

eRomance

by

gleeeeeeful

Kurt/Blaine || AU || R

Online Dating! Klaine AU – Despite growing up in Ohio hours apart, Kurt and Blaine never met. Now they live in New York City and they're looking for love. Blaine hasn't had a boyfriend in years and Kurt hasn't found the time to meet The One due to his grueling schedule. So they try online dating. Could they find Mr. Right online? Future Fic. Slightly non-canon. Klaine feat. Brittana

WIP 40/?

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Prologue

"I can't believe you're making me do this, Santana," I groaned, staring at the computer screen in front of me.

"It's not like I'm holding a gun to your head Blaine, but you know that I'm just helping you make the right decision for you," she said as she peered over top of the monitor.

"Whatever," I said, rolling my eyes.

"I've known you for four years now and in that entire time, you've never once had a boyfriend. Doesn't that seem a little odd to you?"

"How do you know I haven't had..."

"Oh really, Blaine. Have you had a boyfriend? Hell, have you had any guy in your life in a romantic capacity in the past four years?"

I scrunched my brows and stared at the floor.

"I'll take that as a no. But seriously, even I've had a girlfriend since I've known you and you know I'm not always the easiest person to deal with."

I snorted. "Brittany hardly counts, San. You've been with her for what feels like forever."

"It's true and I know you're jealous of us," she added with a wink.

Santana really did have the best intentions, but I was not always on board with her ideas. She and I started the same day as interns at Rialto Music Group – her in publicity, me in artist development – four years ago. Since then, she and I had moved up the ranks together in our respective groups, but still maintained close contact personally and professionally. So much so that we lived two blocks away from each other and would often walk to work together.

But sometimes Santana was pushy. It was great for her job since she would do whatever she could to get coverage for our bands, but when it came to our friendship it meant that she was always a little over-

involved in my life – specifically my love life. It wasn't because she was intentionally being overbearing; it was because she really cared.

"Look," she said, her eyes and tone taking on a more serene tone. "I know that you're lonely, Blaine. Don't try to tell me that you're not. And I know you're not looking for a one-night thing, that's not who you are. You are fiercely loyal and exceedingly loving and one night with some guy won't cut it for you. But I understand how hard it can be to find someone who is gay, available, and not crazy in New York. The only reason I even suggested it is because this worked for me. And you've seen how happy I am."

I looked at her, puzzled. "Wait, you met Brittany online?"

She nodded. "Yes, I did. I'm not open about that fact with most people because I thought they'd judge me for how I met her. My parents still think we met through a mutual friend. I don't think they'd understand that meeting someone online is kosher in the new millennium. But, it's true, Brittany and I met through this exact site online years ago and here we are – five years later – and endlessly happy."

"I never realized, San," I said, looking again at the site in front of me.

NYCDate – Could you find The One? Join now to find men and women living and working in New York City. Mr. or Mrs. Right could be right around the corner. LGBT friendly.

I sighed as I typed mindlessly on my keyboard, filling in the required information to start an account. "I guess if you found Brittany through NYCDate, I guess I can give it a shot."

She clapped giddily, "You won't regret it, Blaine! Who knows, you really could meet The One!"

"I'm still not sold on this, but anything for you, dearest. And hey, it'll keep my parents off my back for awhile too," I said as I continued to type in my billing information. "At the very least, I'll probably get some good dating stories out of it."

"Kurt, what is that?!" I whipped around to see my roommate standing directly over me, eyeing my computer's screen.

"Wes! Have some respect for my privacy! God, don't you know how to knock?" I asked as I slammed my laptop closed.

"You can't blame me... I haven't seen you in two weeks and I saw that your light was on, so I was coming to say hello. Besides, I've caught you doing worse things in here before," he said as he nudged my shoulder suggestively. I gave him my best glare as I stonily crossed my arms in front of my chest.

"It's not MY fault that you suck at knocking. Jerk." I really didn't want to have this conversation with him right now. I haven't been home but a few hours and he's already managed to irritate me to no end. Sure, I've been gone awhile since the tour I was costume assistant on had added a few more dates to the original schedule, but did he really need to come on so strong with the judgment as soon as I walked in? And why was it that I was more embarrassed that he saw me on a *datingsite* than I was the time he caught me masturbating?

"You make it seem like it happens all the time. It's only happened twice now," he explained, as if I didn't remember. "I'm not saying I'm super surprised though."

I raised an eyebrow. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He smiled. "You're so busy. It's ridiculous that I probably see random people on the subway more often than I see my own roommate. I'm sure in your travels around the country that you're not exactly finding guys that make you feel grounded. Online dating seems to be a good fit for your lifestyle right now."

I rolled my eyes. "Don't make it seem like I haven't found someone."

He scoffed. "Oh please. The few times you've even mentioned a guy, it was someone you met in a random city while you were on tour or someone you had a lingering crush on from the cast." I ran my fingers through my hair and shifted my gaze toward the closet, avoiding his eye contact since he could read me like a book without me having to say a word. "Kurt, I've known you since freshman year of college. I know how you are. You act all strong and tough, but really you're a romantic and you want to have a loving, long-lasting relationship. It's okay that you want to try and find that."

