches them, trying not to laugh at their ridiculous levels of enthusiasm.

Behind them, one of the guys is throwing his head wildly with the music, one hand (with disposable cup) held high as he thrashes a little behind the beat. His hair is dark and shaggy, and Kurt can't believe it takes him until the count of five to recognize the loose-limbed mess. Then Blaine looks up and grins like this is the best time he's ever had.

"Kurt! You came!" Blaine hollers as he stumbles over. He flings one arm around Kurt and hugs him tight, burying his head in Kurt's neck. "Isn't it great?"

"Fabulous," Kurt says, because his default setting is dry sarcasm. Most of his attention is still absorbed by the memory of Blaine's warm breath, moist against his skin; witty repartee is a little beyond him right now. "It seems fun."

"It's great, Kurt. Really great." Blaine takes a deep gulp of his drink. Kurt tries not to stare at his throat working and finds himself watching Blaine's mouth instead. His lips are redder than usual, stained by the punch. "Oh, I love this song!"

As Kurt stares, mostly in horror, Blaine actually attempts to headbang to something that's more bubble-gum pop than hard rock. Kurt can't imagine how embarrassed he'd be to act like that in public. "Had a lot to drink?" Kurt asks, raising his voice to be heard.

"No," Blaine says, flapping his free hand. "No, I'm not drinking."

Kurt looks pointedly at the half-empty cup in Blaine's hand. "Isn't that punch?"

"It's non-alcoholic. Santana made it." Blaine's smile is wide and far too happy to be sober. "Great, huh?"

"Can I taste?"

Blaine passes him the cup. "Have it. I've got to dance. This is a great song," he says, and bounds back to the melee of bodies.

Kurt eyes the cup warily. He knows Santana – and how easily she lies about stuff like this – so he takes the smallest sip possible. It burns on the way down. It might have started alcohol-free, but it tastes more like methylated spirits than anything fit for human consumption.

Kurt stays. Not because he's perving on Blaine on the dance floor, as Santana suggests once, but because every time Blaine comes back to talk to Kurt, he has another half-full cup and his grasp on personal space has deteriorated further.

Blaine tries to drag him onto the floor a few times. Kurt refuses to dance with professional dancers regardless of Blaine's attempts to convince him ("Come on, Kurt, look at them. They're stage dancers, not club-dancing people. Well, apart from Santana and Brittany. And Mike, he's an awesome dancer. And, okay, Sebastian and Matthew and Cara... And... What were we talking about again?"). Instead of dancing, Kurt perches on one of the couches and pushes bottles of water into Blaine's hands whenever he can.

He tries convincing Blaine that the punch was more ethanol than anything else, but Blaine argues with the logic of the truly inebriated. ("It can't be alco—alcoholic. Because that would mean I'm drinking. And I don't go out and do that anymore.")

When Santana slides over, there's a sheen of sweat across her bare shoulders, and the halter of her backless dress is doing a miraculous job of rejecting gravity. "Having fun, Porcelain?" She's smiling and her eyes aren't suspiciously wet, so clearly she's avoided the horrible punch.

"Blaine's drunk," Kurt hisses back. "You told him the punch was non-alcoholic."

"I might have under-exaggerated." Santana collapses into the couch beside Kurt. Looping an arm around Kurt's shoulders, she leans over and points at the dance floor. She's pointing at Brittany, who's certainly a captivating sight. With blonde hair in a high ponytail, a denim bolero and an orange silk skirt that barely floats past her hips, Brittany sways and grinds to the slow bass heartbeat. She bends all the way back, hands touching the floor, only balanced by a guy's arm – Blaine's arm, Kurt belatedly sees – at the small of her back. She pulls herself back up slowly. (Kurt can do that, but it's hell on the abs.)

"Dirty dancing?" Kurt asks, as Brittany wraps a leg around Blaine's hips and grinds against him in a truly obscene way. "That's your big entertainment plan for the night?"

"Wait until the making out starts." Santana pats his thigh and then hums right into his ear. "Your boy is fun when he drinks."

Kurt pushes her back and stands up. “This part of the night has officially come to a close,” he says, and then strides over to the mass of bodies. He taps Brittany’s shoulder until she moves away (smiling and possibly saying something about cutting in; he can’t hear her over the music), and then gets a hold of Blaine’s elbow. It doesn’t take much force to tug Blaine away and out of the room.

“Where are we going?” Blaine asks, as Kurt carefully navigates the stairway down to the living quarters. He’s keeping a death-grip on Blaine’s arm but he’s reconsidering his decision to avoid the cramped staff elevators. (They’re small and the air-conditioning doesn’t work, and when the boat rocks, it’s felt most in those small metal boxes. Kurt had thought about it and decided the elevators would probably lead to more nausea than Blaine could control.) He hadn’t factored on how difficult it is to step down and balance a drunk.

“You are going to bed,” Kurt replies. “You’ve had enough fun for one night.”

“You’re taking me to bed,” Blaine repeats cheerily. Then he adds, “That was really fun.”

“I know. I was there.”

“Oh, yeah. Wasn’t it great?”

Blaine’s quiet for a few steps, and Kurt would be quite happy for the conversation to end there. He’s never been a big fan of drinking – one bad experience in his sophomore year had turned him off for life – and he’s certainly not fond of drunks. But Blaine hadn’t meant to get drunk and Kurt knows Santana too well to trust her. Unless it’s Brittany, Santana doesn’t think twice before twisting a metaphorical knife in anyone’s back.

He feels obligated to see Blaine safely put to bed.

Blaine happily follows Kurt’s lead until they get to Blaine’s door. “What about your room?”

“What?”

"I haven't seen your room," Blaine says, like that explains all.

"The point was to get you to bed."

"Your room has a bed." Blaine pouts at him and flutters his ridiculously dark lashes. Kurt is a grown man; he is not going to give into puppy-dog eyes, especially not in the wee hours of the morning. "I helped you carry all that fabric back on board, and you never showed me what you did with it."

Kurt sighs. He could argue, but it might be quicker to show Blaine and then get him to go to (his own) bed. "Fine."

"Oh, Kurt," Blaine breathes out when Kurt ushers him inside, "this is amazing. It's like magic."

The transformation is amazing, if Kurt says so himself. Using a few light-weight plastic rods, removable self-adhesive hooks and yards of shimmering chiffon/poly-cotton blends, Kurt turned a plain white-walled room into a hidden, sensual enclave. Wide swaths of blue and green fabric hang across the ceiling in soft waves and float down the walls, and there are soft ribbons pulling the curtains back from the doorways and the closet door. He'd used the seas as inspiration for his colour palette, and knowing that these colours made his eyes look incredible had been added motivation.

The final touch had been buying a few throw pillows and a satin cover for his bed in greys and blues, and it catches Blaine's attention. He walks into the room, trailing his fingers across the wall hangings, and then sits on the bed. "I mean it, Kurt. I think you're made of magic."

"I think you've spent too much time talking to Brittany," Kurt replies, rolling his eyes because he'd rather look at his ceiling than stare at Blaine lounging across his bed. "It's not magic, it's interior design. And now that you've seen it, it's time for you to go to bed."

"Your bed's pretty comfy." Blaine slides his hand across the smooth material, fingers spread wide. If Kurt didn't know better, he'd say Blaine was flirting.

"But it's my bed," Kurt points out, because he has no intention of sacrificing his bed for a drunk friend. Not when Blaine has a perfectly good bed of his own down the corridor. "Do you need a hand getting up?"

“Yeah,” Blaine says. He holds out a hand for assistance but when Kurt steps over and reaches down, Blaine wraps his arms around Kurt’s shoulders and falls back on the bed, pulling Kurt with him.

Kurt tries to push up, but Blaine doesn’t let go. Again, he can feel Blaine’s warm breath on his neck. Kurt’s trying to think of the right way to ask Blaine to release him (he doesn’t want to be rude, and there’s a part of him that doesn’t want Blaine to move at all) and then the warm air on his neck is replaced by warmer lips. Blaine kisses his neck, then the corner of his jaw. He drags his mouth across Kurt’s cheek.

Kurt’s gasp echoes loudly when Blaine’s lips find his.

Despite the taste of alcohol, Blaine doesn’t kiss like a sloppy drunk. His lips are soft and parted, demanding very little but offering so much. Kurt finds himself reaching up to cup Blaine’s cheek, to tilt his face and follow the kiss deeper, to lick at Blaine’s lips and hear him groan.

Kurt shifts his weight to his elbows and starts to pull back, but Blaine lifts his head to keep kissing. Kurt can understand. He doesn’t want to stop either. “Wait, wait, I need to move.”

“Don’t,” Blaine says, right against his lips. There’s another kiss, but Kurt can feel his feet start to slip. He’s half on the bed, bent at the waist, and Blaine’s hands on his back aren’t going to be enough to hold him up.

“I’m going to fall off the bed,” Kurt says, rolling off and awkwardly shuffling backwards until he’s sitting on the bed, knees bent at the edge and feet flat on the floor.

“That might work better,” Blaine agrees easily, getting onto his knees and then swinging one leg over Kurt. “Much better,” he says, wrapping his arms around Kurt’s shoulders and pressing their chests together. The kissing starts again – great, Kurt is perfectly happy to go back to kissing – and Blaine shifts and squirms, working his hips against Kurt’s stomach as they kiss.

A hot shiver runs down Kurt’s spine as he notices Blaine’s already half hard.

“You’re so hot, Kurt,” Blaine huffs as he kisses Kurt’s jaw and sucks on his earlobe. “Really hot. You know that, right? Your shoulders and your legs. God, your thighs in those jeans. I’ve wanted to kiss you for so long.”

Should have kissed me weeks ago, Kurt thinks, but he's too busy sucking a mark onto Blaine's jugular to say it. Blaine throws his head back with this sweet little gasp and digs his fingers into Kurt's shoulders. "You're amazing," Blaine says, and his voice is low and rough. "That feels so good."

Kurt bites down and Blaine makes a pained grunt, thrusting his hips against Kurt, hard and shameless. Kurt does it again and Blaine's squirming and begging, "Kurt, please, come on, just let me," and pushing back. Balancing on the edge of Kurt's lap, Blaine reaches down and palms Kurt through his jeans. It's rough and a bit clumsy, and so good.

Blaine's distracted, clumsily trying to undo the buttons of Kurt's fly. Kurt has to lean back and breathe through the tease of fingers tugging, pulling at the denim but not enough pressure for anything but frustration. He understands how difficult clothing can be, especially when you're thinking with your dick, but it's driving him mad.

And that's when it hits him. Blaine isn't lust-addled, he's drunk. He's drunk and Kurt... Kurt doesn't do this. Kurt doesn't sleep with boys too drunk to remember. He usually doesn't sleep with boys on the first date, let alone get picked up at a party. He doesn't sleep with boys who have boyfriends. He doesn't sleep with boys in situations that he could never, ever tell his father about.

(God, Kurt never wants to tell his father about this. He would die of embarrassment before he finished the explanation.)

Kurt closes his eyes and reaches down, pulling Blaine's hands away from his crotch. He takes one deep breath and says, "You're drunk."

Blaine looks up at him. His smile's loose and easy, and his eyes are glassy; Kurt knows he's doing the right thing. "Maybe. A little. But it's okay."

"You're drunk," Kurt repeats gently. "You don't know what you're doing."

Blaine's nose scrunches up as he laughs. "It's fine, Kurt. I can do this better drunk than sober. Trust me, I know what to do," and then Blaine's shuffling backwards and folding onto the floor until he's kneeling between Kurt's legs, rubbing his cheek against Kurt's denim-covered thigh. "Relax. I'm good at this."

“It’s not a—” Kurt can’t finish that sentence because he’s staring, watching Blaine lick his lips, and there isn’t a single part of him that doubts that Blaine’s as good as he says. “It’s a consent issue. You’re drunk and I don’t— I don’t want to do this.”

Blaine frowns like he doesn’t know what’s happening. “You’d enjoy it,” he says, but he sounds lost, that certainty gone.

One of the cutest guys Kurt’s ever met is on his knees, head on Kurt’s thigh, telling him how much he’d enjoy getting blown... and Kurt’s refusing. This is worse than the night Rachel spilled red wine on his brand new, current season, Alexander McQueen shirt.

“Not like this. I don’t want to,” Kurt says clearly, and that makes Blaine nod and sit back on his heels. He looks disappointed and that’s not fair when Kurt’s doing the right thing. “What about your boyfriend? I don’t think he’d approve either.”

“What boyfriend?”

Kurt thinks about what he knows about Blaine – what makes him believe that confused furrow between his brows is genuine – and the source of his information. “You lied to Sebastian. Told him you had a boyfriend to get him to back off.”

Blaine’s whole face screws up. It’s unattractive but weirdly adorable too. “He’s very... pushy.” Then he blinks a few times, bites on his lower lip as he thinks. “He’s probably still at the party.”

“Probably.”

“Are you sure you’re not interested?” Blaine asks as he stands up. He looks a little unsteady but doesn’t reach out for support. Kurt shakes his head, and Blaine says, “Okay, then I’m going to go now.”

“You’re not going back to the party,” Kurt says on a hunch, and Blaine’s wide-eyed fake-innocence proves him right.

“You can’t tell me what to do. You don’t want to have sex, fine, but I’m sure Sebastian—”

“No,” Kurt says firmly. “I get to tell you what to do because I’m sober and I’m your friend, and I don’t want you to do something you’ll regret in the morning.”

Blaine pouts but doesn’t walk away. “I miss it,” he says soft and sad, and Kurt has seen Santana drunk. He can deal with mooney, mournful drunks.

“You miss drunken sex with strangers you don’t particularly like?”

“No,” Blaine says, shaking the curly chaos his hair’s become. “I don’t know. Maybe. It’s just nice to... I don’t know.”

“In that case, shoes and jeans off, but the rest of the clothes stay on. You can spend the night here.” Kurt starts untying his own shoes, pulling the laces as Blaine slowly toes one of his sandals off. “There will be no sex, but you can share the bed.”

When Kurt was a kid, he used to get so cold he’d wake up in the middle of the night. It didn’t happen all the time, but he has several clear memories of shivering in his bed. He must have been little, under ten, but he remembers curling up on his side, pulling his cold feet as far from the edges of the bed as possible. He’d drag the pillow under the blankets and breathe in that quiet, contained space until his nose defrosted.

Winters in Ohio are icy and made for warm scarves, hats and coats. New York winters are noisier and generally crazier, but the sheer cold always makes him think of home. That’s why his bed back in Brooklyn has three down-filled covers and a small, free standing oil heater that Kurt can reach from his bed.

Since coming onto the ship, he’s requested two extra cotton blankets and slept with the air-conditioner turned to the warmest setting. This is the first night he’s considered pushing back one of the blankets. He knew Blaine ran a little warm to the touch, but he hadn’t realized Blaine is one of nature’s cuddlers. Blaine’s gone from lying shoulder to shoulder in the small bed, to reaching out and turning in his sleep.

Blaine’s fast asleep – and thankfully doesn’t snore – but he’s curled around Kurt like a toddler with a teddy bear. He’s half lying on Kurt with his head low on Kurt’s chest and an arm thrown across Kurt’s hips, his fingers loosely curled at the waist of Kurt’s t-shirt. Their legs are tangled together, and even Blaine’s toes are pressed against him.

Kurt isn't a cuddler. He appreciates his personal space, especially when he's sleeping. He likes being able to relax and lie flat on his back (lying on your side can produce uneven wrinkles over time, and Kurt takes skin care seriously). He's certainly not used to playing understudy for a body pillow, but he's not complaining. Not when he's being hugged by the human equivalent of a hot water bottle.

Kurt can't remember the last time he felt so gloriously warm at night. Even though there's someone else in his bed and it's a stark reminder of how very accustomed he's gotten to sleeping alone, he's so comfortable that he can't help drifting off to sleep.

When Kurt wakes up, he's still lying flat on his back and there's still a weight beside and on top of him. At least the hand that was clutching and creasing his Peter Alexander sleepwear is gone. As Kurt lies there with his eyes closed, too warm and relaxed to consider moving, the arm across his hips lifts slowly and deliberately. "You're awake," Kurt says, because moving so carefully only happens when trying to untangle yourself the morning after.

"Yeah. I was trying not to wake you." Blaine lifts his head and shuffles back against the wall, rolling away from Kurt and taking his ridiculously warm feet with him.

Kurt might make a small sound of disappointment (he'd been so toasty), but he'll deny it if questioned. Yawning, Kurt pulls the covers higher to compensate. "Do you remember last night?"

"Some. Enough," Blaine says in the total darkness of Kurt's inside cabin. "I'm sorry for getting so drunk. I have no idea why I thought drinking would be a good idea."

"The punch was spiked," Kurt says. He doesn't want to name names, because there's a chance it wasn't Santana who actually added the alcohol. Santana's always been opportunistic, and she might have simply been taking advantage of the situation. There might be a bigger chance of Brittany winning a Nobel Prize, but Kurt doesn't want to spread unproven gossip. "I tried to tell you, but you were having too much fun to listen to logic by the time I got there."

"That would be any time after the first drink," Blaine confesses wryly. "I've never had much tolerance."

Kurt rolls over to his side, blinking himself awake and turning on the bedside light. He runs his hand through his hair a few times, trying to smooth the bedhead out of it. (He tries not to stare at Blaine's hair while he does so. Blaine's hair is wild and curly, like a closer-cropped Ben Jacob Israel but cute.) The morning after is always an awkward moment, but there's a hot boy with uncontrollable hair and a button impression on one of his lovely cheekbones from the pocket on Kurt's t-shirt. It feels a lot more comfortable than it should.

"So when you say you remember enough of last night..." Kurt trails off, and Blaine gives a one-shouldered shrug from the other side of the bed.

"I can put the pieces together. I remember asking to see your room and pulling you down to the bed." Blaine stares across the room as he thinks. "I remember kneeling, or looking up at you while kneeling, and then it's a blank. But I can take an educated guess."

"That was all that happened," Kurt says, and Blaine looks very doubtful. He starts to open his mouth but turns it into a closed-mouth smile instead. "You were really drunk and I let you stay the night, but that's all."

That tight, closed-off smile stays on Blaine's face, but he nods as if he understands completely. "Sure."

Kurt rarely lies to people (even when they ask terrible questions like, 'Does this make me look fat?' and 'What's so appalling about hyper-coloured jeans?') and he doesn't appreciate the insinuation. It's not as if he'd have anything to gain by lying about what happened. "Why do I get the impression," Kurt says slowly, trying to keep the sharpness out of his tone, "that you don't believe me?"

Blaine drops his gaze. He shrugs, but his smile looks less and less comfortable. "It's a little strange, that's all. I had enough coordination to try to get you into bed, so I would have been able to find my room. There wasn't any reason for me to sleep here."

"You and your coordination had big plans of going back to the party to hook up with Sebastian." As Kurt says it, Blaine stares at him, eyes so wide and horrified that Kurt can't help laughing. Kurt covers his face with his hands and tries to get his giggles under control. "I was protecting your virtue."

“That would have been–” Blaine starts and then stops himself before he says anything openly insulting about Sebastian. Kurt’s seen him avoid Sebastian, but he’s never heard Blaine say anything mean about him. “I’m sorry I doubted you. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Kurt leans across and presses a kiss to Blaine’s lips before really thinking it through. It wasn’t planned, but Kurt doesn’t regret it. It’s a quick kiss, nothing more than a soft press of warm lips, but he can feel Blaine stiffen in surprise.

“Um,” Blaine says as he pulls back, and it’s not a happy tone. It’s not a tone of voice that suggests rom-com moments and happily-ever-afters. It sounds more like the tone that gets used right before the words ‘we need to talk’.

Kurt goes on the offensive, and his smile is probably rather Rachel-Berry-esque. “You said last night that you weren’t seeing anyone, and that you wanted to kiss me. That you’d wanted to for a long while. There was also a lot of flattery, especially about my shoulders and my thighs,” Kurt says, and Blaine flushes, but Kurt’s not done yet. He learned young that it’s worth fighting for what you really want. Fabulous things don’t come without a struggle. “I don’t sleep with men on the first date and I don’t sleep with guys too drunk to remember every wonderful moment with me, but don’t think I’m not interested. I like you. I’ve liked you since I thought you were an incredibly cute passenger who insisted on random duets.”

“Kurt,” Blaine says uncomfortably, “I’m flattered, really, but this won’t work.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t do the casual sex thing,” Blaine says. It’s a bit rich coming from a guy who was comfortable initiating a drunken hook up (with the sort of confidence that comes from experience, Kurt bets). “I don’t like the way it makes me feel. I’m not interested in being friends with benefits.”

“Neither am I.” Kurt catches one of Blaine’s hands and presses a kiss to the back of his knuckles. “I really like you.”

“You dream of Broadway, Kurt. That’s wonderful, but in two months, you’ll be back in New York and I’ll still be on this ship. In a year’s time, or even five years’ time, I want to still be working at sea. It’s not fair for me to lead you on when I can’t commit to anything.” Rubbing a hand across his brows, Blaine frowns. “When I’m not willing to.”

"I'm not an institution, you don't need to be committed," Kurt says airily. "You're looking at this the wrong way. It doesn't have to be forever or meaningless. You're ignoring one of the staples of romantic literature."

"Really?"

"The short-lived, meaningful love affair. The life-changing romance that creates memories that are cherished until we're old and grey and married to other people. Think *Titanic*. Think *Bridges of Madison County*," Kurt says, although he blames Carole for that last one (she had a secret collection of Clint Eastwood films; Finn would happily watch the spaghetti westerns and cop films with her, and Kurt somehow ended up with the rest). The light catches on Blaine's hazel eyes. He looks like he wants to be convinced, and Kurt's always been very convincing. "Think *Casablanca*."

From the sudden grin on Blaine's face, that one works. "You're really determined to get what you want, aren't you?"

"I want you," Kurt says seriously, and it's worth it to see how pleased Blaine looks, "and yes, I've always been highly motivated. It's a character strength."

They fall back asleep and only wake up when Santana calls ("I know you're probably worn out from getting down and dirty with your boy last night, but you're still scheduled to be on a piano stool in thirty minutes."). Kurt gets ready in a hurry as Blaine watches him, lying on the bed and trying to pretend he's awake.

"Santana knows you're here," Kurt reminds him as he laces his boots and checks for his keycard.

Blaine mumbles something completely unintelligible. He's asleep by the time Kurt lets himself out.

Kurt does have limited control over what he plays, and while he has a colour-coded plan for all of his performances (it's not Rachel-Berry-like as long as he doesn't use gold stars), he chooses on instinct today. There are a disproportionate number of love songs in the mix, sweet, upbeat and happy.