"But isn't it, I don't know, embarrassing that I'm resorting to finding someone online?" My voice came out a bit whinier than intended, but I was feeling pretty desperate to have to resort to meeting someone online as opposed to the normal way most people met their partners.

Wes shrugged. "I don't think so. Plenty of people meet someone online these days. It seems pretty normal. Honestly, with how busy you are, it might work better that way at first. When would you honestly have time to hit up a bar or even just meet new people?"

"Hardly ever," I noted, looking at my heavily inked calendar lying on my desk. How did I even fit time to sleep in here? "I don't know. What if I don't meet someone on here? What if no one finds me appealing?"

"You can't be serious. How can you think those things? Don't give up now before you've even started, Kurt. Besides, even our first day in the dorms freshman year, you were a man killer. You practically had the guys lining up to take your number. Why not let your wrath out on the rest of New York City?"

I rolled my eyes. "I think you're just being nice, but thanks." I opened my laptop and looked at the site one more time.

NYCDate – Could you find The One? Join now to find men and women living and working in New York City. Mr. or Mrs. Right could be right around the corner. LGBT friendly.

As I started typing my information into the site, I could practically feel Wes' approval of my decision as he walked out of my room.

A/N: Just to note, Kurt, Blaine, the Warblers, and New Directions folks never met.

CHAPTER ONE

Monday, October 8

BLAINE

I felt like my mind was going numb from answering a bunch of seemingly trivial questions about myself. The site allowed me to write short answers, which I was thankful for. Some sites had a generic "yes or no" section that I felt was too rigid and didn't allow you to explain your choices. Besides, answering from a selection of answers doesn't allow your personality to shine through.

Do you drink? *Sometimes* Do you smoke? *No. Well, not often enough to say sometimes.* Do you do drugs? *No.* Are you a morning or evening person? *Evening. Waking up before 8am is a chore.* Are you an indoor or outdoor person? *Both?* What's your ideal vacation? *A driving tour through Ireland.* Do you think you want to have kids? *would depend on the guy since I wouldn't want to intentionally raise a kid without a partner. Besides, I'm not at a place to make that decision right this minute.*

I wasn't thrilled with that answer, but it was the truth. I feel like it's too early to decide on those things – I'm only 26 for god's sake.

I scrolled down and the only thing left on the page was the Next button. Oh, thank god. That was all of the questions. Not so bad.

Wait, I'm only 60% of the way done with this thing? I feel like I've been sitting here forever. What else can I possibly have to say about myself?

Oh, great. Long-form questions.

"This is the hardest part," I whined as Santana brought me a cup of coffee. "I hate filling out these long questions about myself. They ask so many and I feel really conceited writing about all of the, what do they say, 'ways in which I'm The One for you' - I mean, come on."

She laughed as she set the coffee down and pulled a chair up next to mine. Thankfully the office was abandoned since it was after 5, so she and I could fill out my profile without being interrupted by any of our prying co-workers. "I'm sure it's awkward B, but I can help you with that. Maybe seeing yourself through someone else's eyes will help."

"That sounds good," I said as I lifted the coffee cup to my lips to take a sip. "Let's get crackin'"

"Okay, first of all, don't say that anywhere in your profile. It's the epitome of cheese."

"Whatever. I already filled out the basic information – height, body type, hair color – and answered some short questions about my daily habits and whatnot, but now comes to the other, longer questions. Okay, 'what are you looking for in a partner?' I guess they pull out the big guns right away."

"Just write 'a hot man who's a killer between the sheets.' Put it out there from the get-go," she taunted.

"Come on, San. Let's try to be serious here. But Jesus, that question is pretty horrible and open ended," I said with a groan.

She nudged me playfully. "Sure, it's not the best question. But they just want to make sure that whoever is reading this is clear about your intentions before they keep going. Some people probably just want a good lay, others want friends with benefits, others more of what you want. Trust me, it'll help you when you're browsing profiles. Lord knows it helped me weed out a bunch of crazy bitches when I first joined," she said, taking a gulp of coffee.

I stared at the screen for a minute, trying to think of the way to start what would feel like the novel known as Blaine's Feelings About Relationships. A few minutes of hurried typing later, I felt satisfied with my answer – trying to be as concise as possible.

"Okay, how about this? 'More than anything, I'm looking for a partner/companion – someone who will be my equal in life and in love. He should fight for me and fight with me. He should help make me a better person and who can teach me the ways that I can support and love them. I also want someone that I can come home to, who is willing to put up with my cheesiness, who doesn't mind if I leave my clothes lying next to the hamper rather than in them, and someone who would consider me their best friend. I'm looking for that once in a lifetime love, one that defines a generation.' Oh, god, does that sound really conceited? I said 'I a lot. Shit, I don't want some guy to think I'm really self-involved."

I looked over from my keyboard to an astonished Santana. "I – uh – I think that'll work," she said, practically stuttering over her words as they escaped her mouth. "Wow. Blaine, that's really beautiful. The way you described what you wanted... it's really nice. Why aren't you in our licensing group? You should write songs with the way you just strung those words together out of thin air."

"Nah, it's not really my thing. I like working with people, not feeling like I need to write something on command like a Labrador." Taking another sip of coffee, I moved on. "Next. 'What kinds of activities would you ideally like to share with your partner?' That seems a little less heavy than the last question, that's for sure."

"Yeah, and at least I can help you with this one."

"San, how do you know what I'd want to do with the future Mr. Anderson?"

"I know what things you like to do considering we've done a lot of them together, obviously," she said rolling her eyes at my *apparent* inability to realize that she knew who I was. "You love to go to shows and listen to music all the time, you also love karaoke bars, you love libraries and bookstores because you're a giant nerd, you'd cook all day if you had the choice, you enjoy running in the park... I'm sure you'd want to do most of those activities with this guy you're going to meet."

"I guess you're right. Should I also add that another one of the activities I'd like to share with my partner is blowjobs?" I asked, grinning. If Santana was going to write about me, I'm sure she'd add in some quip about sex. She loved to push my boundaries from time to time.

"Blaine Anderson – you nasty dog. Do you even remember what it's like to get a blowjob? It's been awhile, I'm sure your memory is rusty."

"Bitch. That's what I get for trying to inject humor into this awkward situation. Jesus, you know me too well." God, she had a point though. When was the last time I had any remotely sexual contact? The thought that I couldn't remember made me shudder as I clacked away at the keys typing in my answer.

"You know I will outdo you when it comes to anything involving sexual prowess or innuendo, so don't even bother. Alright, now that I helped with that question, what's next?"

I scrolled down to find the next question. "How would you describe your personal style or appearance?"

She laughed. "Have fun trying to explain – that," she said, gesturing to my clothing choices.

"Oh come on, it's not like I dress bad, San," I replied, slightly offended. "I think I'm pulling off a classy look here." People who knew me way back when would probably think my style hadn't evolved much from high school – button down shirts, sweater vests, and Clark Gable-esque hair. I had moved on slightly with

my hairstyle, preferring one that embraced the natural waves in my hair, and traded in my wingtips and dress shoes for more comfortable Converse or boots. The sweater vests and bowties were no more – favoring plain colored button downs and skinny ties more than the clothes that made younger me appear a little too Orville Redenbacher. Once I felt like I'd sufficiently described my clothing and style choices, I glanced at the next question.

"Ugh."

"What now?"

"It's asking me to write a paragraph about myself. This is even worse than the first question." Writing about yourself always feels so forced in online dating profiles. The pressure is on to try and write about your entire life story in around 1,000 characters that appears pithy, smart, engaging, and interesting – enough to make you appeal to someone who might be interested in you. God, this was going to suck.

"Here, let me try," Santana said, grabbing the keyboard out from under my hands.

"San, please don't..."

She glared at me. "I won't write anything embarrassing and I will let you read it before I hit submit, okay? At least this is the last step – the torture of setting up your online dating profile is nearly over."

I shrugged. It can't hurt. And it'll give me time to get another cup of coffee. "Fine. I'll give you a few minutes so I'm not looking over your shoulder as you try to make me sound like less of a dweeb. Do you want another cup of coffee?"

"I don't think I can make you appear like less of a dork, but I'll certainly try my hardest. And no thanks on the coffee; I don't know how you'll sleep tonight with all that caffeine you've ingested today," she added as she shooed me away from the computer.

"Thanks for the boost of confidence," I said as I nearly nudged her out of her seat as I passed by. "And I have to check out a new band tonight, so I'll need all the energy I can get. Those shows last until 2am and I'm an old geezer who likes to be in bed by midnight." I sighed as I raised myself to my feet. "Work your magic, I'll be back in a few."

After strutting back to the break room and poured myself another cup of coffee, I couldn't help but think about the gravity of this choice. It's really easy to join an online dating site on a whim, but this really could change my life. What if I actually meet someone from here? What if we end up dating for a long time and break up? What if we date for a long time and end up getting married? Shit. I mean, I am lonely and I do want to meet The Guy that I've been looking for, but am I really ready to potentially give up my life as a single person in order to share it with another person? Am I ready to find someone who I can bring home to my family? I really should think about how this will impact my life a little more before I start going on a ton of dates with guys. But this is not something I need to think about right now - especially now that I needed to find the hazelnut creamer that makes this offensive low-grade coffee somewhat ingestible.

After finding the creamer and loading my coffee with more sugar to dull the taste, I went out to join Santana who was focused intensely on the computer. She must've heard me approach, because she looked up at me and grinned with a knowing look on her face. "I think I've got it, B."

"Let me at it," I said as I plopped down next to her. As my eyes ran over each word, they brought a smile to my face and even toward the end, I might have felt a little misty-eyed. Not that I'd ever tell Santana.

After I finished reading, I looked over at Santana who sat there smugly, knowing she had succeeded in her task. "I think you nailed it, San." I clicked submit and said a silent prayer in my head, hoping for the best.

KURT

Is it wrong that I love answering questions about myself? I don't think I'm conceited – well, not extraordinarily so – but it reminds me of those times when I was in high school and I would fill out quizzes from Cosmo with Mercedes that would give better insight into my personality or love life or something. It's funny how the small questions end up defining so much of a person's being.