But all copyright-approved, because one close encounter is more than enough.

Towards the end of his last session, he looks up and sees Blaine standing in the doorway. Kurt might be the one singing love songs, but judging from the expression on Blaine's face, he's not the only one feeling this way.

"We only have eight weeks," Blaine says as Kurt closes up the piano lid. "We should make the most of it."

Kurt smiles, noticing the smear of stage makeup on Blaine's left temple. He must have missed it in his haste to come and see Kurt. "What were you thinking?"

"A date," Blaine suggest seriously. "Dinner and a movie?"

"As lovely as that sounds, it's one in the morning. A face like this," Kurt says, circling a hand in front of his face, "requires beauty sleep." It isn't that he doesn't want to see Blaine, but Kurt knows how important sleep is to his skin. He can recover from one late night, but two or three and the bags under his eyes are going to meet international flight baggage limits.

"Oh," Blaine says, but he shifts from disappointment and offers to walk Kurt to his room. He actually walks Kurt to his door and kisses Kurt's cheek as he says goodnight. It's so wholesome and unassuming that Kurt catches Blaine's wrist in his hand and says, "You can stay and watch a movie, if you want."

"Are you sure? I know how exhausting it can be to perform every day, and I'll see you tomorrow."

Kurt rolls his eyes and unlocks his door. "If I get too tired, I can always kick you out," he says and pulls Blaine inside.

There's a lack of furniture, and Kurt really is tired, so they bring Kurt's laptop with them to the bed. Kurt suggests a few films, and they end up watching a rom-com released a few months before Kurt came on

board. Kurt kept meaning to watch it but never got around to it, and Blaine says he's in the mood for a love story.

They curl up on the bed, warm and close, and Kurt doesn't even make it through the first hour before he feels his eyelids grow heavy. He struggles to open them and sits up to keep himself awake. When he moves, Blaine makes a sleepy, disturbed complaint, and Kurt realizes they both fell asleep. He closes the laptop and shoves it under the bed, then pulls the covers up.

Blaine rolls in towards him, one arm reaching out to curl around Kurt's waist. "I should go to my room."

"Yeah," Kurt agrees, yawning. "Or you could stay here for the night."

"That." Blaine's voice is rough, slurring as he falls back asleep. "Let's do that."

It becomes their routine. Blaine meets Kurt after every performance, either at the Wheelbarrow or standing at Kurt's door, and they watch a movie in bed. Sometimes, they get food from the cafeteria and eat it on their laps, and make it to the end of the film. Sometimes, they fall asleep ten minutes after the opening credits.

Blaine always stays the night. Kurt always wakes up warm with Blaine's arms wrapped around him. (Even when they spoon, even when Kurt's the big spoon with his mouth pressed to the back of Blaine's neck, he still wakes up with Blaine's fingers around his forearms, holding his wrists tightly.)

In the morning, depending on how early they wake up, they might spend some time exchanging sleepy, lazy kisses. It hasn't gone any further than making out, but Blaine hasn't complained. Kurt likes it. It's nice waking up warm and held, nice to lie together under the covers and learn Blaine's mouth by feel. It's slow and steady, and there's a growing frisson of anticipation that's Kurt's enjoying too much to rush this.

Eventually, they'll get up and go their separate ways to shower and dress for the day. Blaine will get magazines, and Kurt will go to deck fourteen for food, and then they'll spend a few hours in the breezy sunshine on plastic deck chairs, reading Vogue or simply talking.

On one of those late mornings, Kurt asks Blaine about his first kiss. Blaine grimaces but agrees. "You'll be completely unsurprised that I was drunk and on a dance floor when it happened."

"Who was it?"

"I don't remember his name. I'm not sure I knew it at the time. We were drinking and dancing to Katy Perry, and he kissed me. We ended up in the backroom." It takes Kurt a minute to connect those kinds of places, clubs that are little more than an excuse for intoxicants and getting off with strangers, to well-mannered, considerate Blaine. It takes him another breath, another heartbeat, to recognize that this isn't the story of Blaine's first kiss. Blaine's telling him about his first time. The first time he let someone else get so close to him, see that much of him, and he didn't even know the guy's name. Kurt had been weeks from his nineteenth birthday and had dated Thomas for five months, and he'd still been awkward and embarrassed, nervous about being so exposed in front of someone else. He can't imagine doing that with a complete stranger.

Maybe Kurt's thoughts show on his face because Blaine shrugs apologetically. "I've never been much of a romantic."

Kurt looks hard at him, at this guy who bites his lower lip when romantic comedies hit rocky patches, who holds Kurt's hand when they eat in the cafeteria, who sits next to him on a piano stool and sings the sappiest duets with him in public. He holds Kurt in his sleep and has the sweetest, most heartbreaking smile every time he wakes up and sees Kurt. "That's not true at all," Kurt says, and then has to kiss the flush that darkens Blaine's cheeks.

"It was," Blaine says quietly, forehead pressed to Kurt's and hand loose on Kurt's shoulders. "Until you, it was."

For that, Kurt really has to kiss him.

Regardless of his speaking voice, his smooth cheeks and his devotion to low-calorie cooking, Kurt's not a girl. He doesn't squeal like a nine-year-old at a slumber party when he's surprised, not even when he's scurrying down a hallway to the next bar, shuffling sheets of paper into order and out of nowhere, hands

suddenly grab hold of his elbows. He doesn't squeal, but he does jump a foot in the air and throw the pages everywhere.

"They're too big for confetti," Brittany says, standing beside him and staring at the pages fluttering to the carpet. "You should try it with smaller pieces."

"Next time," Kurt manages, glaring at Santana as his heart insists on beating wildly.

Santana shrugs one shoulder, but she doesn't look apologetic in the least. "Just wanted to make sure you were still on the ship."

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"It means the only time we see your boytoy is at rehearsals and we don't see you at all. It's been a week, Hummel. For all we knew, you could be dying of dehydration."

"Hydration is important," Brittany says, as close to worried as she ever seems to get. "You need to keep your electrolytes balanced if you're going to be sweating for hours."

Kurt starts to nod, then thinks about the source of that comment. "How do you know that?"

Brittany shrugs. "Cheerios."

"Nobody likes a fainting cheerleader," Santana says. "Especially if you're at the top of the pyramid."

Brittany says, "It wouldn't work if you were at the bottom, either."

"But if one of the bottom rung fainted," Santana replies, as if discussing cheerleading moves seven years after high school isn't at all pathetic, "you'd hardly tell the difference. The girls above could balance each other by linking arms and leaning away."

"Unless they were on the edges. Then the girl above couldn't balance."

"You could still lean into the centre of the group, maybe lift your leg up for balance," Santana says, shrugging.

Brittany lifts her leg sideways. She holds her leg up at hip height, balancing perfectly on her other leg as if the ship weren't moving. Then she raises it higher, until her ankle is level with her shoulders, and rests a hand on Santana's forearm. "That might work."

"But it would look unbalanced if—"

"This conversation is ridiculous," Kurt interrupts. "I have five minutes to get to the Atrium, and my sheet music is everywhere."

Brittany looks around the floor, blinking at the white pages. "You shouldn't have thrown them." She links pinkies with Santana as they walk away, leaving Kurt to gather up the pages into a messy pile and then sprint across half the ship to get there on time.

Kurt's starting to know Blaine's shows by his appearance after them. There's an *Across the Pond* show featuring British pop from the last forty years, which apparently involves more dancing for Blaine (he goes from the dressing room straight to the shower, then shows up at Kurt's door freshly showered and humming Queen songs or Spice Girls). There's a fifties-themed show where Blaine clearly wears a wig (it leaves a mark across his forehead but the stage makeup is lighter on that show, because sometimes Blaine forgets he's wearing it and turns up at the bar with eyeliner and mascara still on. It looks so good on him that Kurt finds it distracting).

Kurt's favourite is the *Stage and Silver Screen*, a selection of musical numbers from the twenties to the fifties. He likes the way that Blaine will hum snippets from films Kurt grew up loving. He likes that Blaine will suggest watching old black-and-white musicals, filled with romance and banter and beautiful clothes. He tells Blaine once that it makes him feel like a kid, it makes him remember watching these films with his mom. (He tells Blaine that he doesn't remember her, not really. He knows her from photographs and his dad's stories, from familiar smells caught in an old dressing table, from watching old movies with his cheek on her soft skirt and a hand in his hair, and knowing if he falls asleep, he'll be safe, warm and loved.) In return, Blaine tells him that he loved watching these on the weekends, and how he'd turn the volume up high because he was alone in the house, and attempt to mimic the onscreen steps.

The only thing Kurt doesn't like about this show is how Blaine's hair is forced into submission with enough gel to waterproof a dinghy. Luckily, a little product has never intimidated Kurt. It's become a ritual for him to sit Blaine down on the floor and perch behind him on the desk chair, working the leave-in conditioner past the lacquer formed by strong-hold gel and the heat of stage lights. He justified that leaving the conditioner in for twenty minutes makes it easier to wash out (and Blaine had trusted him enough to try it, and later agree), but secretly Kurt likes running his fingers through Blaine's wet hair. He likes working his fingertips against Blaine's scalp and the breathy moans Blaine will make when he does it just right. He likes the way Blaine relaxes until he's slouched against Kurt's knees, all the tension drained away.

He really likes the way Blaine comes back, freshly showered, skin damp and warm. Blaine smells of soap and water and clean skin, and Kurt possibly has a thing for Blaine's hair forming dripping ringlets against the pillow. He's getting used to Blaine's arms wrapped around him and how Blaine will sometimes sneak a hand under Kurt's pyjamas to press one wide palm to the small of Kurt's back, holding close as Fred Astaire glides across Kurt's laptop screen.

"You're lovely," Kurt says one night, and he's thought it for a while but he hadn't meant to actually say it.

Blaine goes still, like he's as surprised as Kurt to hear those words spoken aloud. Then he lifts his head up and shuffles up the bed to kiss Kurt. "I'm pretty sure that should be my line," he says, as he settles back down with his head on Kurt's shoulder.

Kurt's in the middle of Fashion Week in Paris, breathlessly waiting for Givenchy's latest collection. He's perched on a tiny, rickety fold-out chair in the second row, peering between the shoulders of pseudo-celebrities from reality television and heiresses here to spend on daddy's credit card. There's a hush in the room as the lights drop low, and then a crimson spotlight picks out a tall blonde in wide-shouldered, square-collared, asymmetrically hemmed woolen coat. As the model walks closer, Kurt can see the distressed detail of the fabric, the way the colour blends from lemon to mustard in disordered splotches, and then someone calls his name.

Kurt squints against the glare of the endlessly blue sky – not a cloud in sight today – and glances over at Blaine. His body might be floating on the ocean, huddled under an ugly plaid blanket, but spiritually he'd been in Paris, rubbing shoulders with glitterati and drowning in haute couture. "Yes?"

Blaine pulls down his sunglasses and peers over them. “I was thinking,” Blaine says, tapping the small round frames that make Kurt think of John Lennon, framed in psychedelic swirls of bright yellow and green. (Kurt doesn’t know if Blaine wears them because they’re so incredibly on-trend right now, or if the bright colours just caught his eye. Either way, Kurt loves a bold fashion statement when he sees one.) “You’re halfway through your contract, and you’ve hardly been ashore.”

Kurt raises an eyebrow. “Are you complaining about the way I choose to spend my days?”

“Of course not,” Blaine says with an easy grin. “But I thought, I have a few errands to run tomorrow—”

“Like making sure you buy the next copy of *Vogue* the day it’s released for sale?”

“That’s one of them,” Blaine says, quickly adding, “and I’m glad you understand how important that is. So many people don’t.”

“Sartorial troglodytes.”

“All of them?”

“Every last one of them,” Kurt replies haughtily, liking the way it makes Blaine wrinkle his nose up and pretend he’s not smothering a laugh. “But if I’m going to be enticed away from my glamorous shipboard lifestyle, I need a better incentive than a magazine.”

“*Vogue*’s not enough?” Blaine pulls his magazine – last April’s edition, one of Kurt’s personal favourites – against his chest, hugging it and gently stoking the back cover as if it was a small child. “How can you say that where they might hear you?”

“The magazines know I love them,” Kurt says, playing along. “But I’m pretty sure I could stay on the ship and you’d bring the latest one to me.”

“And doff my hat like a worshipper at your shrine?” Blaine is the sort of boy who quotes Cole Porter lyrics in casual conversation. Sometimes, Kurt thinks he’s a little too perfect to be real. “But there’s also a divine French café hidden in the botanic gardens.”

“You want to take me out for lunch?”

“You’ll love it, Kurt,” Blaine says earnestly, and it’s impossible for Kurt to say no to that.

They dock in a small shore-side village (well, town, but if Kurt’s here to visit a French café, he’s going to think of it as a village) and the first trip is to a newsagents. Blaine leads them straight there, walking the few blocks from the pier. He seems a little on-edge, pointing out the architecture they pass (moderately interesting) and good markets (more interesting because shopping always trumps staring at buildings for Kurt), and not letting a moment pass in silence.

Kurt wants to be jaded and sophisticated, and find this sort of nervousness amusing at best and irritating at worst. Instead, he finds it endearing. More endearing than he’s ever going to admit out loud.

At the newsagents, Blaine points Kurt to the fashion magazines and leaves him to it. Kurt picks up Vogue first, and then finds an Italian edition he hasn’t seen in Blaine’s collection. Further along the small, over-crowded racks, there’s also a French magazine he’s sometimes considered buying in New York (it looks promising enough to half-read from a newsstand, but he’s never bought it because rent, food and utilities are slightly more important and if Kurt has spare dollars for magazines, it usually gets spent on accessories instead). He’s been on a ship for nearly seven weeks and spent virtually nothing; he can afford a few indulgences.

With that motto in mind, Kurt ends up with six publications stacked in his arms. When he finds a seventh (and adds it to the pile) he decides it’s probably best to go find Blaine.

At the back of the shop, Blaine’s lost in thought, staring at rows of birthday cards. He has two in his hands, both pale and floral, and Kurt guesses female relative of some kind. Probably his mom since he hasn’t mentioned a sister. “Whose birthday?”

Blaine jumps a little at Kurt’s voice and hurriedly shoves one card back on the rack. “My mother’s. I spaced there. Sorry.” Then he sees the pile in Kurt’s arms. “They can’t all be Vogues.”

“If you want to truly appreciate the superiority of Vogue, you need to be aware of the alternatives.”

They go to the local post office to mail the card (“Relying on the ship’s mail always adds an extra week,” Blaine says, “and costs a lot more.”) and since he’s there, Kurt picks up a few postcards too. The first one is addressed to his dad and Carole. He tells them how much fun he’s having, that he’s spending his days lounging around on deck and singing at night. He considers mentioning Blaine, but Kurt’s not going to tell his dad – on a postcard, no less – that he’s spending his mornings making out. Saying something vague like he’s met someone feels like he’s undervaluing this. If he tells his dad, he wants to tell him face to face.

Really, he’d like to introduce his dad to Blaine. Kurt’s sure they’d get along.

Kurt shakes that thought out of his head and looks over to see how Blaine’s doing. He’s writing the card carefully, so Kurt starts a postcard to Finn. He thinks about the things that Finn would appreciate knowing and writes about catching up with Mike, Santana and Brittany on board, and how well everyone’s doing. He also mentions the number of girls sunbathing in bikinis because he knows how his brother thinks. Friends, scantily clad women and food would be Finn’s top priorities. Kurt adds a quick PS about the excessive amount of fried food available at the buffet and cafeteria.

Blaine still has the birthday card open, pen hovering, lower lip caught between his teeth, so Kurt takes the time to write a few more postcards. He writes one to Rachel – sells the entire experience as a fantastic opportunity to thrive in the demanding schedule of daily performances – and one to Mercedes that says, “*Sun, waves, cutest boy in the world. Will tell you all when I’m home! xxx Kurt*”. He quickly hides that one at the bottom of the pile. He may have the urge to gush like a twelve-year-old girl with a Disney-channel infatuation, but he’d rather hide that from Blaine for as long as he can.

From the way Blaine’s staring at the finished card, anyone would think it was a peace treaty or a coded message to a secret agent. Kurt hardly has to lean sideways to be able to read it over his shoulder. It’s a fairly standard card, starting with “Dear Mom,” and spelling out the rest of the message in careful, cursive handwriting:

Dear Mom,

Happy 52nd Birthday! I hope you have a wonderful day and this year brings you everything you could wish for.

I’ll be thinking of you on your special day.

Your loving son,

Blaine

“Your loving son?” Kurt asks, unable to resist a little teasing. “In case she thought you were someone else?”

Blaine scratches his cheek, saying, “Do you think it’s too...” When he drops his hand, Kurt wishes he hadn’t spoken. Blaine’s smile is pulled tight, and his eyes are worried. “*With love* always sounds strange, and *fond regards* seems a bit too distant. *From* seems too plain, and just signing a name seems over-familiar. It’s a bit rude, like you couldn’t be bothered finishing the message.”

“I’m sure she’ll love it,” Kurt says gently. “It’s not like there’s a rulebook on sending birthday cards.”

“There should be. Then I’d know how to do it right.” Blaine sighs and adds a quick PS on the inside cover (“*My address is still,*” it says, then lists a PO box in San Francisco and a simple Gmail address). As Blaine writes that, Kurt notices there are also two postcards sitting on the table. They’re covered in Blaine’s handwriting, but it’s looser and more slanted than his writing on the birthday card. The lines of writing slope upwards, and words break across lines with haphazard hyphens.

“Who are those for?” Kurt asks.

“Wes and David,” Blaine says, sealing the card inside an equally floral envelope and then carefully inscribing a memorized address. “I must have sent them dozens of postcards on my first year. These days, it’s only every few months. I know email’s easier and quicker, but there’s something nice about having mail you can physically hold in your hand.”

Kurt nods. “And it brightens up any bulletin board.”

“True,” Blaine agrees, smiling.

Blaine’s right about the French café. It really is divine. Kurt tries their raspberry chocolate soufflé and makes some rather obscene noises of appreciation, judging by the heated stare Blaine gives him. “It’s chocolate,” Kurt explains, sucking a smudge from his index finger, “and the lightest soufflé I’ve ever tasted. I’d be terribly jealous if I weren’t enjoying it so much.”

Blaine's voice is slightly lower pitched than normal. "I have no doubt you're enjoying it."

"You don't get to mock my enthusiasm until you try it," Kurt replies, holding out a tiny forkful of chocolate-raspberry flavoured heaven. He keeps the fork there, arching an eyebrow until Blaine gives in and leans across the table to taste it.

When he does, Blaine's eyes close as he swallows. "That's really good," he says, catching the waitress' eye to order a second serving.

"Do you mind?" Kurt asks one morning. He has his arm around Blaine's back, curled on their sides. They've been kissing for almost an hour – nothing too heavy, not enough to make his lips sore and tender; just light, gentle kisses, all lips and warm breath and Blaine's fingers tracing nonsense patterns along Kurt's shoulders.

Blaine hums into the kiss, a questioning sound that's soon muffled against Kurt's mouth.

Kurt could keep kissing. They've spent some very pleasant mornings this way, cocooned in the utter darkness of Kurt's cabin, learning each other through safe, undemanding touches. But he had a question to ask.

Kurt pulls back and makes himself ask again. "Do you mind all the kissing? That we haven't gone further?" They haven't done much more than kiss and hold each other. There hasn't even been any groping or pressing close and rubbing up against each other. Kurt knows that's due to him.

"Do you want to?" Blaine whispers, and Kurt's glad they're having this conversation in the dark. He doesn't think he could try to talk about this and look Blaine in the eye.

There's no way Kurt can really explain it. He's not skittish or cautious by nature – he's been called outrageous and fierce, fearless and bold. Kurt Hummel is no shrinking violet, but when it comes to sex... He's uncomfortable. He doesn't like having to strip all of his carefully chosen layers. He shows the world armour and costume: he's Kurt Hummel, someone to be noticed at any occasion. Without it, he's exposed. Underneath all that...

He likes himself fine. He likes who he is (most of the time) and how he thinks and talks and feels, but the idea of simply being him, unadorned and plain, and trusting someone else to see he is every inch as fabulous with or without the knee-high boots and stunning accessories... It doesn't come easy. It takes time for him to relax, for him to be sure.

It's hard to explain. Usually, Kurt wouldn't even try.

"Kurt," Blaine says softly, "we can do whatever you want. You don't have to justify it."

"I like taking things slow." Kurt's dated enough to know his idea of slow and steady is usually considered painfully glacial. Not that those guys were usually worth more than a second date, but Blaine is. Blaine's even worth the embarrassment of talking about it. "But what do you want? What do you like?"

"I like you."

Sometimes, Kurt feels like growing up is a slow process of turning into his dad. When he says, "Blaine," it's his dad's chiding tone of voice, the tone that meant Kurt had been unfair to someone and was too pigheaded to see it. It's horrifying to recognize that tone coming out of his own mouth. (It's worse that there's a little part of him that thinks maybe Blaine needed a dad like his. Maybe Blaine needed someone to sit him down and tell him that who you sleep with is important. That it matters.)

"I do like you," Blaine says. "If you want to take it slow, we'll take it slow."

In the darkness, Kurt finds Blaine's hand. He likes the way their hands fit together. Kurt's fingers are longer, but Blaine's palm is square and strong and just a little wider than Kurt's. He likes the feeling of their palms pressed together, likes how easily their fingers fit together, interlocking comfortably. "You're not answering the question."

"It's different," Blaine hedges. "It's a new experience for me."

Kurt's lying close enough that he feels the movement as Blaine rolls away. Kurt could offer some kind of compromise, try to think of it in terms of 'fooling around' rather than 'being intimate' and set some boundaries (no lights and no walking around naked, hands under clothes but no actual undressing), but he's not sure he wants to. He likes Blaine and he knows they have a limited time together, but he's enjoying this as it is.

“If I kiss a guy, I usually sleep with him that night.” Blaine’s lying on his back, quietly talking up at the ceiling. “There was a clubbing stage and... Look, we didn’t exchange names or numbers.”

Kurt squeezes Blaine’s hand because he has no idea what you say to that. He’s not entirely sure why Blaine’s telling him.

“After that, there was a guy. Jamie. He’d call and I’d go over to his place, and it was fun.”

“It was fun as in casual boyfriend?” Kurt asks carefully. “Or it was fun as in booty call?”

“The second. The pattern was: open door, sex, shower, please leave.” Blaine says it lightly, like it’s a joke at his expense. Kurt’s torn between the urge to hold him tight (might be seen as suffocating or patronizing, probably not a good idea) and tracking down Jamie and busting his windows (he spent his formative teenage years around divas; sometimes it’s hard to separate over-reaction from perfectly justified emotions). “For a while, I thought I could have it all. I could be what everyone wanted and still have enough freedom to be happy.”

Kurt suspects that by “everyone,” Blaine means his parents. It’s not anything specific, Blaine’s never said anything against them, but none of his stories are about his family. When he smiles and tells Kurt about random memories that make him happy, they never feature his parents. It’s so far from Kurt’s own experiences that he has no idea how to bring it up.

Blaine sighs. “It just didn’t work, you know? Intimacy should be about more than two bodies moving together.”

In the dark, Kurt smooths a hand across Blaine’s shoulders. “What does that mean for us?”

“If more happens physically, great, but it’s not... It’s not the end of the world, either way. I like being around you. You make me feel...” Blaine trails off, searching for the right word. He sighs and then says, “You make me feel,” like that’s the important part.

Maybe it is.

As slow as the days feel, the weeks pass too quickly for Kurt's liking. Blaine makes an effort to drag them ashore more often. He seems to have an endless supply of hidden little cafés with good coffee and great baking. Sometimes, they wander around unfamiliar streets, and sometimes they check out a local tourist attraction, but just as often they end up window-shopping. Blaine's endlessly patient as Kurt wanders from designer to designer, storing away the textures and the patterns and the things he'll snap up if they're ever on eBay.

When they pick up the next issue of Vogue, Kurt's stunned enough to speak without thinking it through at all. "I only have a few weeks left on board the ship," he says but what he really means, what really bothers him, is that he has less than a month left with Blaine. He should have noticed it. He should have paid attention or planned or something. He's not the type to let these things slip by him, not normally.

"Nineteen days to be precise," Blaine says, hunting the shelves for the French edition of Vogue the girl behind the counter swore was here.

"You sound surprisingly certain of that."

"There's a calendar stuck to my wall with a frowny face for the day you leave," Blaine replies glibly. "Every morning, I count the number of days left in your delightful company."

Kurt raises one disbelieving, if amused, eyebrow. "Oh, really?"

"Of course not," Blaine says, grinning as he spots the last copy of French Vogue hiding behind a stack of knitting magazines, of all things. "But I'm pretty good at remembering dates."

It's over a week later that Kurt discovers Blaine was lying.

He'd planned to pack all of the material he bought – doesn't know what he'd use it for back home, but he would have found something to do with it – but instead, Kurt offers to pin it around Blaine's room. Kurt says it's because the transformation of his dull room is too perfectly realized to be forgotten and reclaimed so quickly, but he keeps thinking of Blaine on this ship for two months after he leaves. Kurt's sure that will be painful enough without having to stare at plain white walls.

Their rooms are the same size so it's easy enough to pull down from Kurt's walls and recreate the entire look in Blaine's room. He and Blaine spend a day carefully moving it from Kurt's room and while Blaine's gone to fetch lunch for both of them, Kurt spots a cardboard calendar taped above Blaine's desk. This month has a picture of a puppy sitting in a bicycle basket and when Kurt flips it over to next month (the picture is of a kitten playing with yarn – Blaine apparently has a soft spot for adorable baby animals), he sees his departure date. There's "Kurt leaves!" written in blue pen and beneath it, in red ink, there's a frowning version of a smiley face.

Kurt takes the calendar down and places it on the desk. For some reason, he doesn't have the heart to tease Blaine about this, silly as it is. Pulling over a chair, Kurt goes back to attaching the stick-on hooks and the adjusting the material as he waits for lunch.

When Blaine returns with a tray of salads, lean chicken breasts and two glasses of orange juice, he stares around him. "I feel like I'm in the wrong room."

"You'll thank me for it," Kurt says, stepping down and taking the tray from Blaine. He sets it on the floor, far away from the swatches that haven't been hung up yet, and then sits cross-legged on the carpet.

"I love it, Kurt." Blaine runs a hand along the fall of fabric, like the first time he saw it in Kurt's room. "It'll almost be like having you here."

As that little frowny face grows closer, Kurt waits for Blaine to push for more in bed. He can understand it: there's this desperation growing under his own skin, the knowledge that if they don't take the opportunities they have now, the chance could pass them by forever. It's there whenever they kiss, this hovering spectre of heartbreak that Kurt knows is waiting just around the corner.

Kurt would understand if Blaine pushed for more, but Blaine doesn't. If anything, he demands less. The kisses are careful and restrained, always so tender, and Blaine seems just as content to lie there and hold him (or be held).

Kurt appreciates it. He doesn't want his first time with Blaine to be about desperation and loss, fraught with the farewells looming in their future. It won't make it any easier to say goodbye, Kurt's sure of it.

There are some mornings when they lie there with their foreheads pressed together and their fingers entwined, slowly waking in the darkness as they breathe in each other's air. As strange as it might be, the lack of sex makes Kurt feel more wanted. Blaine isn't pushing for anything but to spend as much time with Kurt as possible.

The weather is atrocious. The sea is wild and gunmetal grey, foaming and choppy. There's a cold sting of rain caught in the gusty wind, and it's ridiculous to be outside. The only thing worse is lying inside and hearing the roaring gale outside. In Blaine's cabin, it sounds like the end of the world. (Kurt's room is back to institutional blandness, and he refuses to spend any more time there than necessary.)

So they're outside sharing a deckchair, hunched up against the wind and futilely trying to hold the edges of the blankets down. It's taking both sets of hands, and Kurt has his knees clenched around one blanket. Still, the edges are flapping and the wind cuts right through.

"This is impossible!" Blaine says, voice pitched loud enough to be heard over the wind. His hair is flying across his forehead, whipped back and forth by the gusts.

"No, we just have to—" Kurt says, but he makes the mistake of lifting his hands for a moment to gesture, and one of the blankets goes flying up, off their laps and over the railing. Presumably it lands on the deck below but Kurt's not getting up to check. He's too busy staring because his *blanket blew away*.

Blaine's no help at all. He's too busy laughing and keeping both hands holding down the one blanket they have left.

"Fine, this is nuts." Kurt lightly elbows Blaine to get him to stop sniggering. "Sane people are indoors during weather like this."

They hastily pack up and then battle the wind to get back to the door. It takes both of them to pull the door open, and when they get inside, it slams behind them. "I'm trying not to say I told you so," Blaine says as they get their things in order (and Kurt smooths his hair back into something more presentable and a little less 'what is this thing you call a comb?').

“And despite how hard you’re trying, you’re failing spectacularly.”

Blaine grins. “But I tried. Isn’t that the important thing?”

“I think the important thing is succeeding.”

“Do you really believe that?”

Kurt still isn’t used to this: the way Blaine’s moods can turn so quickly, how he can go from teasing and being ridiculous to suddenly serious. Blaine’s hair is still a mess, and Kurt steps forward to brush his fingers through it and calm it, thinking about the question. “Success is important,” Kurt says eventually, “but the definition of success depends on the circumstances.”

“Yeah?” Blaine prompts, standing there and blinking as Kurt runs his fingers through his unruly curls.

“I think I was a success at high school because I got through it. I’m a success because I got out of a tiny town and now live in the best city in the world. I might not be on Broadway yet or live on the Upper East Side or attend every event in Fashion Week, but that doesn’t stop me from being a success.”

Reaching out, Blaine takes his hand and raises it to press a kiss to the back of Kurt’s knuckles. “I’m going to miss you so much,” Blaine says simply, and something tightens in Kurt’s chest. “Come on, let’s put this stuff away and then find a mirror and enough gel to get my hair under control.”

Kurt’s internal deadline – three days and counting – gets an unexpected deferral. Between two of Kurt’s sessions, Mitch stops by Colts and asks where Kurt’s going after this. When Kurt says he’ll fly back to NYC and then visit family, Mitch suggests staying on the ship for another few days.

“We’ll be docking at San Francisco so it’ll make your return airfare cheaper,” Mitch says, one much-tanned arm pushing the door ahead of them open. “The new solo performer isn’t joining the crew until then, so we’ll have the spare bed.”

“That would be wonderful,” Kurt says, thinking he can’t wait to tell Blaine.

When he does get a chance to tell Blaine – at the end of the night, heading back to Blaine’s room together – Kurt’s expecting Blaine to be excited. They have a week left together. Blaine’s excited, sure, but what he says is, “That’s great, Kurt. There’s this fantastic sushi place by the wharf, I’ll have to take you there. See you off in style.”

Kurt’s trying not to count down the number of nights he has left to fall asleep with Blaine curled around him. He’s trying not to think that he has four more mornings of waking up with Blaine’s bleary, half-asleep muttering, wide warm palms sliding across Kurt’s back as Blaine tries to burrow impossibly closer.

It’s hard to do, especially when Blaine yawns against his neck and asks if Kurt has any plans after this.

“What do you mean, plans?” Kurt’s been trying not to think about this, not to think about packing up everything he came with and leaving Blaine behind to return to Brooklyn. He’d rather think about the warm, clean smell of Blaine’s skin and the well-muscled shoulders under Kurt’s hands.

“When you get home.” Blaine lifts his head and drops a trail of light pecks as he finds Kurt’s mouth in the darkness. He kisses Kurt, his lips gentle and lingering, and then rests his head on Kurt’s chest. “What’s the first thing you’re going to do?”

“Air out my apartment,” Kurt says, because he has definite plans to do that. As much as he loves his place and its lovely lack of drafts in the winter, the lack of ventilation makes it get stuffy very quickly. It’s bound to need some fresh air. “Walk down to my local deli and remember how good a bagel can taste.”

“You really miss those, don’t you?”

“A bagel should not be floury, Blaine.”

Blaine ignores the judgmental edge to Kurt’s tone, smoothing a hand along Kurt’s side. “Nothing lined up for work?”

“The fun of auditions can wait until after Thanksgiving. I’m obligated to go home for the holidays, so I have a week or so to fill in,” Kurt says, and then explains to Blaine that there are only two acceptable reasons

for him to miss the annual family dinners at Thanksgiving and Christmas. The first is if the weather in New York is so bad that it's dangerous to travel (his dad's rule), and the second is if the zombie apocalypse hits.

"Is that especially likely over the holidays?" Blaine asks.

Kurt shrugs. "Ask Finn. It was his idea, and somehow our parents agreed that it would be an acceptable excuse for not coming home."

"I'm wondering why the zombie apocalypse is the biggest concern. What about natural disasters and asteroids hitting the Earth? Or Skynet taking over the world and sending mechanical armies against the human race?"

"The first would be covered under weather that makes travel dangerous," Kurt replies, "and no-one would notice if a computer took over. Not unless the flights out of JFK started running on time, and if that happened, we'd happily accept our technological overlords."

"I love that you got that reference. You," Blaine says, curling a hand around Kurt's cheek and kissing him so thoroughly Kurt can feel his toes clench in the sheets, "are incredible, Kurt Hummel."

"Our family holidays involved watching movies together and taking turns choosing. Now Finn knows the plot of *Evita* and I know the plot of *Terminator*."

Kurt's bags are packed the night before. His bathroom has been cleared, his bed is made. When he looks around his room, there's no real sign of him. It's bare and ready for the next performer to come and make it a temporary home.

He spends that night in Blaine's bed. They don't bother pretending to watch a movie. Instead, Blaine leads him straight to the turned-down sheets and presses a kiss to each of Kurt's fingers.

He tugs Kurt's hand until they're both lying close on the single bed. In a voice thick with emotion, Blaine whispers into his ear, "I'll never forget you," and Kurt has no choice but to kiss him. Rolling over, Kurt presses Blaine back into the mattress and kisses him, deep and needy. He pushes everything he's feeling

into that wet slide of mouths and tongues, and Blaine takes it. Blaine's hands are restless against Kurt's back, brushing here and there and never settling, but his thighs fall open easily around Kurt's hips.

It's an offer that even Kurt can read. This is Blaine offering up whatever Kurt wants, and Kurt can feel the sharp edge of that catch in his throat. Blaine doesn't do anything half-heartedly. He laughs and sings and shares, and every time he gives his all. It's the trust in the gesture, the unspoken promise to give whatever Kurt needs right now.

Kurt breaks the kiss – he's not going to cry while kissing the best guy he's ever dated – and buries his face in Blaine's neck. This is what they agreed to. It's stupid to get upset about it now. They both knew the consequences.

"Short-lived, meaningful romance," Blaine whispers. One arm wraps around Kurt's shoulder and the other rubs firmly up and down his spine. "That's what this is. Someday, you'll be married and you'll tell your husband about this, this holiday romance that dented your heart a little."

This doesn't feel like a dent. Kurt's heart feels crushed.

Kurt doesn't sleep much that night. He keeps his eyes closed and his arms around Blaine, but whenever he starts to drift off, he startles awake again. This is the last night he'll have to enjoy this, the last time he'll hold onto Blaine's warm body and feel like cold is a distant, foreign concept.

Blaine keeps stroking his back, or brushing fingers along Kurt's bicep or sides, so Kurt's fairly sure Blaine doesn't sleep either. In the morning, Blaine bounces out of bed (he never has any energy when he's actually slept) and hurries Kurt into the shower.

"This was good, Kurt," Blaine says firmly. "We're not going to end it with tears."

They both make an effort to smile, to get dressed, to head off the boat like it's an ordinary day (ordinary apart from the luggage stowed in a locker at the dock, ordinary other than the fact that Kurt won't be getting back on the boat this afternoon, won't be trying to balance as the floor rocks or nodding to Santana and Mike in hallways, won't be falling asleep with Blaine trying to curl around him like a human octopus). No, it's an ordinary, fun-filled shore excursion, so they head into town.

Blaine keeps up a steady stream of comments about San Francisco as they travel through (“When I was at Stanford, I fell in love with this city. We’d come in on weekends and wander around, getting on those hop-on, hop-off tourist buses. It’s so picturesque and creative,” Blaine says earnestly) and the first place they stop is one of the city’s post offices.

“This isn’t particularly picturesque,” Kurt says, and then Blaine pulls out a little key and leads them to a post-office box. Kurt peers over his shoulder, staring at the envelopes inside. “Haven’t you had a birthday at sea this year?”

“Yeah, a month before you came on board. We kept to a fairly simple lunch in the cafeteria.”

“So you wouldn’t get drunk and make a fool of yourself?” Kurt asks sweetly, and Blaine sighs and nods his head. “So where are the birthday cards?” Kurt asks, looking at the three envelopes in Blaine’s hand. One is from the DMV, and the other two have corporate logos Kurt doesn’t recognize. None of them look like personal mail.

“Wes and David sent e-cards,” Blaine says distractedly, closing up the little metal door and locking the postal box. He slides the letters into his bag.

“And your folks?”

Blaine looks at him, really looks as if he’s judging Kurt against some unspoken, internal criteria. Whatever it is, Kurt must pass.

“My parents don’t send cards,” Blaine says, shrugging. “We’re not in contact.” That’s an outright lie because Kurt saw the card Blaine sent, he saw the detailed listing of Blaine’s address. But now the careful formality of it makes sense.

“You’re not talking?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never had the courage to call them and find out. We argued about me keeping this job. They wanted me to go back to Stanford and I refused. It was...” Blaine trails off, shaking his head. “We fought but after seven months at sea, I had enough saved to pay them back the parental contribution. I handed dad a cheque and stormed out. I’ve written, but... I haven’t heard from them since.”

“They cut you out of their lives? Just like that?” Kurt couldn’t imagine being out of contact with his dad, or Carole, or Finn. He couldn’t imagine any fight that would result in years of silent punishment.

“It’s not entirely their fault, Kurt. I could have had them in my life. I could have made different decisions and had parents who invited me home for the holidays, who wanted to hear about my new car or new job, or a down payment on an apartment somewhere.”

“You wouldn’t have been happy,” Kurt says, and he knows they’re not just discussing Blaine’s parents. There are other choices here, but neither of them wants to argue. Neither of them wants to start something so impractical, so unmanageable. It wasn’t what they agreed to.

“I chose my happiness over their hopes for me.” Blaine almost sounds apologetic, like living his own life was a selfish decision. “I don’t regret it, but I disappointed them. They could have overlooked me being gay if I’d still been their kind of success, if I’d achieved something they could have been proud of.”

“I’m proud of you,” Kurt says. He has to try, even if it doesn’t mean as much to Blaine. “Just the way you are.”

Blaine beams and rests a hand on Kurt’s shoulder. For a moment, Kurt thinks Blaine’s going to kiss him, but Blaine only squeezes Kurt’s shoulder and drops his hand. “That’s— Thank you.”

Kurt plasters on a smile – he doesn’t want to smile, he wants to hold on to Blaine and never let go – and says as brightly as he can, “So where’s the promised life-altering sushi?”

Lunch is almost normal. They talk about the food and the weather and discuss good things to see in the city. Neither of them mentions Kurt leaving. Kurt doesn’t mention catching Mike outside the shared bathrooms (“Give everyone my best,” Mike had said and then given Kurt one of those three-second, back-patting, straight-guy hugs) or running into Santana and Brittany in hallway.

He doesn’t tell Blaine that he thanked Santana for getting him the job, and was disconcerted enough to openly tell her that he’s glad she’s happy (“It’s good to know someone found a happily ever after,” he’d said and she’d rolled her eyes and called him more sickening than an Easter peep). He certainly doesn’t

tell Blaine that they offered to keep an eye on Blaine: Brittany said she'd hug him if he looked sad; Santana said if he got drunk, she'd watch out for him ("Rest easy, Porcelain. I won't let Sebastian hit that junky trunk on the rebound.").

After lunch, they walk back to the wharf. They're holding hands, and it's a relief to be in a city where that small affection doesn't rate a glance from the passing tourists. Kurt's even laughing as Blaine tells him about the first time he rode on the outside of a cable car and feared for his life every time they passed a badly parked car.

They walk and talk until Kurt has to get his bags and head to the airport. Blaine's due back on the ship in an hour so he can't go with Kurt ("It would take me too long to get back to the wharf," Blaine says apologetically, his eyes screwed up and his hand on Kurt's wrist, "otherwise, I'd be there."). Blaine flags a cab for him with a friendly arm wave – apparently, the whistle and vertical arm movement that works in Manhattan isn't needed here – and then lifts Kurt's bag into the cab. Kurt doesn't need the physical assistance but he doesn't have the heart to tell Blaine he can manage fine on his own.

They say their goodbyes standing on the pavement. Blaine holds onto Kurt a little too tight, and for all of his insistence on no tears, Kurt hears the catch in his voice, the unsteady breath he gasps against Kurt's neck. "Kurt," Blaine says, miserable and desperate. "This, all of it, I—"

"I know," Kurt says as Blaine's voice breaks and Blaine's fingers dig in even tighter. "I know, Blaine. You don't have to say it."

The cab driver yells that the meter's running, and that's enough to make them let go. Blaine says something about beating the traffic as Kurt gets into the backseat. Reaching in, Blaine gives his hand a squeeze and too quickly lets go. Then he steps back and closes the door, saying, "Have a good flight," and it's done.

At the airport, Kurt checks his bags and finds his gate and waits numbly for his flight to be called. He lines up in a daze, trudging onto the flight, and it's not until he's watching the misty clouds outside the plane that it hits him. That's it. That's the last time he'll see Blaine. The last story he'll get to hear and the last time he'll feel Blaine's fingers around his.

That was the last time and he never said the important things. He never told Blaine that this was love, regardless of how long it lasted. He never told Blaine how incredible and sweet he really is. Kurt should have said it. He should have made it clear that any guy would be lucky to have Blaine. He should have said how lucky he was to have met Blaine, but he didn't, and now it's too late.

Kurt turns his face towards the little plastic window and tries to think about New York and all the things he's missed. He's only known Blaine for three months. Three months shouldn't be enough to feel so much loss.

Part Two

He gets to JFK after midnight. By the time he gets home, it's early morning. The city streets are as dark and quiet as it ever gets here. He unpacks while he's still too tired to think about it (to remember Blaine's fingers adjusting the collar of that shirt, or the way Blaine stared when he wore these skinny jeans, or wearing this old shirt to bed, Blaine's head on his shoulder and his hand holding tight to the material) and falls into bed.

The queen bed is big and empty, too much room to toss and turn.

New York is home. Kurt loves the city from the lively, open feel of Central Park to the freezing wind of the ferry in winter. He loves the crowds during rush hour and the constant lanes of taxis in Manhattan, but he also loves the slower pace of Brooklyn on a Sunday and the extra space. As much as he hates to admit it, he grew up in the Midwest, and sometimes there's not enough sky between the buildings in Manhattan. Until he can afford to live with full-window views and vaulted ceilings, he'll stay where he can afford to give his boots the breathing space they deserve.

He loves the fashions of New York, the ambition and theatricality of the city from all the wannabe Broadway stars (like himself) to the office girls pretending to belong in a big city to the executives announcing they're VPs like they're playing a role. Most people in New York are striving to be more than they are now, so many have come from other towns and cities determined to make it big, determined to be fearless so far from where they grew up. It's the perfect city for Kurt.

Kurt usually loves it, but today, it feels full of people who don't belong. He can't help noticing the tired, drawn expressions on the subway, people working long, hard hours so far away from home.

He meets Rachel for lunch at the new vegan place on Sixth Avenue. It's a tradition of theirs to meet on the first Tuesday of the month. It used to be a Wednesday, so they could go to lunch and catch a matinee (although during college, that frequently meant going to Subway to split a vegan sub and then walking up

Broadway to watch all the people who could afford tickets). These days, Kurt still can't afford a ticket every month, but now Rachel has matinee performances of her own, so shifting to Tuesdays worked for both of them.

Rachel shows up in a citrus lemon beret and a simple lime green shift dress. Personally, Kurt wouldn't have added the orange shoes and scarf, but Rachel's never understood subtlety. He does love her earrings, though: they're actual citrus fruit, a tiny dangling collection of lemons, limes and oranges layered to hang two inches from her earlobes.

"Those earrings are fantastic," Kurt says as Rachel breezes a kiss to his cheek.

"You think so?" Her smile is wide and bright enough to be seen from the cheap seats in the upper stalls. "I picked them up this week, round the corner from China Town."

Kurt nods. They've both found surprising treasures from the loud stalls in that area.

They find seats, and Rachel asks about the cruise. She asks the kind of questions that Kurt would expect: what were the working conditions, what was the pay scale, how many performances a week, how much artistic independence was allowed and what were the other performers like. Kurt answers every question and when her professional curiosity is finally sated, he asks, "Were you considering a career move to the holiday entertainment industry?"