And thankfully, I didn't have to answer just yes or no to these questions. I hate being confined to a box of set responses... they simply would never do my personality justice by droning on with 'yes' or 'no.'

Do you drink? *Socially.* Do you smoke? *I smoked once in high school... from the wrong end of the cigarette. No plans on reliving that moment anytime. Ever.* Do you do drugs? *Hell no. (Just not my thing)* Are you a morning or evening person? *Morning. There's something exciting about a clean slate every morning to make*

your mark on the day. Are you an indoor or outdoor person? Indoor. What's your ideal vacation? A trip to Paris and the French countryside, traveling by train. Do you think you want to have kids? Maybe. It seems a bit early to decide these things, but I think if I met The One, I'd want for us to come to that decision together.

That's a good answer, right? Trying to decide what to do about the potential of kids just seems way too big of a decision to make when I'm only 26 – almost 27 – and single.

"How's it coming, killer?" Wes brought me a cup of hot cocoa as he sat down on my bed. Somehow Wes' presence made me feel a little self conscious about doing this whole online dating thing. I looked at him over the rim of the mug he'd just placed at my side as I brought it to my lips. "Do you think I'm crazy for doing this?"

He shook his head. "Nah. I do wonder if now is a good time for you, though. You're always so busy. Do you think that you'll be able to juggle a relationship with your travel schedule?"

Oh, crap. I forgot to tell Wes.

"Well... actually, there's been a change. I decided I was kind of over the whole touring thing when we made a stop in Tampa. I realized that running around the country for months on end was not exactly how I imagined it to be. I wanted to spend time while we were in Florida at the beach, but in reality I never left the hotel or the theater. I didn't even go to the Starbucks around the corner because I didn't have time."

He looked at me, puzzled. "So, you just up and quit your job? That doesn't seem very like you, Kurt."

I rolled my eyes. Does he *ever* listen? "I didn't say that I quit, Wes. Actually, I applied - and was hired - for a job here in New York. Which, unfortunately for you, means I'll be around a little more often these days. Hope that's – " I didn't even get to finish my sentence before Wes was practically squeezing the life out of me with his hug.

"That's awesome! I've missed having you around. Who knew I'd actually miss you?" he joked as he backed into his spot on the bed.

"Geez. Who knew that the guy who made us rehearse until the end of time in college choir would be the guy who would be my roommate in New York City and would actually miss me! You never fail to surprise me." He was totally embarrassed; he hated when he got overly huggy. He wasn't a big hugger, though he definitely had developed a soft spot for me over time.

"Oh please. You've missed me too. But really, it'll be nice to have you around more than just one weekend per month," Wes added as he gulped down more of his cocoa. "So, what part of the online dating profile are we at now?"

I scrolled down and clicked the next button. "Oh, good! The long form questions!"

"I think you might be the only person who enjoys answering questions about himself. Don't you think that's a bit weird?"

"I don't think so. It allows me to really think and be attuned to what I truly feel about myself and the world. More than anything, it's a lesson about me more than it is about explaining myself. And besides, should I really date someone if I don't know who I am first?" I said, turning my attention away from Wes before starting with the first question. "Alright, first up. 'What are you looking for in a potential partner?' That's a fairly open question."

Wes peered at me, curiously. "What *are* you looking for? As long as I've known you, you've never really had a 'type' - you flit from guy to guy without any real consistency in terms of appearance, career path, life goals... I hope you can actually define what you're looking for, Kurt. Seems like it will be a tall order."

"It's not like I've brought home that many guys for you to see. There was that guy Paul, the one guy I met at Blake's whose name and phone number I promptly forgot when he decided to take my favorite coat on his way out, and..."

"William."

"Yes, and him. But that's three. In, what, five years? And sure, they were all different, but it's not like I didn't learn anything from them. I think I know what I want now. And not just in terms of appearance, I'll have you know."

I stared at the screen for a minute. Was Wes right? Did I really know what I wanted or was I just being stubborn to prove a point? I sat for a minute longer before Wes interrupted my thoughts.

"You know what you want, Kurt. I was just busting your chops. Don't let me being an ass hinder you from writing it out."

I laughed. "Oh, are you finally admitting that you're an ass? Alert the media!"

He scoffed. "Jerk. See if I ever bring you hot cocoa again."

"Please. It's October, it's not like we won't have it a million more times before spring. They're predicting a pretty cold winter this year. And I know you can't resist making it."

He rolled his eyes. "Whatever. Okay, so... this question."

"Give me a minute. I'll read it to you when I'm done, okay?" Geez, he's more impatient than me sometimes.

Alright, I need to think about this. What do I want? What.. do... I... want?

I typed aw

first things that came to my mind.

Wes glanced over my shoulder and started reading aloud. "Hmmm. 'The short and long of it boils down to one thing - partnership. Friendship and love are essential for creating a solid relationship and I'm looking for someone I can truly call my partner - and not just in a politically correct way. I want to love him and care for him and I want him to do the same for me. I want him to call me out when I'm hogging the covers, I want him to make me laugh, I want him to hold my hand, I want him to show me what love is. I'm hoping for a friend, lover, confidant, supporter, and - of course - partner... occasionally in crime. I want me to be his everything because I know that Mr. Right will truly be my everything - the one I'll love forever.' That's pretty good, Kurt. Not too sappy or anything," he said, moving his hand to his face.