"Well, not now, obviously," Rachel says, tossing her hair back and leaning forward with that frightening intensity she's always had for performing. "But a professional entertainer can never take a career path for granted. It's good to be aware of the alternative venues and to be forewarned that performing a show based entirely on Barbra melodies is something that would need to be negotiated before signing the employment contract."

Kurt nods, finishing the last of his couscous with roasted vegetables. "That's certainly something you'd want in writing before getting on the ship."

"It's good to know," Rachel says, and then the grin gets blindingly bright. "Now, I need to tell you about the changes they made to the production while you were gone. Did you know they changed the order of two scenes and actually wrote in a second solo for me?"

Kurt means to call Mercedes, but he procrastinates. In some ways, his friendship with Rachel is easier. They're emotionally close and he was there for the whole Finn-Rachel doomed breakup of junior year at NYADA, but given the choice between discussing a career on Broadway or feelings, Rachel will always choose stage lights. It's not selfishness so much as extreme focus. If Kurt said he was upset, Rachel would want to talk about it (and do whatever she could to help, no matter how crazy the scheme) but if he doesn't mention it, she'll never notice.

Mercedes, on the other hand, has always had a sixth sense of identifying topics he doesn't want to discuss. She'll call him on avoidance and challenge him to be honest. The only person who knows Kurt's evasion tactics better is his dad, and his dad has never waved a finger at him and said, "You can pull off stripes, plaid and polka dots in the same outfit, so I know you have the guts to be honest with me."

Kurt puts off calling her until the morning he's flying back to Ohio for Thanksgiving. He got to the airport early and now has an interminable hour before he can board, so he calls. Mercedes is thrilled to hear from him and asks about the cruise ("What was the weather like? Were the tourists cute?" and after Kurt answers, she asks, "What was the worst fashion disaster you saw because last week, I saw tartan socks with sandals and ankle length stone-wash jeans. There's no excuse for that.") and Kurt's lulled into relaxing as he talks on his cell.

Then Mercedes asks, "So what happened with the cutest boy in the world? You don't use that description often."

"I never use that description," Kurt bites back, because he... generally doesn't. Well, not about people he's actually met. It's the kind of phrase he only uses to describe hot guys who take their shirts off on the big screen. "Almost never."

"I have a postcard that says differently," Mercedes crows back.

"I'd forgotten about that," Kurt says quietly, remembering having written that. He'd been standing next to Blaine, their elbows brushing as they both wrote. He remembers how silly he'd felt at the time, too giddy and excited not to share with Mercedes. He knew there was a reason he'd put off calling her.

If anyone knows how to read Kurt's tone, it's Mercedes. She hums softly down the line and gently asks, "It ended badly?"

"Not badly, but it ended," Kurt admits. He doesn't rub at his eyes because that can lead to wrinkles. Instead, he very carefully presses the heel of his hand to each eye in turn. "It's for the best. There's about a million reasons why it couldn't work long-term and we both knew that. But..."

"But you liked him," Mercedes says knowingly.

"So much." Kurt takes a deep breath before he can get too upset while talking on a cell phone in a public area. If there's anything he's learned from riding the subway, it's that distressingly personal conversations can happen on a cell in public, but they really, really shouldn't. He forces a smile and hopes it shows in his tone. "But he was very cute."

"The new James Bond cute or the shirtless hottie of the week cute?"

"Teenage crush on Jesse Bradford cute."

From the way Mercedes says, "Aw, honey," she remembers their Cheerio squad time well. "If it's really bad, you can always come out and stay with me for a while."

As much as Kurt appreciates the sentiment, he's fairly certain visiting home will alleviate the worst of it.

He's picked up at the airport and welcomed home in a flurry of hugs from everyone. Kurt notices that his dad hugs him twice, but he doesn't say anything.

They get back to the house and Kurt's shown up to the spare room. It used to be his room but since then, it's been redecorated in cool greys and warm beiges (Kurt had helped Carole pull it together during his second spring break. For all the acid-wash denim and dubious '80s photos, the woman has style). This isn't the room he grew up in. He only lived here for two years between the wedding and leaving for college, but his family's here so it's still home away from home.

There are things here that mean family. There's the smell of Carole's pumpkin pie in the oven, a recipe that's slowly been modified to low-fat and low-carb, not that either of them would let his dad know that. There's the sound of Finn playing on his beat-up old Xbox, hollering from his room as he fails to shoot someone in the head (or gets shot in the head, it's hard to tell). There's the background sound of football on the TV, and there's a smear of black engine grease on a dish towel because his dad couldn't resist going in early to the shop to make sure everything's being done right.

Kurt always associates those smears of grease with his childhood. There's a small sink in the shop, too tiny to be much use at getting all the grease off his dad's hands, but his dad refuses to change it. He always said that it wasn't broken so it didn't need to be fixed, and then he'd come home and leave a dark mark on the first thing he touched. Kurt learned early that stain removal was an art form and that it was best to avoid hugging his dad until he'd had a chance to wash his hands at home.

Usually, Kurt loves being home. He loves getting back to New York too, but there are things about Ohio that he can appreciate for a short stretch of time. Ohio comes with that warm, safe feeling of family, but he also likes the space, the slow vacation pace of Lima, and how the town actually hasn't changed much. There are things he wishes had changed and they're the things that bothered him as a kid: the lack of choice and diversity, the longing for originality, wanting more than just denim and flannel for boys (and the way wanting that marked him as different in the worst ways). Judging by the kids he sees on the streets, that still hasn't changed.

But there are other things. Being recognized by name at the local stores because he grew up around here is kind of nice. He likes that there's still space in the town. The Lima Bean is still open and still filled with high schoolers; Scandals is just as low-key and depressing as it ever was. There are so many things that are familiar and home, and they make him feel grown up because there's nothing scary and huge here. Compared to the craziness of New York, this is small and quaint, and kind of delightful in a way he never, ever appreciated when he lived here.

He gets to see his dad. He gets to tell his dad about the cruise, about all those days at sea and looking out at the bluest of water. How he could go out at the deck at night and it was black from sea to sky, the crests of the waves barely visible as he listened to the crescendo of water. He even confesses to his dad that he thought about the Titanic, how terrifying it would have been to sink in icy, black waters, to wait through the night unable to get your bearings.

"Did you watch that movie a lot while you were away?" his dad asks, smirking into his beer.

Kurt will admit that he went through a... phase when he was younger and watched it frequently. At the time, he'd wanted to be Rose (for the hats if nothing else) and wanted to sing the theme song. He'd sang the French version when the Cheerios won Nationals and since discovered that a fabulous hat makes its own entrance. But he still has a copy of the movie that gets pulled out when he needs a good cry. "It's apparently bad luck to watch a film about shipwrecks when you're aboard a ship. Like watching *Alive* while you're flying. I think it's complete superstition, but Blaine insisted."

His dad gives him this look: a little smug, a little amused but mostly curious.

Kurt raises his eyebrow right back. "What?"

"You've talked more about this Blaine guy than you have about the rest of the crew, and three of them went to all those competitions with you."

Kurt shrugs it off. He hasn't exactly told his dad about Blaine. He's thought about it but... he's not sure what he'd say. Apparently, while Kurt's been trying to work out the best way to describe Blaine, he's been telling his dad all about him.

"You're here for another five days, kiddo. You'll tell me before you leave."

Kurt thought the first person he'd talk to about Blaine would be his dad, but it's actually Finn. Finn finds him standing out in the winter chill, hat and scarf and coat on – because he's not insane and this is Ohio in winter – staring out at the stars. There's too much light pollution in New York to ever see the stars, but after watching them so bright and clear in the middle of the ocean, Kurt's missed them. Kurt's missing a lot of things.

"Hey, dude," Finn says, closing the door behind him. He stands there sort of awkwardly when Kurt nods back but doesn't say anything else. Then Finn shrugs and buries his hands into pockets of his denim jacket. (He's wearing a denim jacket and a Henley in winter, it's ridiculous. Kurt would freeze if he tried that.) "You okay? 'Cause you seem kind of... down. Your favourite designer didn't get shot again, did he?"

Kurt would make a cutting reply if he hadn't gone into mourning for a week when that actually happened. And that wasn't a high-school, teenage melodramatic reaction either. That was last year. "No, nobody died."

"Then what's up? It's not cancer, right?" Finn asks suddenly and the only reason Kurt doesn't boggle at him is that he's had conversations with Brittany over the past few months. Non sequiturs and misunderstandings are her norm. "Because I had this really bad flu last week and while I was at home, I saw this movie about a kid with leukemia and the first sign of that was lots of moping."

"I don't have cancer, and I'm not dying. If I'm moping, it's because I met someone, not because my life has turned into a Lifetime movie."

"On the boat?"

"Not a boat. It's a ship. They get touchy about that."

"Huh." Nodding, Finn walks across the dark porch and settles beside Kurt on the swing chair. "What was he like?"

"He was..." Kurt doesn't know how to explain Blaine. How can he sum up a boy like that in a few words? "He was... God."

Finn looks worried. "I'm speaking from experience here, dude. Not everything that looks like Jesus actually is."

"He wasn't literally god." As much as Kurt loves his brother, some things need to be spelled out for him. Using small, simple words. "He was a guy. He was a really cute, sweet, hot, funny, talented guy."

They sit in silence after that. Finn's nodding to himself, then he crosses his arms like he's just realized it's close to freezing. "So what happened?"

"He works on the boat."

"I thought it was a ship."

"It's not important," Kurt snaps back. "What's important is that he doesn't live in the Tristate area. I saw you and Rachel try the long-distance thing. It crashes and burns."

"That sucks," Finn says feelingly.

"Tell me about it."

"Okay," Finn says and stands up, "I've got to run to the store for a few things. Anything you need?"

"I'm good," Kurt says, almost laughing at the sudden change in subject. Sometimes, Finn treats emotional conversations like a dentist visit: something he has to show up and do, but he's hoping it won't last more than thirty minutes. "A little heartbroken, but otherwise fine."

When Finn returns, Kurt's still sitting out on the porch, enjoying the chill and the quiet. He hears the traffic occasionally, but it's missing the near-constant hum of cars and voices from his apartment's fire escape.

"Time to get you inside," Finn says as he stomps up the wooden steps of the porch in his gigantic feet. Kurt wonders how he even finds shoes, and then he looks at the atrociously cheap sneakers Finn's wearing. Well, that explains it. No taste must make it easier to shop.

Kurt follows Finn inside to the warmth. He takes off his jacket and his scarf, his loose woolen hat and the fleece-lined vest he was wearing, and his purple multi-textured gloves, and then joins Finn on the couch. Finn pulls a few things out of the bag. There's a small tub of fat-free hazelnut gelato (one of Kurt's favourites) and a block of sugar-free organic dark chocolate (another of Kurt's favourites) and then he goes to the bookshelf and pulls out *Mulan*, *Fantasia* and *Chicago*.

"If I get a choice," Finn says, showing the three covers to Kurt, "I'd rather start with *Fantasia*. Dancing hippos are cool."

"Finn, don't take this the wrong way, but what are you doing?"

"I remember the last time you broke up with someone." Finn shrugs, like this is an everyday occurrence, like his stepbrother pining over the boy of his dreams is perfectly normal in Lima, Ohio. Moments like this make Kurt so proud of his brother and the man he's becoming. Finn's not the smartest or the most sophisticated guy in the world; he never outgrew that naiveté that Kurt once chose to believe was

adolescent awkwardness, and he never really grew into the length of his arms and legs. He dances badly and is terrible at Scrabble, but he's one of the sweetest, most devoted people that Kurt's ever met. Sometimes, Kurt loves his brother more than he can say.

"You're the best brother ever," Kurt says, and Finn gives him that crooked, self-congratulating smile that proves he wasn't expecting to be acknowledged for this. "Let's start with the hippos."

The rest of the visit goes the way it usually does. Kurt cooks a few meals with Carole, shares favourite recipes recently discovered. He helps his dad out in the shop, because even though Finn runs it these days – and Kurt's silently thankful when he sees how Finn takes on the heavy, awkward jobs before his dad can – it wouldn't be a Hummel family holiday without his dad spending some quiet hours in the garage.

His dad's always given the guys the week off around Thanksgiving, and Finn's maintained the tradition so it's just the three of them crowded around an old Ford. This is a side of himself Kurt rarely shows in New York. He's not sure any of his friends there would believe that the Kurt Hummel they know – who thinks every day should be greeted with a brand new costume – is the same guy who's happy in overalls, bent over the hood of a car, trying to help Finn shift a particularly difficult radiator out of the way.

There's something about working with his hands and working with his family that makes it easy to talk. Finn talks about the business ("I kind of stressed when that new place opened on Lincoln Drive, but we're doing okay.") and the guys ("Tim's getting divorced, Evan's just had his first kid and might be dropping back to part-time work."). His dad talks about the traffic in Washington ("Absolutely ridiculous.") and the lack of good rental properties ("I think it's fine, but Carole hates the bathroom, so we'll be looking at somewhere new again."). Kurt talks about New York and the jobs he's had (or, fine, the auditions he got hopeful about and still didn't get). He doesn't mention Rachel in case she's still a sore subject, but Finn asks how she's doing and he sounds curious, so Kurt tells him that too. He tells Finn how successful Rachel is, how she's loving every show, how back in high school it would have made him viciously, violently jealous, and now he's thrilled for her.

"Okay," Kurt allows graciously, "I might be a touch envious, but I'm mostly happy for her."

"Yeah, I can hear in the tone of your voice," his dad says. He's laughing at Kurt. Kurt can hear it, even though he tries to cover it with a cough. Kurt glares, but his dad only rolls his eyes. "So we've done careers, apartments, and friends. What about love life? Anyone on the horizon?"

Kurt sighs the most dramatic, world-weary sigh he can manage. "You would think in a city of eight million people, I'd have found Mr Right in one of the five boroughs. I'm not picky. I'd even date someone from Queens, although Long Island or Manhattan would be preferable."

"What about the boat dude?" Finn asks, damn him. Not that Kurt's trying to keep it a secret from his dad, but... well. His dad's always been kind of practical, even when it comes to heartbreak. He's pretty sure his dad's going to tell him the things Kurt already knows: that the guy is overseas for most of the year, that you can't build a life on seeing someone during a few holidays, that Kurt has his own life and career in New York and it's a bit ridiculous to give that up for a holiday fling.

Kurt considers not saying anything, but his dad's watching him with eyes narrowed under his baseball cap. Kurt knows that look. That's the look that says Burt Hummel is no-one's fool. That's the look that got him elected to office. "You met someone on the ship?" his dad asks carefully, and from that tone he knows this is something big.

"Yes, fine," Kurt says, "I met someone." The radiator comes free, and Kurt pulls his hands back, spins around so he can face his dad. "And he was perfect. Even his imperfections were charming. I mean, Katy Perry, honestly, who's kept any of her albums? And twenty-eight Disney musicals saved to his laptop, all of them cartoons. Add two drinks, he becomes the lush of the party, I kid you not. But he was really something."

"So what happened?" his dad asks.

Beside him, Finn makes a face for a moment, and then adds, "Was he straight?"

"Oh, please. My gaydar is so much better than it was in high school," Kurt says with an eloquent roll of his eyes. Living in New York for the past seven years has been fabulous for that.

His dad raises his hands in surrender. "Just wondering what happened. You still like him, so it didn't end on a bad note. I know you, Kurt. If he'd dumped you, you wouldn't be singing his praises. If you'd dumped him, you'd have a good reason and you'd share it."

Kurt shrugs, glancing down at his hands. That's when he notices how filthy his nails are. The worst thing about working on cars is the grease and grime. The only possible defense is to wash his hands frequently, so he heads over to the basin.

"He's worked on the ships for years, and he wants to keep doing it." Lathering up his hands, Kurt tries to shift as much of the dirty engine oil as he can. It's almost as stubborn as he is. "I want Broadway."

When he turns around, his dad's still watching him, staring like there's something he doesn't get. "So you both have careers."

"He performs on the ships, Dad. He loves it."

"So you both have musical careers," his dad says uncertainly.

"He'd be on a ship for seven months a year. You can't date someone you never see." Kurt isn't whining. He isn't. "It couldn't possibly work."

"Huh," his dad says and then switches his attention to the engine in such an obvious change of subject that Kurt shakes his head. He appreciates it, but still. There is no subtlety in this family.

Kurt probably should have known something was up when Carole invited him to help sort through her wardrobe.

Not that he's not willing to. He always tries to encourage it, honestly. And not just Carole's wardrobe. Kurt's offered to help his dad and Finn. And Rachel. And Mercedes. It's an addiction that results in better fashions for everyone, so Kurt isn't too ashamed.

Usually, if Carole gives in, it's after a lot of prompting and it's restricted to one type of clothing. The Christmas holidays when Carole consented to Kurt clearing through her collection of denim jackets had been wonderful. He hadn't felt so proud of himself since the acceptance letter for NYADA came.

This is the first time that Carole actually suggested sorting through her wardrobe, and Kurt's having a great time pulling clothes out of her closet and piling them into yes, no and maybe piles. There are two maybe piles. One is for the clothes that Kurt is abstaining from judging until he's seen how they look on Carole. The other is for the clothes that are terrifyingly, retina-scarringly hideous but Carole loves them. Kurt would rather burn them than pretend they are a potentially forgivable crime against fashion, but he won't. There's a limit to the number of sartorial miracles he can achieve in one day, and today will be a success if he can assassinate the distressed denim jeans and matching vest combo lurking in the deepest shadows of her closet.

"So," Carole says as she nods to a deep green, mandarin-collared chiffon shirt that's definitely going in the no pile, "you met someone while you were away?"

Kurt rolls his eyes. "I should have known Finn couldn't keep a secret." That's not entirely fair, Kurt knows. Finn is perfectly capable of keeping secrets, but they usually have to revolve around Rachel for Finn to keep them successfully. Kurt's secrets have always had a 50/50 success rate. Getting detention for talking back during European History? Finn blurted it out within two days. Going to Columbus overnight with Mercedes to see *La Cage Aux Folles* when he was technically grounded? Finn covered for him and never told either of their parents. Kurt's never been able to figure out which secrets Finn will keep or why.

"Not just Finn. Burt too." Carole smiles and gives a little shrug. "They were worried about you. They wanted me to ask if, you know, you were okay."

"They could have asked. I was standing right there."

"Yeah, they could have," Carole agrees fondly, "but they were worried."

Kurt sighs and sits down on the bed. It's not a good idea to sort through clothing when distracted by a conversation like this. That's how a diagonal-striped hooded cardigan in beige and lilac stayed in his wardrobe for two seasons straight. (Not every bold fashion statement has been the best purchase in hindsight.) "Despite their over-worrying and complete lack of secrecy, they're still the two best guys I know." Kurt gives Carole a look and he can't help smiling briefly. "Which is a bit tragic, considering."

"So, on a scale of re-watching *The Princess Bride* to a full Bridget Jones' style drunkenly bawling to *All By Myself*, how are you?"

Kurt ponders the question for a moment. "I'm at the self-pitying stage of walking down the street and listing all the things I'll never show Blaine, but I'm okay. No drunken karaoke yet." What Kurt loves the most is that Carole doesn't push. She nods and walks to the closet to pull out the next thing.

Oh, god, it's a repulsive sundress in a paisley blue print that is such an unflattering cut across the hips for anyone over Size Stickfigure. What in the world could have convinced Carole to buy it?

Carole sees the look on Kurt's face and puts it straight in the no pile. She doesn't even argue it.

The next one – a rather sweet sweater in medium pink, thick and woolly and practical, but a nice colour for Carole – goes into the yes pile. "Can I give you some advice, Kurt? Something to think about?"

It's typical of Carole. Carole asks and doesn't presume Kurt needs to be told. She's never forced her way into his life. She stepped in and looked after his dad, made his dad smile again (which was wonderful) and she was there when Kurt left for college and stopped him from worrying (if his dad would eat right, if his dad would be lonely, all those little things Kurt didn't realize he worried about until he didn't need to anymore), but she never pushed. She always treated Kurt like an adult.

Knowing the choice was his, it was easy for Kurt to embrace her as family. "Go ahead. But it had better be more insightful than 'there are plenty of fish in the sea' or 'follow your heart,'" Kurt says.

"Not everyone on that cruise ship was single," she says.

"What?" Kurt asks. "No, they weren't. Am I supposed to be thankful he wasn't secretly married?"

"Having someone you love working away from you for months at a time sucks. I did it with Finn's dad. It can be lonely and frustrating, but it can work if you really love someone. Just because somebody's job is miles away doesn't mean you stop loving them. It's hard, but it's not impossible."

"That's your advice?"

Carole hums for a moment, low and tuneless. "My advice is to think about it. Burt said he's never seen you so caught up in someone and if you love him that much... think about it. Sometimes you've got to work for the good things in your life. Sometimes you got to take the risk, be patient and give it your all."

“And sometimes,” Kurt says drily, “you have to be sensible and recognize that risk-taking isn’t a path to a stable future.”

“Depends on the risk. Your dad and I both sold our places, bought somewhere entirely new and moved in together with teenage sons. To be honest, we’d both have been financially screwed if it didn’t work out.” Carole reaches up casually, and squeezes Kurt’s arm. “Nobody ever won the love of their life by playing it safe.”

Kurt dreams of being back on the ship. The hallways are too bright. The gold is glaring, catching the light as he passes through the inside decks. Kurt walks through familiar places: the bars he performed at, the empty corridors with big armchairs, places that used to have passengers sitting and reading. He walks to the theatre, and it’s deserted. He never saw it full of passengers, never saw a show here because he was always working, but he saw Mike practice to a room of vacant chairs.

Walking through one doorway takes him to another room, somewhere that doesn’t connect in reality but he doesn’t even question that he can step from the theatre dressing rooms straight to Blaine’s room. He knows it’s Blaine’s room from the calendar on the wall, a photo of a sad-eyed puppy above the grid of time, each day crossed through in dark, permanent marker.

Opening the same door he came through, he’s suddenly on the outside deck. The sky’s grey and overcast, too gloomy to be outdoors. The cold wind cuts right through Kurt, but he steps forward. He traces a familiar route, around the corner to see two deck chairs laid out, two rumpled blankets left on them and Blaine’s white canvas bag sitting between them. He can see the front covers of Vogue peeking out, the magazines a smeared blur but those well-known letters still crisp and certain.

Kurt turns around and walks back with a growing sense of dread. He can feel the edge of panic, the urge to walk faster, to hurry. He’s missing something, he knows it. He’s striding through corridors, faster now, and remembering it must be in his room. He must have left it there.

When he opens the door, his room is just as he remembers it. The fabric hangs gently from the corners of the room, softening the square cabin walls and hanging in gentle curves across the ceiling. On his bed are grey covers edged in satin and embroidered in dark blue, and a dark head of hair lying on Kurt’s pale pillowcase. Blaine’s fast asleep, covers cocooned around him.

The relief is so strong that Kurt's knees almost sag with it. Everything will be fine. He's sure of it. What he was looking for is right here, he thinks, and he steps towards the bed.

He doesn't seem to get any closer. He takes another step, and another, but the bed stretches further away, harder to reach. He knows that shouldn't be the case, knows something's wrong. He starts to panic, to speed up his steps, and then he starts to jog. Every heavy footstep takes so much effort but the bed is further than ever. He flat-out runs, but the bed is still on the other side of the room and he can't get any closer.

Kurt wakes up, breathing hard. For a moment it's disconcerting that he's in a different room. Not on the cruise ship, not in his apartment, but in this room that was only his for a few short years.

It doesn't take a genius to put together the meaning of that dream. Kurt wishes his subconscious would be a little more creative.

When Kurt gets back to New York, winter is undeniable. The sky's a dark, gunmetal grey, and Kurt misses the fall foliage. He loves the colours of New York in fall, the leaves twisting into red, orange and yellow, all of Central Park becoming bright and gloriously alive before the spindly death of cold and snow turns the park into a quiet, ghostly realm.

Kurt always admires the colours of New York. He likes the way a stormy sky and a few leaves can make him think about his own wardrobe. Specifically, he's thinking of stovepipe, charcoal grey pants with a rusty orange pinstripe. How he could match them to what he thinks of as his fall cardigan, all orange and deep reds and earthy browns, picked up for eight dollars at a flea market three years ago and knitted with the softest wool. He'd had to adjust the cuffs and change the buttons on it, but it's a favourite now.

Kurt thinks about what he'd wear under it. A high-necked, long-sleeved black top might work, but maybe he should stick to the grey and orange theme, wear the dove-grey boat-neck top with the three-quarter length sleeves... He thinks he still has that from last season. He can't remember culling it from his wardrobe. Those slightly unusual staples are always handy and endlessly versatile in layers.

He's still thinking of the outfit and possible accessories as he opens his mailbox. There are bills, more bills and a credit card statement that he needs to look at before he even considers buying a new top (no matter how good something in deep, darkest red would look against that cardigan, and how well it would work with those pants). Halfway through the pile, his thumb catches on the thin corner of an airmail envelope. The postmark says San Francisco and the stamp is a shot of the San Francisco Bridge, red against blue, heavy metal beams rising and curving across the water of the bay.

It's addressed to Kurt Hummel with Kurt's address printed neatly. It's unmistakably Blaine's handwriting, but Kurt can't even begin to imagine what Blaine's message would be. Kurt turns it over. The sender address looks familiar (that same post office box address, Kurt's sure of it) but it doesn't give him any hints.

Kurt shoves it back into the pile of mail, hiding it from himself until his apartment door is closed behind him. He doesn't look until he's standing in his own kitchen, the rest of the envelopes dropped carelessly to the counter. Then he takes a breath and tears it open.

The first thing Kurt notices is the way the words are sprawled across cramped, uneven lines. It's how Blaine writes when he's too busy wanting to tell everything to worry about how he's doing it. The writing slants upwards at the end of the lines and Kurt can't help smiling at that, messy as it is.

Kurt brushes his thumb along the lines of text and starts reading.

Dear Kurt,

I know I just sent you off in a cab, but I realized there were things I hadn't told you about San Francisco, and I couldn't stop thinking about the things we didn't get a chance to do here. If you ever come back, you should ride the cable car. Get on at Union Square, I swear the tourists are half the fun. The lines are ridiculous, especially if you come on the Fourth of July weekend, but it's so cool to see everyone love it.

You should wander around Fisherman's Wharf. The seafood there is fantastic and the vibe of the place is fun and silly, Kurt. It's become such a tourist attraction but no-one takes it too seriously. It's full of people having a great time.

Take a bus over to Sorrento, especially in the afternoon when the whole town is drenched in sunlight. There are galleries and tiny little cafés, and walking from store to store should be a wandering adventure. The pace of that town is so different from the city, like it's this little place carved out of summer.

I know you're not much for the outdoors, but you should see the redwoods too. They're worth the trip and they're huge. Even if you go in June and the fog's thick, once you get there it's incredible. Just looking up at these trees that have been here for hundreds of years makes you want to stand taller. Crane your neck back and see them stretch into the sky. Sometimes, it's good to know there are things that are bigger than us, things that were here before us and will be here after us, will go on growing no matter what.

I'd also suggest getting coffees at Macy's. There's a Starbucks there and if you get an armchair by the window, you can sit there for hours watching people walk across Union Square. It's a wonderful way to people-watch, and very comfortable.

Then the writing style shifts. The slanted, messy lines become upright and carefully rounded letters. Kurt can imagine it too easily: Blaine jotting down his thoughts quickly and then reconsidering before he posted it.

I'm not expecting a reply, Kurt. I'm not trying to change what we agreed to but if we'd had more time, I would have done these things with you. These are the things that made me fall in love with San Francisco and if you get a chance, you should let this city win you over too. So consider this letter a personalized tourism brochure, nothing more demanding than that.

*Yours sincerely,
Blaine Anderson*

It makes no logical sense, but Kurt's first reaction is to be annoyed. They had an agreement. They had a clear, simple arrangement. If Kurt had known it was going to merge into pen pals, well... If Kurt had known...

Kurt wants to say he wouldn't have agreed if he'd known this would drag out forever and become an annoyance. He's never been a good pen pal, not even in those compulsory letter-writing programs from elementary school. But it would be a complete lie.

Honestly, if he'd known writing was an option, he would have written the first letter. But it wouldn't have been this cheery 'let's be besties' kind of note. If Kurt had written, it would have been gushing and overblown.

So maybe he should be glad that Blaine's made this first step and made it clear that friendship is a possibility. Kurt should probably be thrilled about it. But he's not.

He knows the snuffling breaths of Blaine falling asleep and the smell of his skin first thing in the morning, warm and spicy, comforting. He knows that Blaine's feet are always hot but his nose sometimes gets cold, that he squeezes the middle of the toothpaste and isn't as gentle as he should be when applying eye-cream. Kurt can't imagine going from being so close to so distantly friendly.

He wants Blaine in his life. Kurt knows that from the way his throat closed up when he recognized the handwriting and the way his hands started to shake before he ripped the envelope open. But this feels too much like doing something halfway, and Kurt doesn't know if he could bear it.

So Kurt does what he's always done in times of severe indecision. He grabs a copy of Vogue, makes himself a hot mint tea and resolves to work it out later.

"Hummel-Hudson residence," his dad says clearly. It's that gruff, workman tone he uses for strangers.

"Hey, Dad. It's me."

"Hey, kiddo," his dad says, sounding less polite and much happier. "How are things?"

Kurt groans, because it's really been that kind of week. It's been a week of indecision where he doesn't know if he wants to write back (he does, but he doesn't, and he keeps talking himself in circles) or what he'd say if he did. It's why he called, really. Talking to his dad has always made him feel better about his decisions, whatever they were.

"That good, huh?" his dad asks.

"It's not bad. It's just..." Kurt sighs. "I don't know what to do, Dad."

“You’re calling for advice?” His dad sounds amused and smug, but Kurt knows he deserves it. He’s never taken advice easily, not even from his dad, and he very rarely asks for it. “World must be ending.”

“I was going to talk to Carole and finish a conversation from Thanksgiving,” Kurt says, “but maybe you’ll do.”

“About the long-distance thing?”

Kurt should have known. “You guys clearly discuss every detail.”

“Try raising two teenage boys,” his dad says back. “Talking about everything is the only way to stay sane.”

“Like raising me was anything like raising Finn,” Kurt says lightly. They both know he doesn’t really mean it. Finn might have been the one with pregnancy scares and dirty socks everywhere and breaking up with girlfriends every few months, but Kurt kept challenging his fashion allowance and arguing to do anything the girls could do. And he knows the bullying saga took its toll on the whole family.

“Didn’t say it was the same, but teenagers are never easy. Trust me, someday you’ll raise kids of your own and realize how right I am.”

“Not with a guy who spends half the year at sea,” Kurt replies, and then he tells his dad everything. He even reads him the letter.

His dad sighs and says, “So what’s the real problem? You don’t know if you like the guy, or you don’t think he’s worth the effort?”

“Dad,” Kurt whines like he’s back in high school again. “Weren’t you listening? He’s absolutely worth it.”

“So...”

“Do you think I could do it? Do you think I’d be happy? I mean, long distance isn’t anyone’s idea of a happy ending, and Carole might be right. It’s possible but it’s hardly happily-ever-after.”

“The thing with happy endings,” his dad says, pausing like he’s thinking about this, “is that they’re a childhood dream. Just because you get married, it doesn’t make the rest of your life sunshine and roses. You have love and maybe kids, but it comes with challenges and sleepless nights. There isn’t a happily-ever-after where the rest of life becomes easy, Kurt.”

“I don’t want life to be easy.” Kurt twists the phone cord between his fingers. “But there should be more good days than bad days. There should be something worth going through the bad days for.”

It’s his dad who finally makes him write back to Blaine. Not that his dad tells him to write back, not in so many words. His dad actually says, “Look, kiddo, much as I love hearing from you, this is the third call this week and Carole and I have reservations at Breadstix. Let’s assume you’ve told me about your week and I’ve spent twenty minutes listening to you go on and on about the cruise ship guy because you’re too stubborn to take advice when it’s offered.”

“I’m pretty sure that hasn’t been the point of these conversations,” Kurt says, lying to the best of his ability. It’s totally been the point. Kurt keeps thinking about Blaine and about what Blaine apparently wants (friendship), and what Kurt wants in the abstract (boyfriend, partner, someone to build a life with and raise a family with – for all the ways he’s nothing like the deadbeats he shared a high school with, there are some basic values that he still believes in: love, family, until death do us part). But what Kurt specifically, concretely wants right now is Blaine.

He doesn’t know how to have both. He doesn’t know how to choose. And if he’s really honest, there’s a chance Blaine doesn’t want either option, so maybe Kurt’s fooling himself. Maybe it would be ridiculous to write back at all.

Kurt keeps spinning in circles, and when he has absolutely no idea what he wants in his life, he calls his dad. “Have I really called three times this week?”

“Yep.” There’s a rustling of fabric that sounds suspiciously like his dad pulling on a jacket. Kurt finds it hard to imagine his dad putting on a tie for anything he’s not being paid (and forced) to do, and even then, he always grumbles about it. The only time his dad wears a suit and tie without complaining is the anniversary dinners he takes Carole to every year. For one day a year, his dad puts aside his own dislikes and discomforts, all to show the woman he loves how deeply he cares for her.

It shouldn't be so hard to find a relationship like that.

But it is. This is why Kurt keeps calling home. "I don't know what to do."

"Kurt, what's the worst that happens? You chase after this guy, you make an idiot of yourself, and everything goes wrong. How are you any worse off than right now?"

"My ego might be fractured instead of bruised?" Kurt asks, fake-sweet and rolling his eyes.

His dad's reply is simple and no-nonsense. "Hurt pride never killed anyone."

Sighing, Kurt puts his biggest fear into words. "He breaks my heart. We try and it's not enough for me, or it's not enough for him, and... I don't want to spend nights crying on my couch. From time to time, I might be a little lonely but I don't want to be miserable and heartbroken again."

"Nobody wants that," his dad says softly, like he's remembering how much of wreck Kurt was after Adam. Miserable was an understatement. Kurt was so far beyond miserable that he spent three days wearing sweatpants. The terrifying thing is that three weeks with Blaine feels bigger and stronger, more true and solid than nearly two years with Adam. If he goes for this, if it doesn't work, Kurt knows he's going to be devastated.

"But again," his dad adds, "it never killed anyone. And it's not like you're sitting around happy now. So what have you got to lose?"

Kurt might roll his eyes but his dad has a point. His dad usually does. "Fine," Kurt says, "Go and enjoy your dinner out."

Kurt knows Blaine's email address (remembers looking over at Blaine's screen, both of them checking their emails during an onshore day, remembers seeing *bjanderson@gmail.com* and wondering what Blaine's middle initial stood for) but Kurt abandons that idea as soon as he recalls Blaine talking about the charms of getting mail that he can physically hold.

So Kurt writes. He scribbles down three drafts, none of which work well enough. They all end up crumpled into angry little balls of paper and tossed (very accurately, he takes a little pride in that) into the trashcan. Writing a heartfelt letter is so much harder than it looks, and it feels too cloying. Like trying to be someone he's not. Kurt Hummel has always been funny and sharp, and "dress to your assets" is a fashion maxim for a reason.

Blaine,

Since you had the chance to tell me what you love in San Francisco, I should have the opportunity to show you what I love about New York. Unfortunately, you'll have to brave the traffic (horrendous) and the weather (icy with a persistent threat of blizzards) but I promise it will be worth it.

I've got space if you'll come and stay with me, and see New York through the eyes of a (technically adopted) native. Call me when you get this, and we'll work out arrangements.

Kurt signs his name with a flourish (a literal flourish of the pen at the end – he does love writing in coloured fountain ink) and then carefully writes out his cell number beneath it.

He doesn't get a call that week or the next, but he's not expecting one. Kurt knows Blaine doesn't get the chance to check his mail too often, and Kurt has a life to live too. He has a few auditions, and then a call-back. And then a second call-back.

It's a role as a tertiary character, and he only sings in the group numbers, but it's a paying job. Best of all, it's actually on Broadway! The first person Kurt calls is Mercedes, and he tells her everything about the audition, the play, the part. The second person Kurt calls is Rachel, and he tells it all again, although his excitement has him talking in a register so high it probably hurts any passing canines. (Rachel understands every word thanks to her, as she says, "perfect ear for pitch.") She offers to take him out to celebrate but that feels like it might jinx everything so they set it for the day after his first performance.

After his first show, Kurt calls home and tells his dad everything he can think of, and then he tells all of it Finn and then he tells it again to Carole. Then there are rehearsals and daily shows, and Kurt's too busy to keep an eye on the weeks blurring into each other.

He's on Broadway. He has far more fantastic things to think about.

His phone rings during rehearsal, and Kurt ignores the dirty look he gets from the stage manager and the director (so he forgot to turn his phone off one time; he's remembered every line and every step perfectly so those death glares are uncalled for). He still hurries over to switch his cell off, though.

He doesn't check the message until hours later. He's standing against the side-alley behind the theatre, wrapped up tight against the cold but enjoying the chill on his overheated face (overheated from stage lights in a Broadway theatre!) and dialing his voice mail. Kurt thinks it's most likely Rachel calling about their next lunch date (an outbreak of legionnaire's disease in their favourite vegan place had forced a cancellation last week) or his dad calling about coming home after Christmas (Kurt's got a week's vacation in late January so he'll definitely be going, even if he hasn't booked flights yet).

He ducks closer to the wall to hear the message more clearly, waves to a few of the cast walking by on their way out. When he hears Blaine's voice, he's glad for the extra privacy. Just the sound of Blaine's voice makes him smile, makes something soft and warm unfold in his chest. It makes him tug at his rehearsal outfit – oversized periwinkle cotton sweatshirt, neckline hanging loose across one shoulder, dark grey leggings, charcoal grey sneakers edged in electric blue – and wish he were wearing something more presentable before he remembers that this is a phone message. Not only is it pre-recorded, but Blaine wouldn't be able to see him even if the call were live; tugging the shirt until it sits right is ridiculous.

Kurt listens to Blaine's cheery, confident, "Hey Kurt," and can't help smiling.

Blaine goes on to gush, "I just got your postcard of the Empire State Building. It would be great to see New York, I haven't been there in years. I'm calling you from my new phone so I don't know the number yet but if you call it, I'll pick up and we can talk arrangements. Okay, hope to hear from you soon. Bye!"

Kurt plays the message twice just to hear Blaine's voice. He sounds friendly and happy, like he's grinning ear to ear and only minutes away from bouncing on the balls of his feet. Then Kurt listens to the message again because he's really, really missed Blaine.

Kurt pulls up his missed calls, saves Blaine's number and calls him. There are four rings before it's answered and Kurt blurts, "Blaine, it's Kurt. I was in rehearsal so I couldn't answer," before Blaine has a chance to say anything.

"Rehearsal?" Blaine asks quickly. "What's the new gig?"

"Broadway!"

Kurt's excitement must show – he's still excited, it's Broadway, he's going to be excited forever – because Blaine laughs and says, "That's incredible, Kurt. I knew it had to happen. Tell me everything. What's the show called? What's it about? What's your incredible and scene-stealing role going to be?"

"I promise to tell you all of that, but not on this call. I have to be back in rehearsal in a few minutes," Kurt says, and it's like being back on the ship. It's so easy to talk to Blaine, to imagine his face when he hums low and thoughtful (his brows would draw together, his lips would purse).

"Do you want me to call you back? Or maybe you should call me when you're free?" Blaine asks, always considerate, and in the background, Kurt hears a PA announcement.

"Where are you? And is your contract finished?"

"It finished this morning. And I'm in the San Francisco airport," Blaine adds sheepishly. "I know it's presumptuous and it's certainly short-notice, and I thought you probably wanted me to call to set a date to come visit, maybe in a few months' time would be more convenient, but..."

Kurt's voice is breathy and surprised, but he forces the question. "But?"

"But just in case. If you said come over now, I wanted to be able to get on a flight today."

Kurt imagines it: Blaine spending the last few hours sitting on uncomfortable airport seats, waiting for Kurt's call. Blaine trying to keep his expectations low but still hoping, still wanting. "I meant now," Kurt says, "right now. Get on the next flight."

Unfortunately, rehearsals and performance prep stop Kurt from talking to Blaine again that night. Every time he checks his phone, there's a text message from Blaine updating him on flight times ("*7pm fully booked* :-(*B*" says one and "*On standby list, fingers crossed! B*" says another). The last one confirms Blaine managed a seat on standby and will be in at three the next afternoon, and after that radio silence descends.

Kurt texts him back a message to confirm and then another saying he can't wait to see him. Even though he knows Blaine will be on the plane and unable to check his messages, Kurt also texts him a goodnight before he goes to sleep. It's slightly ridiculous, Kurt knows, but he falls asleep happy and hopeful.

He wakes early the next morning and goes through his morning routine: brush teeth, smooth on moisture-rich serum to prep his skin for the skincare regimen that will follow breakfast, turn on coffee machine and then sneak across the hall to steal their paper. (The neighbours in 2C work the night shift and never wake up before eleven. As long as Kurt's careful reading the paper and gives the pages a quick press before he refolds them, no-one's the wiser. Kurt can have his morning news and afford interesting accessories; his neighbours always get the neatest paper in the building.)

He's a little surprised to open his door and find Blaine sitting on the floor next to his doorway, head resting on his folded arms. There's a large suitcase and a huge backpack on either side of his folded legs, taking up the least floor-space possible. Kurt blinks at the image in front of him – surely it can't be true, it must be wishful thinking – when Blaine lifts his head and smiles.

"Hi Kurt," Blaine says, and he's somehow more gorgeous than Kurt remembered. Not that Kurt's been thinking of Blaine as homely, but he'd forgotten how wide his hazel eyes are, the precise red of his generous mouth. Kurt remembered the shock of dark curls and thick brows, but his memory had softened the strong chin and nose, the high curve of his cheeks. "I made a little mistake in the time conversion. The flight actually got in this morning."

"And was there a reason why you decided against the time-honoured tradition of knocking?"

"I didn't want to wake you up at four in the morning. I thought you probably had a matinee today." And that's Blaine all over: charming, considerate and more than a touch ridiculous.

"Then come inside," Kurt says, helping Blaine maneuver the suitcase inside his apartment. He's tempted but he doesn't step across the hall to grab the NY Times sitting there, waiting to be read. With any luck, he won't have too much time this morning to think about any news beyond his front door.

Between the two of them, they get the suitcase and the backpack to the spare room. The only thing in the spare room is a portable, aluminum hanging rack (filled with Kurt's current spring favourites) and a double closet (that's half full of Kurt's summer wardrobe, but he's hoping there's still enough space for Blaine to hang anything he needs. If not, Kurt's going to have to get creative in storage options – or go out and buy a few more portable racks).

"I considered moving the fold-out couch into this room, but it's old and heavy," Kurt confesses, while Blaine looks curiously through his spring shirts. "It's in the living room for now."

Blaine turns to watch him, eyebrows raised in interest. "For now?"

"I thought you might move it with me," Kurt says and Blaine's expression goes from surprise to hurt dismay to a tight, polite smile in the space of a few words. "If you want to sleep in a room of your own."

Blaine shakes his head and turns back to Kurt's clothes. "You don't have to go to any trouble for me. I can sleep on the couch if that's more convenient."

"Blaine—"

"It's fine," Blaine says quickly. His words are too fast and his tone is too light, like he's trying to accept anything that will make this easier. "I mean, I thought that's probably what your letter meant. But I can see how troublesome it would be to have a house-guest sleeping in your living room. We can move it now if you want."

What Kurt really wants to do is walk across the room, fit his palms against Blaine's cheeks and kiss him. He settles for laying a hand on Blaine's shoulder instead. "That's not what I want."

Blaine's entire face lights up. "No?" He leans closer and his smile is hopeful and nervous.

"No," Kurt says softly, pressing a kiss to Blaine's smile. It feels like the right thing to do, so Kurt presses another, wanting to be clear about this, and Blaine laughs against his mouth.

“Thank god,” Blaine mutters between kisses, “I was so sure I had this wrong.”

There’s another kiss, slower and deeper, and it feels as comfortable and familiar as Blaine’s arms wrapping around his shoulders. Kurt drops his forehead to rest against Blaine’s, overwhelmingly happy. He’d feel embarrassed about it, unapologetically sappy as it is, but Blaine’s grinning too.

For a moment, Kurt enjoys standing there, simple warmth of being held and having Blaine within kissing distance if Kurt so chose. But as nice as it is to have Blaine here, the reality of working on a show as a relative unknown means Kurt can’t miss rehearsals. He might want to play hooky like some infatuated sophomore but he can’t. It’s the downside to being an adult. (The upside is being in complete control of his fashion choices and being able to watch *America’s Next Top Model* whenever he wants to. Totally worth it.)

Also, Blaine smells like airplane, all recycled air and stale traveler. It’s hardly attractive.