I peered at him. Oh god. "Are you crying?"

"Don't judge me Kurt! I'm not a man with a icy heart. I have feelings," he said as he clutched his cheeks in fear. I wanted to chide him a bit more, but I didn't want to push my bounds too much. Clearly he was having an emotional day... or something.

"Okay, moving on. 'What kinds of activities would you ideally like to share with your partner?' That's easy enough," I said as I happily typed in my answers. Nothing too unusual - cooking, dancing, enjoying the arts. No need for Wes to hear about that part, he knew what I liked.

"Shouldn't you add something in about what *other* types of things you might want to do?" he suggested with a wink. God, what a perv.

"Are you sure you're not still 17 and in high school? I don't see you in that fancy private school uniform, so I'll take that as a no," I stated. Maybe it was a straight guy thing, but somehow the guy was always thinking

about sex. Sure, I think about sex plenty myself. But he's way more... vocal... about it. "Alright, last question."

"Ooh, do tell, Mr. Hummel," Wes said, practically bouncing at the possibility to help me with this dating profile at some point - and this being his final chance. I rolled my eyes. I hated it when he called me Mr. Hummel. It made me feel old.

"The most stereotypical of them all. 'Tell us about yourself in one paragraph.' No bells and whistles. But I have 1,000 words so let's be sure to get it perfect."

"Let's get crackin' - we have to get your profile up ASAP. I want to meet the future Mr. Hummel sooner rather than later."

"Where did you come up with such a horrible phrase? It's so corny," I said with slight disdain. He said that all the time and it always kind of grinded my gears.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I dunno. Okay, seriously, onto the question. How do you want to get this answer started? I feel like it might be kind of abrupt to just say 'Hi I'm Kurt!' - don't you?"

"Yeah, but we can figure something out. Though I'm pretty sure I can figure most of this paragraph out by myself, but I'll let you add anything I leave out, deal?"

"I can accept those terms," Wes stated with a nod.

"Geez, you're such a lawyer sometimes." Wes *was* a lawyer, so it wasn't an insult to call him one, though I certainly tried to insult his profession. With all the lawyer jokes out there and Wes being an easy target, I couldn't help myself sometimes.

For the first time since I started my profile, I actually wasn't sure what to say. There's a lot of weight in how you describe yourself in these things. Aside from the photo - which I still needed to choose... and that decision would take forever - it was the second thing people would look at. It has to fully describe as much of me as possible and it's a pretty daunting task. Instead of writing down everything, I decided to just write down bulletpoints before I handed my laptop over to Wes. "Since you want to help, write me something that utilizes these points in 1,000 words. Think of it as your assignment. I'm going to get a load of laundry started and maybe by the time I'm done, you'll have something I can read. Sound good?"

He grabbed the laptop eagerly and licked his lips. "Perfect."

"Please don't make me sound dumb, Wes. And do not send it before I read it." He kept typing feverishly. "I'm not kidding!"

He waved me away and I trudged to the laundry room. Sure, I'd trust Wes with my life. I trusted him with my clothing, which was kind of my life, so I could assume he'd do alright with my personal statement. Right? I carefully lowered the clothes into the water and shut the lid on my jeans before heading back to the room.

Wes was reading whatever he had written with a smug look on his face. "You ready to be amazed?" he asked as I resumed my place at my desk. I nodded sheepishly and took the open laptop from his hands and started reading.

wanted to be.

I was asto

After reading four sentences, I hit submit as Wes beamed at me, clearly proud of his abilities. Once I received the notification that my profile was accepted, I closed the lid on my laptop and sighed.

Let the games begin.

CHAPTER TWO

Monday Night, October 8

BLAINE

After completing my profile, closing down the office and parting ways with Santana, I took the subway out to Brooklyn. Being in artist development meant working bands up to being able to record an album. A lot times, that meant holding hands with artists, assuring them that they were - indeed - good enough to have their music heard by the masses. Some of the bands I'd found over the years had successfully recorded, some hadn't. But it was the nature of the beast - you never knew until you took a chance with a band and I loved that about my job.

It was like life. Sometimes people may surprise you once you give them a chance. And in my mind, that's kind of what I was doing with this whole online dating thing. I was giving it - and whatever guys I may meet on there - a chance. Besides, it's not like I was getting a marriage proposal out... though it would be nice to have one of these days.

As I changed trains on the one headed toward Brooklyn, I didn't even think twice about the fact that it would take me nearly an hour and a half round-trip to make my way out to the venue and back. Living in Hell's Kitchen was great, but leaving Manhattan meant that travel took awhile even with the express trains running. I could have found a good variety of venues to visit in Manhattan, but Brooklyn seemed to always bring a more laid-back vibe to its shows, and my favorite was The Bell House. It was a good, smaller venue that had shows nearly every night. Even though their shows weren't always a home run, I'd at least always have a good time.