So Kurt sends him to shower and change, and instead of staring at his bathroom door (hearing the water run and thinking Blaine’s naked in there, and Kurt’s a great performer, surely he could convincingly call in sick?), Kurt cooks breakfast. It’s nothing too fancy (an asparagus and feta egg-white omelet isn’t going to set the world afire) but Blaine still looks impressed.

“I burn toast,” Blaine confesses with a wince. “Usually, I live on Subway and deli food when I’m not working.”

“That sounds like a lot of carbs,” Kurt says pointedly but Blaine just grins.

“Carbs are my favourite foods. And sugars.”

Kurt shakes his head in despair. This is the sort of basic nutrition that should be taught at school. “Sugars are carbs.”

“In that case, carbs are definitely my favourites.”

By the time Kurt gets through rehearsals, there's only a short break before the matinee performance starts. After that, there's two hours before the next round of rehearsals – assuming, as always, that there aren't any emergencies and nothing disastrous happens in the matinee to force longer rehearsals – and Kurt could come home but he'd barely have time to sit down before he'd have to head into the city again.

He explains this to Blaine, but he doesn't really expect him to understand. If Kurt were someone's guest, he'd feel uncomfortable coming to visit and being abandoned on his very first day.

Blaine shrugs and says, "That's cool."

"Are you sure?"

"I spent the whole night travelling, Kurt. I'm probably," and Blaine yawns so wide his jaw cracks, "I'm not going to be good for much today. Give me another hour and I'll be falling asleep where I stand."

"Well, we can't have that," Kurt replies. After breakfast (and after washing the dishes because Kurt loves everything about his apartment other than the mutant cockroaches that will come after any crumb left behind), Kurt leads Blaine to his bed. He orders Blaine under the covers, ignoring Blaine's protests that he was joking, that Kurt should get ready for his day, that Blaine doesn't need to be tucked in for a nap.

"Did you sleep at all on the plane?"

"I don't like the vibrations." Blaine frowns, like he just noticed how ridiculous that sounds. "I know, I spend half my life on ships but it's not the same. On a ship, you're rocked to sleep. On a plane, it just keeps... shuddering."

"You're a nervous flyer, aren't you?"

"A little," Blaine admits, sitting on the bed and finally giving in. He slides his legs around and pulls the covers up.

For no good reason (because he can, because Blaine's here and even if Kurt has to go out for the day he can still enjoy this), Kurt actually does pull the covers up and tucks Blaine in. Blaine starts to giggle so Kurt exaggerates the gesture, makes it ridiculous until Blaine wraps arms around him and pulls him down. There's a laughing kiss to Kurt's cheek and Blaine says, "I've missed this."

“I’ve never tucked you in before. I’d remember.”

“I’ve missed you,” Blaine clarifies. “I’ve missed you in the mornings and at night, and like this. I’ve missed how much fun you are.”

“That’s because you’re ridiculous,” Kurt says seriously and Blaine sticks his tongue out like an overgrown kid. Because Kurt is a bastion of maturity, he doesn’t stick his tongue out in return; he taps Blaine on the nose instead.

There’s something strange about coming home to the smell of food already cooked in his kitchen. It’s even stranger to have someone sitting on his tiny loveseat sofa to welcome him home. It’s not a bad strange. It’s unexpectedly good, Kurt thinks. Rather than say any of that, Kurt asks, “You cooked?” and raises an eyebrow.

“I ordered take-out.” Blaine gestures to Kurt’s oblong table with one wide palm. “But I set the table myself.”

“I appreciate the effort,” Kurt says. He can smell garlic and hot tomato from the pasta, and the salad sitting in the bowl is bright green and fresh. “I especially appreciate that part of the meal wasn’t fried or made from starches.”

Afterwards, Blaine even offers to do the dishes while Kurt cleans the grime of the day from his skin. Kurt agrees for obvious reasons and when he emerges from the bathroom, Blaine’s already curled up in bed, laptop open on his knees.

Kurt enjoys the image for a moment – Blaine in his bed, against his sheets – and then gets in. It should be familiar, curling up together to end the day with some musical Disney froth, but it’s not the same. For one, Blaine’s restless. He shifts and can’t quite settle down. Usually, he wraps himself around Kurt and barely stirs; tonight, he keeps rearranging his weight and making the mattress move. Kurt supposes this is the first time Blaine’s gone to bed without being completely exhausted by his day.

Not that Kurt's any more relaxed. He can still hear the thunderous applause in his head, the adrenalin of tonight's performance flooding his veins. He doesn't understand how anyone can bow on stage and be able to fall asleep an hour later. A theatre full of applause is better than a triple-shot mocha for waking Kurt up.

So they're both fidgeting. Blaine moves and Kurt twists to accommodate him, and Kurt hardly has to move to kiss him. It starts as a soft peck on the cheek – something Kurt's done many times before, curled up in front of a movie, dropping a quick kiss to the high curve of Blaine's cheek or the edge of his hairline, any spot Kurt can reach without having to disturb either of them. It starts that way, but then Blaine moves, stretching his neck to reach Kurt's mouth, and one kiss turns to two. Then three.

Blaine's mouth is warm and wet, and it needs to be kissed. Or Kurt needs to be kissed. He's not sure which, but kissing is definitely a necessity. There are hands sliding down Kurt's back, settling along his sides, and Blaine digs his fingers in, holding Kurt close. Holding him like Blaine never wanted to let him go.

The tendons in Blaine's neck stand out, stretched taut and twisted by the angle, and Kurt has to taste them. Has to run his tongue along the hard line of muscle and then nip with the slightest hint of teeth. There's a sharp gasp above him, Blaine kicking his legs out and trying to turn closer, and Kurt remembers there's a laptop somewhere on this bed.

This is far more interesting than what's happening on the screen, Kurt's sure. But he likes his laptop – and it would ruin the mood to have a computer-related injury like being stabbed by a corner – so Kurt pulls away to move his laptop safely to the floor. Blaine gets hold of Kurt's free hand, distracting him with a wet kiss to his palm followed by softer kisses along the heel of his hand. It's difficult to think with Blaine's thumb tracing patterns on his inner wrist and Blaine running his tongue along the crease between thumb and palm, but Kurt manages to slide the laptop under the bed.

Then Blaine moves onto Kurt's fingers. Sucking at one fingertip, swirling his tongue over the sensitive skin, sliding his lips over the digit and then pulling back slowly. Kurt's breath catches as Blaine moves to the next finger, repeating the warm, wet process.

Kurt shuffles back to Blaine's side, which is a little awkward and slow with only one hand, but it's worth it. Worth it to see Blaine with his eyes closed, lips shiny and sucking on two of Kurt's fingers at once. He sucks hard, cheeks hollowing, and scrapes his teeth against Kurt's knuckles as he moves.

It has to be the sexiest thing Kurt has ever seen. Ever.

He's still staring when Blaine pulls off and opens his eyes. Blaine blinks, starting to flush. "I kind of have a thing for your hands," he says uncomfortably, "sorry."

"Yeah," and Kurt's voice is low and rough, exposing how turned on he is right now, "that certainly needs an apology."

Blaine bites his lower lip, and that's it. Kurt has to pin him down and kiss him. Has to get two hands in those soft, messy curls and kiss him until Blaine's squirming beneath him. Until Blaine's rocking up and sliding hands under Kurt's pajama top and saying, "Kurt, Kurt, are we doing this? Please say we're doing this," and Kurt mutters, "Obviously," between kisses.

Waking up with a completely naked Blaine isn't very different from waking up with a partially clothed Blaine. Kurt still wakes up with two arms and one leg wrapped around him and Blaine still exudes heat as relentlessly and undeniably as he exudes charisma. There's hardly any difference at all, Kurt thinks, staring at a mouth-shaped bruise on Blaine's shoulder.

(Kurt's not really the type to leave hickeys. It's tacky and immature. But the noises Blaine made... low desperate groans, fingers working restlessly, grazing across Kurt's cheeks and the back of his neck, strong thighs clamping around Kurt's hips. Kurt can feel the blood rush to his cheeks just thinking about last night.)

Blaine stirs, waking up, and Kurt's missed this. This unguarded smile. That split second of goofy, heartbreaking joy that Blaine shows when he first blinks awake. Kurt's missed feeling like a present on Christmas morning, like the sight of him with dry cheeks and bed hair and morning breath is the best part of Blaine's morning.

It's ridiculous, but he likes it as much as he likes the way Blaine always hides back under the covers, searching for an extra few lazy minutes. He likes those extra few minutes in bed (Kurt thinks it's pointless to stay in bed if you're not sick... unless you have company, of course).

"We could make a list of things to see while you're here," Kurt offers, and Blaine makes a curious snuffling noise but keeps his head pressed to Kurt's chest and his eyes closed. "If you needed an excuse to stay in bed," Kurt adds.

Kurt has every intention of making that list until Blaine's hand wanders low across his hip. "I'm sure we'll think of other excuses," Blaine murmurs, and one thing leads to another.

By the time they do get out of bed, sweaty skin has gone from sexy to really, really gross and showers have become necessary. Kurt begrudgingly offers Blaine the first shower (he knows how to be a good host) but he can't help laughing when Blaine catches his reflection. The look of horror on his face is priceless.

"Oh my god, my hair," Blaine says, trying to flatten the fuzzy, wild mess and completely failing. "I look like a clown."

"I was going to say distressed poodle," Kurt offers and in the middle of a hair-emergency, Blaine glances at him and his smile turns a bit sappy, "but clown works too."

"This is really unattractive," Blaine says mournfully.

Kurt steps behind him and wraps his arms around Blaine (because he can, because he's there, because Blaine looks worried and little too serious about this, because being hugged makes Blaine smile). "Personally, I'm relieved. I always knew you had to have a flaw hidden in there somewhere. At least this is manageable with good conditioner."

The first week, Kurt means to show Blaine around the city. He really does. He has every intention of getting dressed for the day and herding Blaine out his front door to spend a few hours seeing the sights.

The problem is that Blaine tends to wake up sleepy and adorable. He shuffles closer with warm hands and strong thighs, and starts kissing Kurt's skin with his eyes closed. Kurt's not sure if it's all that bare, golden skin or the fluttery butterfly-wing sensation as Blaine blinks awake, but Kurt doesn't have the willpower to resist it.

He should be ordering them both out of bed, forcing Blaine to wake up, wash and dress for the day. Not giving in to lazy, indulgent kisses that start a slow burn in his blood. Not winding fingers into Blaine's curls and dropping kisses to his soft lips, his smooth jaw, his strong neck.

They should be exploring the city – that was the excuse Kurt used to invite Blaine after all – but exploring Blaine's body is far more tempting. Kurt learns that Blaine's ribs are ticklish, that Blaine giggles and squirms until he's breathless, but he never begs Kurt to stop. (Kurt's feet are ticklish, and he would murder anyone who tried to exploit that.)

He learns that Blaine's careful not to leave marks on Kurt (as someone who bruises like over-ripe fruit, Kurt appreciates it) but Blaine loves having his shoulders bitten. He loves Kurt sucking hard at his neck, biting down and leaving flushed red marks, loves holding Kurt tight as he does it.

He discovers Blaine loves going down on him, but he does it with no finesse, no subtlety, no teasing. He takes Kurt as deep as he can, sucking as hard as he can, and swallows every time. It feels incredible, even if Kurt does once find himself thinking of Olympic gold medals and trying not to laugh. The hottest thing is how Blaine crawls up Kurt's body afterwards, panting and eyes blown dark and so revved up that Kurt barely gets his fingers curled around him before Blaine gasps and buries his head in Kurt's shoulder, hips pumping through Kurt's fist as he comes.

Kurt also discovers that Blaine begs so prettily. That there is no better sound in the world than Blaine's voice, broken and reedy, saying, "Kurt, please," as Kurt takes his time licking and kissing his way up Blaine's inner thigh. It's better than applause, especially the whimpering noise Blaine makes when Kurt pins his hips against the bed and sucks lush kisses to the head of his cock.

He discovers how well they fit on their sides, legs intertwined and palms cupping cheeks as they kiss. He discovers that Blaine likes kneeling above him, resting his weight on his elbows as they kiss; how it's the perfect position to grope Blaine's rather fine ass, how Blaine leans back into his hands when he squeezes the strong muscle there.

But more than that, Blaine likes being on his back, likes Kurt's weight pressing him down. It feels a little odd to Kurt to be the one rolling them both over, to lean down and take charge, to work one leg between Blaine's or grind his hips down. But it's worth it for the blush that rises up Blaine's neck, for the way his eyes flutter closed and his mouth hangs open, for the way he chants Kurt's name like he can't remember

other words. For the way Kurt can reach down with one hand and Blaine will already be damp, leaking and so close that a few strokes of Kurt's fingers are all it takes.

And after that, Blaine tends to drift off to sleep and the morning's gone before Kurt knows it.

He mentions it to Blaine, after the fourth day of sleeping in followed by sex followed by napping. Admittedly, they also make lunch and sit around Kurt's apartment chatting in the afternoon, but somehow Kurt keeps leaving for rehearsals without having dragged Blaine past his front door. Not that Blaine seems to mind. So far, Kurt's come home to hot food (takeout, but there's always a nod towards balanced eating) and once, candles laid out on his dinner table, with paper napkins rolled up in his silver and gold napkin rings (a thrift-store find; he couldn't resist their charming gold bows).

There's conversation and doing the dishes, and they don't even bother turning the laptop on when they retire for the night. There's no point, not when Kurt knows the sounds he can coax from Blaine's throat, not when Kurt's spent the whole subway ride home imagining trailing kisses down Blaine's well-muscled back or thinking about Blaine's arms (god, Blaine's *arms*, there should be odes written to those biceps). It's not that Kurt's complaining – an active sex life does wonders for his abs – but at some point, they need to make plans.

He tells Blaine as much, but Blaine yawns, post-coital and sleepy, curled up against Kurt's side. "I should have warned you. I'm always exhausted the first week on land. I'm more sloth than man."

"Do sloths get sex-crazed?" Kurt wonders aloud. "You're more Playboy bunny than sloth right now."

"I'm not sex-crazed. I'm enjoying a wonderful opportunity."

Kurt raises an eyebrow at Blaine's grin. "To get me naked?"

"To get you naked," Blaine agrees. "The Statue of Liberty can wait."

Blaine sleeps less after the first week. He's still sexually ravenous, which surprises Kurt a little. He'd expected it to wear off or fade away. Kurt's not usually a twice-a-day kind of guy; he's more of a twice-a-week kind of guy, if he's being really honest. Maintaining and caring for his wardrobe takes time, as does his skin routine. When he'd been with Adam, Adam had understood the importance of a good moisturizer and, more often than not, fell asleep watching Kurt at his mirror.

Blaine hovers. He stands behind Kurt or pulls a chair over, and watches his every movement as if everything Kurt does is worthy of applause. When Kurt says, "If you're going to sit there, you might as well exfoliate. That sea air is giving you dry patches."

Blaine nods seriously. "Only if you show me what to do."

He follows Kurt's every instruction so carefully, even the ones Kurt doesn't explain as well as he should. He tries so hard to get it right that when they're finished and every tub and jar is back where it should be, Kurt can't resist wrapping his arms around Blaine's neck and kissing him. That's kind of how Blaine ends up straddling Kurt's lap, tongue in Kurt's mouth, hips rocking against Kurt's stomach. Kurt has to move them to the bed when his dressing table starts to shudder and make worrying rattling sounds as jars clink together.

This is ridiculous, Kurt thinks as he sucks the bruise he left on Blaine's collarbone this morning. It's ridiculous and an over-active sex life has never been part of his future plans, but he's enjoying every damn minute of it.

Kurt loves New York and he loves it even more when he gets to see it through Blaine's eyes. He gets to show Blaine his favourite things, like Battery Park in the middle of the day, full of tourists even in the current chilly weather. He shows Blaine the view from the Empire State Building (Blaine laughs and says, "This is very *Sleepless in Seattle*," and Kurt replies, "Only if I get to be Meg Ryan.") and they wander through MOMA (Kurt loves the lighting in there; Blaine knows a surprising amount about the paintings).

He takes Blaine to Times Square, stands right in the middle of the bustle and lets Blaine soak it in, staring at all the signs of Broadway. He sits with Blaine on a bench in Central Park and shares a bag of jelly beans (apparently Blaine's favourite, and a peace offering of sorts after Kurt nixed the street vendor selling

hotdogs). He takes Blaine to the markets of Chinatown and trendy little cafés in Chelsea, and they even go to Little Italy for tiramisu.

He also includes Blaine in his monthly lunch with Rachel. He's told Blaine about Rachel, but maybe he hasn't done her justice, because beneath Blaine's polite smile and friendly handshake, he looks a little surprised. The surprise fades once Rachel gets through her first ten questions on the holiday entertainment industry (working conditions, song choices, rehearsal schedules – all things she's already quizzed Kurt on, but Rachel likes having information verified).

When she excuses herself to the bathroom – and they get a chance to breathe – Kurt queries Blaine's initial surprise. Blaine grins widely and shrugs, and then says with wide-eyed honesty, "I actually thought she'd be taller. It's a ridiculous thing to say, I know, but I didn't imagine that much diva in such a small frame."

Kurt raises one eyebrow and Blaine adds, "I know, it's ridiculous."

Rachel returns before Kurt has the opportunity to really mock Blaine, and she starts on another barrage of questions. This time, they're a little friendlier. She asks those general small-talk getting-to-know-someone topics (where did Blaine grow up, where did he go to school, first musical that really made an impact on him – ordinary stuff like that).

Despite Rachel's interrogative style, Blaine smiles and answers, and Kurt's congratulating himself. Rachel and Mercedes are his friends because deep down, they share some very basic qualities. They're divas and drama queens, they care passionately and fiercely even if they don't always fall in love with the right people, and... well, they're intense. Mercedes hides it behind a sweet smile and sassy attitude, while Kurt mostly obscures his with sarcasm and a lofty sense of his own superiority. Rachel lets it shine through bright eyes and show smiles, and that focus is as brilliant and sharp as a diamond. Kurt knows himself well enough to know that someone who can't stand Rachel will have limited patience for his own – occasional – histrionics and ambition.

But Blaine's gesturing with his hands and telling Rachel a story of Dalton mischief that has her laughing. Blaine's waving down the waitress when Rachel's glass is empty and then asks about dessert. Both Rachel and Kurt decline, but Blaine dithers between chocolate mousse and chocolate mud cake.

"If you don't know what you want," Kurt says, "you don't want it badly enough to warrant those empty calories."

Blaine pouts and fixes Kurt with the most woeful expression he's ever seen outside the glass windows of a pet store. "It's chocolate, Kurt." He even bats his eyelashes. Kurt refuses to give in to such a shameless ploy but... Blaine is on vacation. And delightfully fit. A piece of cake or two wouldn't be the end of the world.

Rachel shakes her head, raising one authoritative finger in the air. "If you're not craving it, it's not worth it."

"Give it an hour," Kurt suggests, compromising. "If you still want something sweet, I'll bake you something." At least that way, Kurt can control the amount of butter and sugar in the recipe.

"You bake, too? Is there no end to your talents?" Blaine's teasing, Kurt knows, but he can still feel the heat rise at the back of his neck. He excuses himself from the conversation.

In the bathroom, Kurt presses a cool, damp towel to the back of his neck and stares at himself in the mirror. Same clear, changeable eyes and same pale, apparently flawless skin (he puts effort into maintaining that illusion). Same fine, soft features that never roughened into someone who resembled his dad. He doesn't look like a twelve-year-old choir boy anymore, but he still looks around seventeen, like a late-bloomer waiting for his voice to drop (not going to happen) and his stubble to grow (again, not going to happen but Kurt's never regretted that).

He's still Kurt Hummel, different and interesting, but he doesn't feel like Kurt Hummel. He feels like he's lost his equilibrium. He looks at Blaine and his heart soars, the world sways beneath his feet. Blaine grins and teases, but he looks at Kurt with so much affection, with so much feeling. It makes Kurt giddy in a way he's not used to feeling. He's certainly not used to showing it.

When Kurt sits back down at the table, Rachel's talking about *West Side Story* and Kurt's own performance in it. "Wonderful pitch. Really, Kurt has always had fantastic musical talent, but he did have a terrible tendency to add personal flair to the choreography. It pulled focus in a very distracting way, but I doubt Kurt could help it."

"Really, Rachel? I introduce you to someone new, and you tell them I can't follow choreography?"

"Blaine *asked*. He asked for my opinion on your role as romantic lead," Rachel says firmly. "It's hardly my fault that I have a well-developed professional eye."

“If only you could apply that professional eye to your own wardrobe choices,” Kurt replies. “I remember how you dressed in high school.”

So does Rachel because he doesn’t even need to specify the trend he was remembering. “As a vegan, I feel very strongly about animals and awareness of their rights. I was dressing to a theme.”

“Was that theme one of hideous, hideous clothing? Or, hmmm,” Kurt pauses, looking up at the ceiling as he hums, “clothes I would never want to be seen dead in?”

“At least I was known for wearing them,” Rachel replies. She’s always believed in the ‘no publicity is bad publicity’ maxim of fame. “And my dads loved my animal sweaters.”

“Two gay dads, and yet you still walked out of the house looking like that.” Kurt looks over at Blaine for support – he’s sure Blaine would understand if Rachel still wore those atrocious patterned sweaters – but Blaine’s following the conversation with watchful curiosity. He looks like a spectator at a tennis match, someone who hasn’t chosen a side but wants to see the outcome. “Honestly.”

“Are you complaining that my dads didn’t live up to the stereotype?”

“I would, but I’ve seen their interior decorating. In the important ways, they got there.”

Kurt wants Blaine to be happy. From a very selfish perspective, it’s because he wants Blaine to stick around. He wants to keep Blaine in New York for as long as he possibly can, and that’s going to be easier if Blaine’s happy here. He hasn’t said any of this to Blaine, not yet. They’re in this strange... holding pattern, Kurt supposes.

They spend a lot of time together and Kurt loves that time, he really does, but it’s more than that. Kurt’s starting to suspect he’s in love, as clichéd and meaningless as a simple “I love you” seems these days. He cares for Blaine. He wants Blaine, both physically (he certainly can’t deny that, even if his current sexual appetite is outside of his norm) and in a more domestic way. He wants to see Blaine’s smiles and he wants to wake up with Blaine’s arms around him. He wants Blaine to be there when he goes to sleep, when he leaves for rehearsals, when he opens the fridge and wonders what to cook for lunch.

Kurt wants even more than that. He wants to take Blaine home to Lima and show him off. He wants to introduce Blaine to his family because he knows they'll love him as much as Kurt does.