Especially since my friend Lauren was their main bartender. Lauren and I met the first time I had gone to The Bell House for a band - whose name I couldn't remember because they were so incredibly awful - and Lauren and I commiserated over the band's horrible sound and the singer's lack of emotion in his songs; even if they were covers. Once the show concluded, she and I chatted for what felt like hours about music, New York, guys... everything. Turns out, Lauren was from Ohio too but had gone to New York after graduation to try to get away from her old life and start over. She wanted to make herself over, lost about 100 pounds, redid her wardrobe, graduated from college, was pursuing her Master's degree, and became "less of a bitch" although she was still certainly pretty feisty despite losing her self-proclaimed title of Queen Bitch. We weren't best friends, but considering how often I found myself at this venue, she was always a good person to have on my side.

"Well, if it isn't Anderson. What's up?" she said greeting me from behind the bar after I showed them my ID and got my wristband to purchase alcohol.

"Hey Lauren, what's on tonight's agenda?"

"It's a group of kids from Queens - Atticus Finch. Their sound check wasn't horrible, so here's hoping that's a good thing," she said as she grabbed for a clean glass and started to pour me a beer. "No opener tonight, so hopefully you'll be back in Manhattan before your carriage turns into a pumpkin." She winked at me then placed the beer in front of me. I reached into my pocket for my wallet before she stopped me. "Anderson, you know better. I'll upcharge the hell out of these hipsters if it means I can get you a free drink now and again."

I chuckled and threw the cash into her tip jar and she thanked me silently with a nod as she made her way down the bar to help a new customer. I turned around and leaned on the bar, taking in the scene in front of me. The crowd seemed to be mostly younger kids, usually a good sign, and the room was fairly packed despite a weeknight show. As I started to analyze the various 'kids' that had come to the show tonight, the band came out from behind the curtain and took their places with their instruments. The crowd yelled enthusiastically - somewhat unusual for a band so unknown - as the lead singer grabbed the microphone.

"Hey guys! We're Atticus Finch and we'd like to thank each of you for coming out tonight. Without further ado, let's roll!"

With that, the band took off - and man, did they take off. Their music was incredible, their stage presence was far better than I would have expected from a bunch of kids, and the way that the audience responded to their music was infectious. Even I found myself singing along to the chorus of one of their songs when they called us to join them.

Once the forty-five minute set came to a close, I turned back to the bar to find Lauren, who was standing directly behind me with a grin on her face.

"What'd you think?" I asked as I placed my empty glass in front of her.

She smiled. "They were good. And you'd be an idiot not to talk to them, Anderson."

I laughed heartily. The best thing I could appreciate about Lauren was that she knew music. She wasn't a performer - she certainly didn't want to be - but she knew good music when she heard it. And she was never afraid to give her opinion on anything. Ever.

"Noted, ma'am. Well, I best talk to them, huh? If I don't see you, I'll probably see you sometime next week, right?" I added walking toward the stage.

"You best hope!" she practically screamed as she continued her duties at the bar.

Approaching the stage, I saw the band had started to pack up for the night. Some of the guys were talking to their fans near the front of the stage while a few others were picking up the pieces of the drum kit or packing up the amps. As I walked up, the lead singer was just concluding his conversation with a girl who'd come for the show tonight, who was really star struck at the sight of the lead singer. The fact that he wasn't in a hugely popular band didn't seem to phase her - it was the music and his voice that had spoken to her. At least, that what she'd said to him in the final words of their conversation as I got closer.

The singer Zach - who introduced himself and his band toward the end of their set - thanked her for attending before turning to me. "Hey there, man. Thanks for coming out," he said, extending a hand for a shake.

"Of course. I was in the area and thought I'd come in. You guys seem to be pretty popular around here."

He took the hand I'd just let go of and ran it through his hair. "Yeah, a lot of these guys are our friends, but we've been playing all around the city for six years so I guess we've picked up some fans over time."

"Six years? How old are you guys? I wouldn't think more than 19," I added, shocked.

"Actually, I'm 21. The rest of the guys are either 21 or 20. We're young, but we've been playing together since high school and just decided to keep it going while we're all in school," he added, sheepishly. I totally got where he was coming from, being young in music usually translated to inexperience or inability to create music.

"Don't sweat it. I thought you guys were great. Really great, actually."

"Thanks - uh - sorry, I didn't catch your name..."

"Blaine."

"Oh, cool. Thanks Blaine," he added before looking away when one of his band members called to him from off-stage. "Sorry man, I gotta get going..."

I stopped him. "Don't even worry about it. But do you guys have a card or anything? I know some people in the business and I'd love to have your contact information just in case."

He lit up at the possibility of me knowing someone in the business. I wasn't going to tell him that I was in the business myself; I'd made that mistake once and it resulted in a restraining order and a boss who insisted that I run new bands through him before announcing who I was. Zach reached into his back pocket and produced a business card and handed it to me. "Here you go! It has our booking agent, manager, and our website too. I've gotta jet, but thanks for checking out our show, Blaine," he added before being whisked away to help pack up the band's van.

I waved to Lauren at the bar and made my way out the door. Once I was down the block, I dialed my boss' phone number. I knew he wouldn't answer - it was nearly 11 and he was probably asleep already - so this voicemail would have to do.