It's a lot to put into words, and Kurt wants to say it right because Blaine always tries. When it comes to Kurt, Blaine always tries to ask the right questions, to use the right glasses and the right towels, the right skin creams and the right hangers for his clothes. Blaine makes an effort. He finds blankets and sources a makeshift picnic for them on the fire escape. It's twenty degrees outside and the sunlight is weak at best, but Kurt doesn't say no. Between Kurt's hat, scarf and oversized sunglasses, the only skin exposed is his nose and a stripe of each cheek, but it's fun. It's silly and cold, but Kurt loves leaning back against Blaine's chest, Blaine's arms holding the blanket tightly around them both.

Kurt knows what he wants to say. He wants to turn his head and say, "I love you," and "How do you feel about visiting Ohio?" and "You should stay here." Not stay here as in never leave, because Kurt doesn't expect Blaine to give up his career ("the thing I love most in the world," Blaine had once said) but move in. Have somewhere to call home, a place where he belongs, where he's loved. The idea of Blaine drifting at sea for seven months and then coming back to travel and see different cities and visit friends, but have no one and nowhere to anchor himself... the whole idea makes Kurt sad.

But he chickens out. Kurt doesn't say the things he's been thinking. He turns in Blaine's arms and says, "A picnic like this would be enough to make anyone fall in love," and the words are almost right but the meaning's completely wrong.

"If the weather were warmer," Blaine says, shrugging and burying his cold nose in Kurt's scarf. "On a day like this, it's probably only enough to form a mild attraction."

He'd been a little worried to introduce Blaine and Rachel, truth be told. Kurt can admit that. Rachel is not so much an acquired taste as a developed immunity. His hopes had only encompassed the idea of Blaine tolerating Rachel and maybe even finding her amusing in a detached car-crash – or *America's Funniest Home Videos* – kind of way.

But Blaine actually likes her.

Kurt's glad. Of course he's glad. Rachel's one of his best friends and he loves her like he loves the spotlight, bright and warm, glaring and wonderful. But he never, never foresaw the moment when Blaine would say, "Rachel texted me. She has early morning rehearsals so she suggested we go out for lunch."

"I can't. Rehearsals," Kurt reminds Blaine. He has a large cast and an impatient, pernicious choreographer and an overzealous director and the rehearsals are just insane. It's worth it and it looks incredible onstage, but one wrong turn in last night's performance means they'll all be drilling the same steps for at least four hours today.

Kurt could be doing much nicer things with his time than step-ball changes and high kicks (like lying in his bed with Blaine, or going to the Museum of Natural History and watching Blaine turn into an overgrown five-year-old when he sees the dinosaur bones).

"I know," Blaine says, scrunching up his nose and pointing at the rehearsal schedule taped to Kurt's fridge. He tilts his head to the side, eyes narrowing. "Do you mind if I have lunch with Rachel? I can cancel it if I'm overstepping."

Kurt blinks, but that's not what he meant. "I'm surprised, that's all. I love Rachel, but you don't have to spend time with her just because she's my friend. I've dated boys who could barely tolerate being in the same room as her." Not that those worked out, Kurt doesn't add.

Blaine grins. "She's fun."

"Rachel?"

Blaine shakes his head as if he doesn't have an answer, then he says, "She's talented and she's bright. And she cares so much about her work, she really lives for it. And she tells the best stories about you in school."

"They're lies," Kurt says dryly. "All of them."

"She has photographic proof."

"What sort of photos?" Kurt asks cautiously. There were a few outfits in college that, in hindsight, weren't his best fashion choices. And he remembers sophomore year when Rachel was determined that she had the requisite artistic flair to be a great photographer and then spent three months taking photos of

everything she saw. (Lesson learned from that experience: not every performer can take a good picture; artistic flair does not always translate across disciplines; Kurt's best angle is not mid-way through a mud mask.)

"She had prom photos on her phone. You looked incredible. Jail bait," Blaine adds, shrugging, "but incredible."

"I'm sure you looked very fine in your tux too."

Blaine makes a face. "I didn't go to prom. Formal dances aren't really my thing. Besides, it's not like anyone wanted to go with me."

The idea of Blaine in high school, complete with fifties-style capris and jaunty checked shirts, jumps to mind. Then Kurt realizes private boarding school probably means some dowdy school uniform, baggy blazer in maroon or dark green, maybe navy. "I'd have asked you to prom. If I'd known you back then."

Blaine's eyes widen and glaze over, like he's trying to imagine meeting Kurt at that age. He scoffs and shakes his head. "Judging by how you looked in that photo, I don't think you would have looked twice at me. I was pretty dull in high school."

"Was?" Kurt asks teasingly, but he regrets it when he sees the edge of Blaine's smile go a little tight.

"Yeah, I still am, I guess."

"No, you're not. There's nothing dull about you, Blaine Anderson."

Kurt isn't paranoid, but he's cautious. Competing with Rachel Berry over a boy is something that should only happen once in a lifetime, and he's certainly not going to go there again. Not that he honestly thinks Blaine and Rachel's third private luncheon is anything to worry about (Blaine doesn't really know anyone else, and Rachel's interpretation of friendly can overshoot the mark by a hundred miles). Kurt knows the way Blaine looks at him, the way Blaine sleeps wrapped around him, the way Blaine smiles just for him and chants his name in bed like a mantra. He isn't insecure, but he still makes the call to Rachel.

It's between Wednesday's matinee and evening performances, when he has almost two hours to kill in the city but not enough time to make it worth going home. Rachel answers the phone, drilling through scales and trilling out, "Hello, Rachel Berry," from B to high C.

Kurt almost mimics her in reply, but he's sitting in Starbucks. People would stare if he did that. "Hi, Rachel."

"Do we have scheduling conflicts with next week's lunch?"

"No conflict. I just wanted to say hi," Kurt says, which is the lamest thing he's said to Rachel Berry in the last twenty-four months. Kurt keeps track of these things.

"For no particular reason?" Rachel asks carefully. "Kurt, are you feeling okay? Is this the sort of conversation we should be having in person? If this is serious, I emote far better when you can see my face."

"You don't need to emote." Kurt rolls his eyes and hopes it shows in his tone. "I just wanted a few details about your conversations with Blaine."

Because of the type of person Rachel is, she tells him everything. She reports on the questions Blaine's asked and the stories she's told him, and because Kurt's the type of person he is, he scoffs. "Why would he ask about growing up in Ohio? He's already lived it, Rachel. That makes no sense."

"Of course it makes sense. It makes as much sense as creating a fake Facebook account and pretending to be an alumnus of a college you never attended. When you're dating someone, you want to know who they used to be."

"Firstly," Kurt says, remembering that doomed crush and how many times he tried to explain to Rachel that Facebook stalking of school friends wasn't within the normal range of besotted behaviour, "that's not romantic, that's creepy. We've had that discussion before."

"My point stands. Sometimes, you're curious and asking outright would make you seem like an over-invested stalker." Rachel hums on the other end of the line. "I think it's sweet."

"I don't find that reassuring."

There's a loud clang from the kitchen. Kurt pushes his front door open and steps quietly inside, peeking around the doorway to see Blaine at the kitchen sink, shirt sleeves rolled up and bare ankles poking out from the bottom of his indigo jeans. He's scrubbing at a pan and muttering angrily, just loud enough to be heard. "Blaine Joseph Anderson, kids can follow recipes so you can certainly do this without screwing it up."

Kurt can't help smiling. Blaine does that when he's annoyed: he mutters under his breath and calls himself by his full name. It's kind of adorable.

The scent of something burning is thick in the air and his pan's being scrubbed with enough gusto to threaten the Teflon coating (Kurt doesn't believe that lifetime guarantee, but he'd loved the sleek steel handles and royal blue colour). These are things that would have Kurt scowling and stomping into the kitchen if it were anyone else. Even Finn, even his dad would suffer his wrath, but with Blaine, he watches and finds himself smiling.

Clearly, Kurt's infatuated.

"Mastering the fine art of cooking?" Kurt asks from the doorway.

Blaine turns, his hands still holding the pan in the sink. He looks torn between guilt and annoyance. "More failing than mastering. This was supposed to be a meal by the time you got home."

"Instead we have parts of a meal?" Kurt asks hopefully, but Blaine shakes his head.

"We have charcoaled steaks, undercooked potatoes, and... I'm not sure what happened to the broccoli, but I don't think it's supposed to be grey."

After pressing a kiss to the back of Blaine's neck, Kurt steps closer to inspect the damage. The steaks are black and ruined beyond repair – explaining the burnt pan – and the broccoli is a sad, sickening colour. The potatoes need another ten minutes' cooking, and Kurt takes a quick mental inventory of his fridge. "There's a package of frozen peas in the freezer," Kurt says, switching the potatoes back on, "and there's a chicken breast in the fridge. I'll show you how to make Parmigiana."

“I think dinner will be quicker if I don’t try to help. How about I wash up?” Under his breath, soft enough that Kurt could ignore it if he chose to, Blaine adds, “No way I can mess that up,” as he turns to the sink.

Sometimes, Kurt wonders how he didn’t see this on the cruise ship. Blaine had been so confident and outgoing, friendly and easy to be around. He’s still those things, certainly, but underneath that there’s this sweet, uncertain guy. Kurt’s used to being needed, and he’s always wanted to protect the people he cares about. It shouldn’t be a surprise that Blaine’s occasional and odd insecurities make Kurt want to hold him close and reassure him.

But rather than whisper soft, meaningless platitudes, Kurt says, “Don’t be ridiculous. How are you going to learn if you don’t try? This isn’t brain surgery, you’ll get it.”

And Blaine does, mostly. He’s a little clumsy with the corn crumbs (the less fattening alternative to breadcrumbs) and it would have burned if Kurt hadn’t watched the grill (and refuse to be distracted by Blaine curled warm against his back, strong arms wrapped around Kurt’s waist), but the meal comes together. They mash the potatoes and steam the peas with mint, and the finished product looks good enough to photograph.

“I told you,” Kurt says, because he enjoys being right. It happens so frequently he’s earned the right to enjoy it.

Blaine smiles, the edge of white incisors catching on the side of his lip. “Our first meal cooked together.” It’s a joke, Kurt knows, but his heart still catches on the idea of it: the first of many. The idea of ‘theirs’ and ‘ours’.

“You know,” Kurt says, before he thinks about it too much, “I’ve got vacation time coming up. I keep promising Dad I’ll come home and visit. You could come too.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to impose. I know you don’t get to see your family as much you’d like,” Blaine says. He doesn’t say he doesn’t want to come.

Kurt stares into Blaine’s warm, hazel eyes and wonders why he didn’t ask weeks ago. “I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t want you to come.”

“Oh,” Blaine says, and then, “Okay.”

Kurt doesn't know what to say, so he picks up the plates and takes them to the table. “We should eat before these get cold.”

“You weren't kidding about the nervous flyer thing,” Kurt says as Blaine's fingers tighten painfully around his hand. In Blaine's defense, they're going through a patch of turbulence and for the last few minutes the plane's been shakier than a travelling fairground rollercoaster. At every dip and rise, Blaine sits straighter in his seat and his eyes stretch open wide.

Kurt has no such qualms. He's done his research. He knows he is, statistically speaking, safer in the air than he is in a car and both flying and driving feel a lot safer than trying to jaywalk on Manhattan streets (and he does that more often than he should). But Blaine's pale and he's gone from holding Kurt's hand to clutching it like a lifeline.

“You should talk to me,” Kurt says. “Try to distract yourself.”

Blaine gives a shaky nod. “Any preferred topics of conversation?”

“We could talk about the number of discussions you and Rachel have had about growing up in Lima,” Kurt suggests brightly. “If you're so fascinated by my every experience, you could ask me to my face.”

“I, um...” Blaine looks doubtful. Then the plane gives a particularly sharp lurch and there's a bone-grinding clench of Kurt's hand. “Did you know Rachel's dads growing up?”

“I wasn't alive when they were growing up.” It's a trite reply but... Rachel's dads? Scared of dying in a fiery plane crash – or even a *Lost*-style deserted island – and Blaine wants to discuss Rachel's show parents? Kurt is not impressed.

“I wasn't fishing for information about you,” Blaine says and he somehow makes it sound like an apology. “I like the way you tell stories. But I've never met anyone like Rachel before.”

"No one has. They don't mass-produce the defective models," Kurt says sharply. (Blaine smirks and then looks a little ashamed of himself.) Kurt rolls his eyes, surrendering the romantic (if creepily obsessive) idea of Blaine's every thought revolving around him. It had been flattering to think Blaine was so smitten he'd sink to Rachel's understanding of personal boundaries, but Kurt's practical enough to know that 'less crazy than Rachel' is a good trait in a boyfriend. "What do you mean?"

"The gay parents thing. If anyone had gay parents in Dalton, nobody talked about it. People had divorced parents, but most of them remarried within a few years. It was unusual not to see... you know," Blaine ends with a shrug.

"I really don't."

"Couples. Straight couples. And I can't help thinking about Rachel's dads."

"Okay," Kurt says because maybe he gets part of that. He remembers seeing Rachel's dads in the crowd at his high-school graduation. Not everyone was there in a couple, and there were a few other same-sex pairs that might have been friends or might have been something more, but he remembers thinking that it felt like McKinley, like being gay was so rare and unusual it might as well not exist.

"Can you imagine it? In the nineties? Settling down in Ohio and raising a child together?" Blaine asks earnestly and Kurt stops himself from confessions that yes, he's occasionally thought of that. Although he replaces Ohio with a charming brownstone in Brooklyn, the essentials are still the same. "It must have been so difficult."

"And apart from being the world's biggest stage parents, they did a good job." Kurt's not exaggerating about the show parent thing. Rachel has awards, tiaras and trophies spanning all the way back to nine months old. She had dance lessons and singing lessons and anything else she wanted for that competitive edge. Kurt wouldn't trade his own family for anyone, but he can't deny that Rachel made the most of her opportunities.

"I can't imagine settling in Ohio and doing that now, and yet... Rachel."

"You really couldn't imagine doing that now?" If Kurt's being really honest, that's sort of his own plan. Not now, probably not for another five or ten years because Kurt likes the idea of being a huge Broadway star

in his thirties and adopting when he's famous enough for it to make the society pages. "You don't want that, family and kids and all that stuff?"

Blaine shrugs. The conversation must be doing the trick because the plane lurches again but Blaine's hand doesn't tighten painfully this time. He looks like he's too deep in thought to remember to be terrified.

"Not that I think it's a bad idea," Blaine says slowly, clearly thinking about what he's saying, "it's just that I... I always thought of it like you get perfect students."

Kurt raises an eyebrow in polite enquiry and Blaine continues, "You know in school, there were those guys with 4.0 GPAs taking AP classes, who were captain of the polo team and ran track, and were members of the chess team and the show choir and the environmental group. The type to have a wonderful girlfriend and be part of his church and do community fundraising, and everything. The guys who were smart and athletic, well-liked and admired, the guys who were good at everything."

"I don't see the connection."

"There are some guys who are like that, who can do everything and excel at all of it. I've never been that kind of student. I can do a couple of things reasonably well, but not everything. I've always had to focus on one thing at a time to be good at it. I figured being gay and getting married and having kids was like that. Some guys fall in love with another guy and settle down and get married and have kids. I'm sure they have great careers and beautiful homes and interesting friends and get along with their families and everything. But I'm not that kind of person. I never thought it was something in my future. Does that make sense?"

"I understand the simile," Kurt says. "I don't understand how you don't see that you're absolutely one of those guys. You're handsome, smart, caring, talented and very sweet. I wouldn't settle for anything less."

Blaine laughs but the look he gives Kurt... there's something very speculative there. Like Blaine's reconsidering something. Kurt hopes Blaine's reconsidering.

When Kurt introduces Blaine to his dad, Blaine's wearing his most polite, charming smile and calls him sir. His dad laughs and says, "In this family, it's just Burt," and "Come on in. You two don't need to freeze on the doorstep."

Kurt likes being right. He knew his dad would like Blaine.

The visit mostly lives up to Kurt's expectations. Blaine's good manners and natural charm win Carole over very quickly – it's hard not to take a shine to someone who volunteers to do the dishes. Once Finn gets over his initial surprise about the volunteering ("Dude, you don't have to offer. It's my night on the roster."), they get along relatively well. Then they start discussing the Buckeyes.

At first, Kurt thinks Blaine's making small talk, trying to bond with his dad and Finn over something easy and accessible. Blaine admits that he tries to keep up but he misses most of the games while he's working, and reading the post-game commentary isn't the same. Then there's mention of some coach, and Blaine gets a little passionate (there's hand-waving and eager nodding, and while Kurt doesn't understand most of the references or the cause of outrage, it's still entertaining to watch).

When his dad says, "We've still got the last game recorded," Blaine lights up like the Fourth of July.

As much as Kurt loves his dad and his stepbrother (and Blaine, although he hasn't admitted that out loud yet), he's only ever tolerated football. It took him months to realize that one of the best things about Finn and Carole moving in was that his dad always had someone to enthusiastically watch the game with him, someone else to yell at the screen and hiss with him. Kurt only does that for *America's Next Top Model* and he's sure his comments make as little sense to his dad as the rants over plays mean to Kurt.

Kurt excuses himself. He's much happier in the kitchen with Carole, pulling together quick batches of cookies: oatmeal-raisin for his dad, double-choc-chip for Finn and Blaine.

"He seems very nice," Carole says approvingly.

Kurt lets out a pleased hum and smiles into the bowl he's stirring. "He really is. I was a little worried we'd have a repeat of Thomas," Kurt says, remembering the first boy he'd brought home and the way his dad had suddenly decided to treat them as if they were in junior high, "but so far Dad's retained sanity."

"Give Burt a little credit," Carole says, but she's grinning. Kurt's sure she remembers the way his dad had insisted that Thomas sleep on the couch (the phrase "while you're under my roof" had even been thrown

around) and the way no-one had been surprised when Thomas went back early. Kurt had honestly been a little relieved. Realizing that Finn could outsmart his boyfriend on whatever shoot-'em-up video game was currently popular had been a humbling (and horrifying) moment.

“Dad spontaneously lost touch with reality,” Kurt says. “There’s no other way to explain it.”

“You were nineteen and looked about fifteen, and your dad suddenly had to recognize the fact that his baby boy had grown into a young man. He over-reacted, yes, but it could have been a lot worse.”

“I remember the general air of distrust. There’s a good reason Thomas only stayed two days.”

Carole smothers a laugh. “If your dad terrorizes only one boyfriend, consider yourself lucky. My dad terrified every boy I dated, up to and including Finn’s dad. It’s just that silly macho thing of trying to look out for you and make sure you end up with a good guy.”

“Yes, I know,” Kurt mutters, peering through the doorway to see Finn and Blaine on the couch, leaning forward with elbows resting on their knees to watch the action. His dad’s sitting in Carole’s ratty old armchair, can of diet soda in his hand, eyes not leaving the TV screen. Kurt steps back before anyone sees him monitoring them. “The intention is sweet, even if the execution is a little crazy.”

Kurt’s parents are asleep at the other end of the hallway. Kurt’s brother is asleep on the other side of the bathroom. Those are two very, very good reasons why Kurt refuses to let this go any further.

No matter that Blaine’s curled up on his side, facing Kurt with one knee thrown over Kurt’s hip. No matter that what started as one goodnight kiss segued into ten.

No matter that Blaine’s hand is warm against the bare skin of Kurt’s back or that Kurt has one hand under Blaine’s t-shirt, palm pressed to Blaine’s stomach, feeling the muscles tense and shudder every time Kurt nips at the corner of Blaine’s mouth.

“Parents,” Kurt hisses in the dark, whispering against Blaine’s skin. “We are not doing this—”

“Not doing this,” Blaine agrees, hitching his leg higher and trying to rock his hips closer. There are times Kurt really appreciates the flexibility of fellow performers.

“I’m not explaining stained sheets to Carole,” Kurt insists even as his fingers wander, following the hard rise of hipbone under the edge of Blaine’s boxers. “We have to stop.”

“Stop,” Blaine repeats. “We’ll stop.”

“We’ll stop.”

“Absolutely,” Blaine says breathlessly as Kurt drags teeth along his jawline. Kurt isn’t going to leave a mark, he isn’t going to leave hickeys, but Blaine squirms underneath him, pressing up into Kurt’s mouth, wordlessly begging for more.

“Stained sheets,” Kurt reminds him.

“Or,” Blaine pauses for a kiss, “or,” and another kiss, “maybe,” and one more kiss.

“No,” Kurt whispers back, but it’s hard to sound insistent while Blaine’s kissing and rubbing up against him.

“I could swallow. No stains. Please,” Blaine says, because he says things like this. He’s never crude, never vulgar, but some of the things he says still make Kurt blush. It’s not the words but the idea of it, the calm way Blaine talks about sex – it excites Kurt’s imagination, but it also relaxes the part of him that worries about being vulnerable and undone in front of someone else. “Please, Kurt. I know you can be quiet.”

“But you can’t,” Kurt says, chuckling a little because it’s true. Blaine hums and moans, and makes slurping sounds that should be ridiculous and instead – somehow – manage to be obscenely hot. He’s louder giving than receiving, although not by much. Usually, those sounds are enough to melt any possible objection (“I’m tired,” or “I’m going to be late for work,” or “I just had a shower.”) but there are parents. Those are the last people Kurt wants to know about the sounds Blaine makes.

Kurt gives Blaine one last firm, closed-mouth kiss and untangles himself until he can roll onto his back and tug Blaine’s head to his shoulder. “This is silly. A few days without sex won’t kill us.”

“Are you sure?” Blaine asks, but he’s wrapping an arm around Kurt’s waist and relaxing into the cuddle. (Kurt can’t believe he’s become a cuddler, but the evidence proves it.) “Because if there’s even a little doubt...”

“I’m sure.”

Kurt likes this. He likes how quickly things can get heated between them, but he likes this too: that it can cool down, that it can shift from lush kisses, groping hands and rutting hips to something warm and familiar. He likes the soft feel of Blaine’s hair against his cheek and the way they fit so well together. “I’m glad you came,” Kurt says, thinking about how well Blaine fits into Kurt’s family, how comfortable it feels to have him in Kurt’s life.

“Well, I was trying to,” Blaine replies, “but—”

Kurt pinches him before he can finish that sentence. Only light and on Blaine’s forearm, but Blaine jerks with surprise. “I wasn’t the one who started this,” Kurt says.

“I’d argue, but I don’t like being pinched.”

“Do you want me to kiss it better?” Kurt deadpans.