"Hey Clark, it's Blaine. I just checked out this band in Brooklyn and I think I might have found something great. They're called Atticus Finch. Check them out when you get in since I'm sure you'll be at your desk by 7am as usual and I won't come straggling in until 9." I laughed at that part. He was always an early riser and he knew that I struggled to make it in by 9 most mornings, so he was always busting my chops about it. "Let's talk about them Wednesday when you're back from Boston, cool? See ya."

I took a look again at the band's card - which had a photo of the cover of *To Kill A Mockingbird* on it - and read the contacts for the band. I didn't think anything of it, until one name stared back at me. One that I hadn't read in years.

Well, this could get interesting.

KURT

Wes decided to do dinner with a bunch of his friends from law school, which meant I would have the apartment to myself that night. Even though I hadn't seen Wes in a few weeks, I actually appreciated the space. It gave me time to process my soon-to-be new job that I was starting on Friday and the fact that I just signed myself up for an online dating site. You'd think I would want to take the time to actually hunker down and think through these monumental life changes I had just submitted myself to, but instead, I was captivated by the magic of TLC and its bridal-based television shows.

As my eyes flickered to the marathon of Say Yes To The Dress that was blaring from the TV, I shook my head. I still couldn't believe that I signed myself up for a dating site. Then again, is it really that weird that I had? I'm spending a Tuesday night at home, alone, watching repeats of Say Yes To The Dress. Clearly, I'm living on the edge.

I watched as Randy tried to dissuade yet another bride out of a huge, fluffy ball gown and decided that I was bored enough to actually peruse the site I just joined. I went back to my room, grabbed my laptop, and came back out to the couch. I might as well take a peek and see what kinds of guys I might find on this dating site since my night wasn't going to become any more exciting. I logged in and just stared at the screen for awhile. Where should I even begin?

I scrolled to the search bar and looked at the searchable fields. Seemed pretty standard, so I gave it a whirl.

Preference. Guys who like guys. Obviously. *Age range.* 25-30. I have a rule against dating younger guys - did that once and it was a disaster. And if I dated a guy that was too old, I'm pretty sure we wouldn't have much in common. *Borough.* I had to think about this one. Sure, I could eliminate some of the outer boroughs - definitely didn't want to go all the way to Westchester to meet some guy - but should I rule out Queens or Brooklyn? I guess for the time being, I'll limit it to Manhattan just to see where that would go. *Height.* I'm not too picky, so 5'7" to 6'1". That seems reasonable, right? I definitely couldn't date someone who was a giant like Finn or someone who was tiny like Mercedes. Wes was 5'7" and he didn't seem too short to me, so that height would be the threshold of what was the shortest I'd go. *Eye color.* Does it really matter? *Hair color.* Seriously? Are people **that** shallow? *Religious Affiliation.* That one made me laugh since I put down that I didn't have one, but I realized I didn't care if they were Christian, Jewish, Agnostic or worshiped the Flying Spaghetti Monster. As long as they were fine with my beliefs, I'd be fine with theirs.

There were more searchable fields, but I figured I'd start with this and see where it took me. The site made it convenient and organized potential matches based on their percentage of match to you from greatest percentage to lowest. Once I added in the searchable fields, it limited the pool of matches, though it certainly didn't feel like it. Because after I clicked the submit button, the next page netted me thousands of results.

Thousands.

Okay, so maybe this wouldn't be a total wash after all.

I tweaked the search a bit to narrow things down, like adding that I wanted someone who lived within 2 miles from my apartment in Chelsea, someone with no kids, and someone who liked animals. Thankfully, that decreased the number of matches significantly to a few hundred and that seemed a little less daunting to me.

I looked through the matches at the top of the list and some of them were definitely cute based on their pictures alone. I clicked on the first match they had for me - which came in at 94%. Those odds seemed good.

Name: James. No red flags yet. *Occupation: Financial Analyst.* Oh god, that could mean that he's boring. Then again, would it really set me up with someone boring at a 94% match? *Age: 30.* Not too old, though he's at the top of my dating range. Probably has his life together at the very least. *Borough: Chelsea.* The guy could have lived down the street from me for all I knew. Then again, a lot of gay guys lived in Chelsea these days... *Height: 6'0"* *Religious Affiliation: Catholic.* Interesting...

I looked at his photo with more detail. God, this guy was really attractive. He was slightly tan, blonde hair styled classically like John F. Kennedy's had been, with perfect, pearly teeth radiating behind full lips. His eyes were lighter, the actual color not obvious from the photo though I sensed that they were probably a swirl of colors like mine were. He was wearing a well-structured button up with a red skinny tie and charcoal gray slacks. I could tell he knew how to dress - thank god.

Could this guy be any more perfect? Oh, right. I still hadn't read his profile information. He could be a total creep and I was quick to want to message him based off a photo and basic information. Simmer down, Kurt.