“I think that would probably start this up again.”

“Go to sleep.”

“Sweet dreams to you too.” Then softly, so softly, Blaine adds, “I’m glad you invited me.”

The one thing that doesn’t happen as expected is the conversation with his dad, the talk that happens every time Kurt comes home and is seeing someone new. Not the birds and the bees talk, thank heavens, because that was horrible enough the first time. (It was a good thing, if horrible in the way root canal is simultaneously good and horrible. Once Kurt got to New York and met other queer kids, heard other stories of coming out and parents ignoring it or trying to change it, he was so proud of his dad for trying. For manning up and tackling the uncomfortable things because he loved his kid more than his own

comfort zone. As embarrassing as it must have been for his dad, it was stuff Kurt needed to know and he wouldn't have listened to anybody else.)

So, no, not that conversation. Kurt's missing the conversation that starts with, "So, you're seeing someone?" and ends with "Is this it, kid? Is he the one?"

His dad always asks him, and it's never a simple answer. Kurt always finds himself talking around it, hedging and avoiding. For once, Kurt knows what his answer would be, and this is the one time his dad refuses to ask the question.

Kurt keeps wondering why. "Blaine is a great guy," he tells his dad.

His dad stays sitting at the table, enduring a breakfast cereal that's more bran than sugar. "Okay," his dad says slowly, taking a bite.

"Blaine is caring and open-hearted and one of the best guys I've ever met."

His dad looks at him like he's a few cards short of a deck. "I'm not arguing it."

"Because you can't. Because he's sweet and funny, and loyal." Kurt hears his words getting faster. "Because he looks at the best side of life and tries with everything he has. And he's smart – he got into Stanford, and that's virtually Ivy League."

"Good for him," his dad says, scratching under the brim of his baseball cap. "Now do you want to tell me what this is about, Kurt?"

"You haven't asked," Kurt says, watching his dad for a sign, for some tell-tale expression. "You haven't asked if Blaine's the one. If Blaine's my one. Every other time I come home, you ask, and this time there's nothing. Like it's not even possible and that's ridiculous."

"I don't need to ask." His dad shrugs. "It's pretty obvious."

"What?"

"I know you, Kurt. I don't need to ask. I've seen the way you are around him." His dad pauses, and Kurt's glad to have a second to think about it. To wonder what his dad sees now that he didn't before. Kurt thinks he acted the same way around Thomas and he probably talked the same way about Adam. He knows it's different with Blaine, it feels different, but he doesn't understand how his dad knows that.

Kurt swallows. "What do you mean?"

"You've always had this air about you, this attitude. Like you know how incredible you are and refuse to pretend you're not. No-one could accuse you of being fake, kiddo, but you're not diplomatic either. When you don't respect other people, you don't hide it."

"You just said I was incredible. Why would I hide my opinions?"

"Exactly," his dad says warmly. He's absently tapping a few fingers on the dining room table, the spoon resting in his half-full bowl. "When you talked about those other guys, about Thomas and Adam, I couldn't help thinking that you didn't respect them too much. You liked them and maybe you loved them, but they weren't your equals."

Kurt rolls his eyes. "You're saying that because you're my dad. You're biased in the 'they're not good enough for you' arena."

"I'm not saying they weren't good enough for you. I'm saying you didn't think they were as good as you." His dad doesn't look away, not once, and it might be hard to hear, but Kurt doesn't want to be the one to break eye contact. "If you want to build a life with someone, you need a partner. You need an equal. It plain doesn't work otherwise."

It's strange how talking to his dad like an adult, about serious things and big ideas, can make Kurt feel like a kid. Like maybe he doesn't know as much about the world as he thought he did. "And with Blaine?"

"I haven't heard you say one snide thing to him. No cracks about literature or foreign languages that he doesn't know, no comments about wardrobe choices or forgetting lines onstage. You haven't told one story that puts Blaine in a bad light."

Kurt's a big enough person that he can acknowledge his twinge of guilt. He had said things like that, he'd told those supposedly hilarious stories. He never stopped to consider how it must have made Thomas or

Adam feel. Not once. “I wouldn’t do that to Blaine,” Kurt says eventually, settling on the one truth he can manage right now.

“I know you wouldn’t, kid. That’s why I don’t have to ask. The answer’s clearly yes.”

Kurt misses the snow in Lima. In Brooklyn, whenever he looks out his window it’s all slush and sleet. It’s tinged with grey and brown, tainted by the pollution and the sheer number of feet trampling through the city. Here the snow falls thickly across lawns and trees, and the whole street is shrouded in blinding white. These are the white Christmases he remembers, the snow days he always longed for.

It’s an odd thing to yearn for, but Kurt does. Sitting on the porch, he’s admiring the bleak sky and icy landscape, the harsh beauty of skeletal trees, black outlines against the grey clouds. It’s stark and minimalist, but it’s the lack of life that makes spring so glorious. He’s thinking about how he could translate that thought through an outfit – or maybe a seasonal collection, sharp outlines and pale colours, and he’s always looked good in austere greys – when Blaine pushes the front door open. “Finally get sick of shooting people in the face?” Kurt asks. Blaine’s spent the last hour in the basement with Finn, pointing guns and causing distressingly realistic blood spatters across the screen. It’s as far from a Vogue magazine as Kurt can imagine, but Blaine seemed to be having fun.

“I think I was slowing Finn down.”

Kurt looks over, smiling. He likes that Blaine notices these things, that he thinks about other people. Given the conversation with his dad this morning, Kurt suspects he lacks that trait. Maybe not totally, but clearly he’s not the most considerate person alive. He’s never empathized easily with others but Blaine... Blaine steps into someone else’s shoes with an ease Kurt admires.

“You’re a really good person, Blaine Anderson.”

Blaine blinks, his eyes wide. Slowly, hesitantly, he says, “I feel like there should be a ‘but’ at the end of that sentence.”

“No. No qualifying statements. You’re just a really good person.”

"You think so?" Blaine asks carefully, and Kurt nods. If anything, Blaine looks less convinced. "I was thinking this morning that I haven't been back in Ohio in over five years."

"Since that fight with your parents?"

"Yeah. And now I'm, like, a two-hour drive away." Blaine sighs. He tugs at his woven hat (scarlet and cream, but it works with Blaine's sweater, zigzag cuffs of red and cream threads peeking through tan wool), pulling it down over his ears. Kurt has a sudden flash of what Blaine must have looked like as a kid – or how Blaine's son would look, maybe, dark curly hair and big hazel eyes, tugging at winter clothing and insisting on making snowmen. "I should visit. A good son would visit."

"You don't have to," Kurt says gently.

"I want to. Or, well, I guess it's more that I don't want to be here and not visit. Or not even try." Blaine folds his hands over the railing, fingers interlocked tightly. "And you should feel free to say no, but I'd appreciate the company. If you didn't mind coming."

"I'd love to," Kurt says, and it's surprisingly genuine. He really does want to go. He's curious about Blaine's background, his family and his childhood, and given the roads, he's not sure he trusts Blaine's driving if the weather gets worse. "We'll take turns driving."

Despite the threatening clouds, the drive goes easily enough. There's a storm coming – Kurt can see it in the dark, low clouds – but they have a while yet.

They eventually pull into a nice section of town. Kurt can tell by the size of the houses, the general neatness of the lawns and the newness of the Range Rovers parked out front. Blaine's family home is like the rest of the houses in the street: pale brick and delicate white trim, pretty bay windows and high angled roof on the double-storey, double-garage house. Without stepping inside, Kurt thinks this place is worth at least three times his dad and Carole's.

He has enough time to up that estimate to four times, since Blaine parks by the curb and keeps the motor running. He drums his fingers on the steering wheel of Finn's truck, but doesn't get out.

(The truck isn't necessary for Finn since all of his tools stay in the shop, but Finn and his dad share a love of these sorts of things: trucks, outdoor camping, sports involving big tires and loud engines, reality shows that involve grown adults doing ridiculously dangerous things. It's a little old and a little beat-up, but Finn loves it. Kurt loves what it makes him remember: the three of them in his dad's shop, bringing this second-hand bomb back to life. They spent summer weeks working on it, teaching Finn the same stuff Kurt's dad taught him. It had made them brothers as much as singing in Glee Club, as much as standing beside their parents at that altar.)

"They moved the cherry tree," Blaine says, after he's stared at the garden for a while.

Kurt's not sure which one of the bare-limbed, severely pruned plants is a cherry tree (he can recognize cherry blossoms, thank you, not the trees they come from) but the garden is wide and spacious. Smooth, snow-covered lawns roll out to either side of a straight gravel path, the hedges are trimmed with perfect square corners and the whole thing looks far tidier than the gardens he's known. Maybe Quinn's garden looked like this but Kurt's grown up in gardens with mown grass and trimmed trees, and that's about it. No perfectly square garden beds with layers of greenery, tiny winter bulbs backed by taller bushes standing guard before the hedges.

"It's pretty," Kurt offers, and Blaine gives him a look that Kurt can't read at all.

"Let's do this," Blaine says quietly, but there's a few seconds' delay before he shrugs and gets out of the truck.

They walk up to the house in complete silence. The only sound is the crunch of their steps on the beige gravel path.

When they ring the doorbell, Kurt's expecting something classy. For the grand scale of the house, it's still a doorbell with a normal chime. They ring again, but it isn't answered. Blaine says, "I don't think they're home," and he sounds relieved. "Sorry this was such a waste of time. I'll take you out for lunch to make up for it."

Kurt's not ready to climb back into vinyl seats just yet. They've driven for too long to leave it like that. Kurt reaches out, lays a hand on the curve of Blaine's bicep. "Can we at least see the back garden? I'm curious."

"I can show you inside if you want," Blaine says slowly, dragging the thought out as if he's waiting for Kurt to change his mind, "assuming they haven't changed the locks."

Kurt steps through the front door to find a house that's tasteful and bright, beautifully decorated. The first floor is living space (living room, dining room, formal lounge, kitchen, study). It's all done in creams with gold accents and occasional panels in Dior grey, wide open and airy. The art on the wall is painted, not prints, and hanging in ornate golden frames.

Blaine leads him through room after beautiful room, and it's not until the third doorway that Kurt realizes what's missing. There are no family photos. No posed shots hanging on the walls, no prom picture on the mantle. Every room is artfully detailed, colour-coordinated knickknacks and a lovely use of textures, but the whole thing could come straight out of Vogue Living. It feels like a display home, a setting for upper-middle-class happiness and success, an advertisement for the American dream.

It doesn't feel like a home.

Blaine's let some things slip. He's talked about watching movies on his own as a kid, or coming home from boarding school for the holidays and the freedom of having the house to himself. He described it as being alone but looking around, Kurt thinks he probably meant lonely.

"Tell me something that happened here," Kurt says softly, following Blaine into the dining room. "It's so empty now, I can't imagine you growing up here."

"There aren't a lot of great family stories," Blaine says.

"It doesn't have to be a great story. When you step in here, what's the first thing you remember?"

Blaine blinks, slow and thoughtful. "Coming out to my parents. I was in my last year of junior high and I thought my parents should know. I remember being terrified."

Kurt nods because he remembers that feeling. Remembers telling his dad and knowing that as much as his dad loved him, he wasn't growing into what parents assume their kids will be. He'd been so scared, terrified that this would be the thing that made him too different, that made it too hard for his dad to keep trying. In hindsight, he should have known better. "How did it go?"

"They were quiet for the longest time. I remember my palms sweating. Then Mom walked around the table, and put her hand on my shoulder and said it was okay." Blaine forces a smile, but he looks a little ill. "I believed her. And then she said it was fine if I wasn't ready to date girls yet. I didn't need to make up stories."

"Oh, Blaine," Kurt says, folding his hands in front of him. It's such a horrible thing to be young, confused and scared of rejection – only to have the source of your fear ignored. Kurt knows it's not uncommon, as far as coming out stories go, but he can understand why it remains a painful memory for Blaine.

"I didn't have the courage to argue the point," Blaine mutters to the shining reflection on the polished wooden table. "But if you want a tour of awkward Anderson moments, that's easily done."

He walks out of the room and Kurt hurries after him. "Blaine, I didn't mean—"

"There," Blaine says, pointing at a spot in the middle of the entrance hall, "is where I shoved a cheque at my father and told him he might be disappointed, but he could cut his losses here."

Blaine points at the couch in the family room. "There is where I spent two weeks watching TV with my wrists in casts because I thought it'd be safe enough to go to a school dance with a friend. A friend. He wasn't even a date. And there," he says, pointing at the fireside, "is where Dad asked what did I expect would happen if I made myself such an obvious target."

Blaine spins on his heel, takes the stairs two at a time. He stops halfway up and waves a hand to gesture at the space around him. "Here is where my older brother told me to go to Stanford. This is where Cooper stood and said that college was the best option for people not talented enough or devoted enough to make a living as performing artists."

"Blaine," Kurt says gently, but Blaine's already walking away, bounding up the stairs and throwing open a bedroom door.

"And here, the night before I left for college, Mom said—" Blaine stops, and the anger fades from his expression, gets devoured by something sad and hopeless. "Mom said a lot of things. How having a family gives your life meaning. How being gay was an excuse for promiscuity and irresponsible sex. Mostly, she wanted me to meet new people and be closeted, she wanted me to lie and be someone I wasn't. Someone I'm not."

Blaine looks so lost and Kurt, in what might possibly be a first in his life, wishes he hadn't asked.

"I shouldn't have come back here. When I look around, all I see are the ways I failed to be someone they could be proud of."

Kurt takes one last look around the room – the dark masculine shades of grey and brown, the fencing and polo trophies on the shelves, the lack of show choir or Disney or anything that feels like Blaine, an entire bedroom built around someone Blaine isn't – and then at the sweetest, kindest and most interesting guy Kurt's ever known.

"They failed, not you," Kurt says, cupping a hand against Blaine's jaw, thumb brushing along his cheekbone. "They're the ones missing out. They don't get to know the incredible man you've become."

"Did your mom really want you to go back in the closet for college?" Kurt asks on the drive home. Blaine's been quiet so far, smiling when Kurt catches his eye, staring sullenly out the window when he thinks Kurt's concentrating on the road. "It sounds like the opposite of the college experience."

"That wasn't the worst thing said that night."

Kurt's pre-emptively horrified – he knows it has to be bad – but it's like a car crash. He can't look away until he's seen all the gory details. "What was?"

"Not all husbands are faithful. That was what she said when I pointed out that even if I didn't tell people I was gay, I'd still want to sleep with guys. Being closeted and getting married to some poor girl wouldn't make either of us happy, and Mom said, 'Not all husbands are faithful.' I couldn't believe those words came out of her mouth."

Kurt tries to imagine Carole or his dad suggesting cheating as a good lifestyle choice. Carole would be disappointed and upset with him; his dad would probably sit him down on the couch for a lecture about honesty and respect. They wouldn't encourage it in a million years.

Kurt turns his attention back to the road. "Are you okay?"

When Kurt steals a glance, Blaine has his head turned towards the window. He's staring out into the distance, brows furrowed. There's something about the slump of his shoulders that breaks Kurt's heart.

"I'm fine, really," Blaine says, but he doesn't sound very convinced. "I don't know what I was expecting. Probably better this way."

"How do you figure?"

"I've no idea what they would have said. I have absolutely no idea what they would have said to you." Blaine shakes his head. Kurt catches a glimpse of the movement from the corner of his eye. (He only takes his eyes off the road for a second. He's a mechanic's son. He's seen the result of way too many crashes to let his attention wander while driving.) "Besides, dealing with someone else's passive-aggressive parents? Isn't that too much to ask from an extended holiday fling?"

"That's not what this is," Kurt objects.

"A short-lived meaningful love affair, then," Blaine recites, laughing a little.

"That's not what this is. It's really not. You get that, don't you?"

Blaine shrugs and gives a bit of a hum, but it's not agreement and it's not good enough. It's nowhere near good enough. Kurt considers his options. He could wait until he gets home but timing makes a difference to these conversations, and this is the perfect moment. He's been putting it off for far too long if Blaine thinks that description still applies.

However, driving and big emotional talks are not a good combination.

Kurt pulls over to the side of the road, but keeps his lights on and the engine running. It's starting to get dark and he wants to keep the heater going.

"I was wrong and I don't say that easily," Kurt says, and Blaine frowns in bewilderment. There's something adorable about Blaine looking confused. Judging by that expression, Kurt could have confessed a love of parachute pants and head-to-toe denim. "There isn't anything short-lived about this. This is the kind of love that lasts a lifetime."

“Kurt, I care about you, I really do, but...” Blaine sighs, worries on his bottom lip. “It’s not Broadway, I know, but my job cost me a lot. I’m not prepared to give it up, not even for you.”

“I’m not asking you to.” Kurt feels himself grimace and adds, “Well, not yet. I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t thought about it, but mostly, it’s in the context of starting a family. I wouldn’t want my kids to grow up missing a parent like I did. But that’s a future, distant future, conversation. Right now, I think seven months of long-distance with five months of having you all to myself? We could make that work.”

Ideally, Blaine would smile happily after that little speech, not look stunned and unsure. “Kurt, that’s a lot to ask of anyone.”

“The long-distance thing or the future kids thing?” Kurt asks carefully. He doesn’t want to give up the idea of either, but maybe he can compromise. Just a little. For a while.

Blaine blinks rapidly as he thinks, dark eyelashes fluttering in a way that shouldn’t be distracting. This conversation is too important to be distracted by how ridiculously gorgeous Blaine is.

“Talk to me, Blaine,” Kurt pleads. He unfastens his seatbelt and shifts around to face Blaine as much as he can. “I really think this can work. If we want it to.”

“Maybe we should put this on hold.” Blaine drops his gaze to his lap, stares at his interlocked fingers as he carefully speaks. “If you’re still single when I get leave again, I’ll come to New York. If you’re not, then that’ll be fine too.”

“No,” Kurt says, even though a part of him is screaming that he should be saying yes, he should be taking any opportunity to keep Blaine in his life. “I don’t want to be someone you catch up with when you’re in the area. I want New York and Brooklyn to be your home. I want you to do what you love, what you are so good at, and then I want you to come home to me.”

The thing is that Blaine doesn’t argue. He doesn’t say he wants his freedom or that having a home with Kurt waiting for him would weigh him down. He doesn’t say he doesn’t want this. But he shakes his head sadly and says, “Seven months is a long time to be alone, Kurt. I wouldn’t expect you to wait—”

"You might not expect it, but you're worth it and so is this. It's worth trying, at least." Kurt slides his hand around the back of Blaine's neck. "Don't you want to try?"

"I want you," Blaine says, voice thick. It's so close to yes, but Kurt needs to hear the actual words.

"So we'll try? You and me, us, long-term? We'll try?"

Blaine swallows, eyes stretched open. "Okay," he says, sounding as terrified as he looks.

"This time, say it like you're in love with me," Kurt teases. He wants to lighten the mood, but Blaine's face shifts from fear to utter seriousness.

"I am in love with you."

"Good," Kurt distantly hears himself say. Then – after a moment he's going to blame on the shock of suddenly getting exactly what he wants – he says, "I love you too."

Over the next few days, there are a few conversations with Blaine about what to do next: add Blaine's name to the lease ("To legally make it our apartment," Kurt explains); forward Blaine's mail from the post office box ("To our address," Blaine says cheerily); get Blaine's few possessions shipped from storage ("There's not a lot," Blaine says, "It'll fit in the spare room. Mostly, it's magazine collections and favourite clothes that didn't fit in a suitcase."). Blaine doesn't laugh when Kurt suggests writing a to-do list. Instead, he nods seriously and suggests dividing the list into 'To Do Immediately' and 'To Do Eventually', and Kurt can't resist the urge to kiss him for that.

There are some other conversations. They get shrouded in vague terms, whispered in the dark of night with Blaine's arms curled tight around him. They talk about family and possibilities, about where they see themselves in five or ten years' time, and once they even talk about retiring. "I always liked the idea of retiring somewhere warm, somewhere grandkids would like to visit," Blaine confesses, his cheek resting above Kurt's heart. "This was years ago, when I was a kid, but I wanted that. Grandparents I saw, having somewhere fun to go for summer vacation. I haven't thought about that in ages."

Kurt strokes his fingers through Blaine's hair and thinks: grandkids. In his heart of hearts, his boyfriend wants grandchildren. This thing between them is going to work. He's sure of it. "You know how keenly I feel the cold. Retiring somewhere warm could be nice. As long as we visit Broadway at least once a year."

Judging by the smile that keeps settling on Carole's face and the proud, paternal look his dad keeps giving him, he and Blaine aren't precisely subtle in their happiness. Kurt ignores those expressions as best as he can. As long as there aren't any awkward parental conversations, he can deal with the patronizing approval.

He doesn't realize how blatantly obvious they must be until they're saying their goodbyes. Finn claps one huge hand on Blaine's shoulder and says, "So, we'll see you next Thanksgiving?" For Finn to notice, it must be visible from space.

Blaine's face breaks into the cheesiest grin in the world, and Kurt's so in love he nearly beams too. "Depends on my work schedule," Blaine says, "I usually miss Thanksgiving by a few days."

"Cool. I'll show you the secret level at Christmas, dude." Then there's a weird fist-bump, fluttery fingers thing that Kurt doesn't get, but it's nice to see his brother and his boyfriend get along. Even if they do start talking about cheat codes and ammunition stores.

Kurt tunes out the conversation to the best of his ability and levels a meaningful look at his dad. "Look after yourself," Kurt says, "and remember that bacon is not a good reason to ignore your cholesterol levels."

His dad's arm lands around Kurt's shoulders. "You don't have to fuss over me. I've got Carole for that."

"Don't think I didn't see that secret stash of bacon in the freezer."

"It's not secret. It's Finn's," his dad replies, as if Kurt doesn't know his dad has a weakness for BLTs or egg and bacon on toast. "Anyway, looks like you've got someone else to worry about."

"Meaning?"

His dad nods towards Blaine, and the peak of his cap hides his eyes. "Meaning it looks like you worked out your own happily ever after."

"Are you trying to say I told you so?"

"Only because I told you so," his dad replies, sounding far too satisfied with himself. "See what happens when you take my advice?"

"If I took your advice, I would have been singing Mellencamp songs for the last ten years," Kurt says brightly but he gives his dad a tight hug. He can bear a little smugness (since his dad is kind of right).

"Or Diana Ross."

Really, there's nothing Kurt can say to that. It's impossible to be appropriately sarcastic when he's surrounded by so much love. "Don't let it go to your head," Kurt mutters as convincingly as he can. From his dad's chuckle, he fools absolutely no-one.