Do you drink?: I'm known to kick a few back from time to time. Okay, so not an alcoholic. That's good. Do you smoke?: Only cigars for celebrations. Cigars? Classy. Do you do drugs?: No thanks. Can't go wrong there. Are you a morning or an evening person?: Mornings. I like to get in a good run in the park first thing in the morning before I embark on my day. It's refreshing. Perfect. Well, I'm not up early because I go running, but at least we both would be up early. We? Am I already putting us in the 'we' category? Jesus, I am delusional. What's your ideal vacation?: Skiing in Aspen. I'm not a skier, but I would probably be if he taught me. I bet he could teach me... teach me lots of things. Oh god, there goes my mind in the gutter again. Do you think you want to have kids?: As of now, no. I'm really focused on my career and I want to be satisfied with that before I bring kids into the equation. At least he's honest. I'm not sold on the idea of kids either way, so that's not a deal breaker.

Oh goody, the long answer parts. So far, I'd definitely want to message him, but we'll see what happens with this section. I crossed my fingers and eyed my way down his profile – hoping to find nothing incriminating so I could just message the guy already. Scrolling past James' photo, my eyes fell on his write-up of himself.

My name is James and I'm originally from Birmingham, Alabama but I don't have the bumpkin accent. I moved to New York when a business opportunity availed itself in the city and even though New York isn't quite like The South, I still like it here. I work for an investment company and have been for six years and I love what I do. Sure, it may seem boring, but it suits me.

I don't get to the movies or to concerts often, but when I do get to the movies I love to watch action movies and thrillers. For music, I listen to mostly top 40 and occasionally Country, but I don't really have a preference either way. I have a dog, Tide, and he and I love to run in Central Park every morning. There's nothing more refreshing than time outdoors while most of the city is still sleeping – even in the city that never sleeps.

If you're interested, please message me. I hope you won't regret it.

Not bad. It's kind of vague, but I guess that's what dates are for, right? But based on these few things, how are we even such a compatible match? I skipped ahead to see why the internet bots would match us so highly even though the guy didn't seem as much like me as I thought.

Ah, bingo.

What kinds of activities would you ideally like to share with your partner? I'm outdoorsy and a foodie, so the perfect weekend would be hiking or biking and ending the day at an amazing restaurant, preferably a farm-to-table type place. I would also want him to enjoy shopping since I really enjoy perusing the collections at some of the shops off Fifth Avenue.

The guy likes shopping! Would it be too weird for us to have a first date on Fifth Avenue? I can ignore the part about the hiking or biking for now knowing that he might like shopping as much as I do. My eyes peered at the next section and I was practically salivating at the thought of this guy.

How would you describe your personal style or appearance? I'm very into menswear and the "sartorial arts" – most of my wardrobe comes from places like Billy Reid, Sid Mashburn (my favorite clothier who, unfortunately, doesn't have a shop in New York), and occasionally Barney's. I'm originally from Alabama, so my style tends to be more conservative and preppy since that's how Daddy raised me to dress.

Okay, this guy is pretty perfect. Back in high school, I definitely favored the more preppy, clean-cut guys and this guy definitely fit the bill.

But I wondered if I would be his type. Guys like that tended not to go for guys like me who walked the fine line between overtly masculine and delicate. I refused to ever call myself feminine because there was nothing about me that was remotely feminine, but my dad once said I had a more "delicate" fashion sense. I adapted that frame of mind and vague "definition" of myself - even though my dad probably had no idea what he was talking about.

I figured the only way I'd know if I was this guy's type would be to message him. I didn't want to divulge my entire life story, but I definitely could manage to drop him a line to say hi and that I'd love to hear from him. That's totally normal, right?

I typed up a couple of sentences saying hello and asking him to check out my profile if he was interested before signing my name and clicking send. It felt weird to email someone for a potential date rather than try to establish a connection in person or at least through a mutual friend, but I guess this will work in the meantime. I never thought I'd meet the guy of my dreams online, but maybe some things are better off not going as planned.

CHAPTER THREE

Wednesday, October 10

BLAINE

"You're cutting it close this morning, Anderson," Clark bellowed at me from his desk as he saw me run past with an apple in my mouth and messenger bag tugging at my coat. I had nearly overslept and had to dig my coat out of my closet when I walked outside and realized a cold front had come through overnight, bringing the chilly fall weather into the October air.

"I'll be there in a minute," I said, hoping he'd understand what I was saying with the apple still in my mouth. I dropped my bag in my chair, took the laptop out of its compartment and plugged it into the power source and booted up. After I got home from the venue last night, I pulled together some basic information about Atticus Finch for Clark to look at - where they had played for the past few months, photos of the band, posts from fans on their Facebook page, and the band's contact information. I took a bite of my apple and watched as the information I compiled printed out from the printer at my desk before throwing it all into a file folder. I dropped the apple, grabbed a pen and the folder, and headed to Clark's office.

"You ready for me?" I asked, knocking lightly at the door. Clark was sifting through some files on his desk - probably bands that other people in our department had compiled like I had - and motioned for me to sit.

"So, you think you found a band?" he asked me as he placed the folders on his desk. Clark was an older guy, in his mid-40s, who previously worked for a music magazine before it went bust. While he was at the magazine, he had developed close relationships with artists, publishing houses, band managers, PR teams, and record labels and decided to branch out into the recording world. His connections were what brought him to Rialto and he always emphasized the importance of networking and maintaining connections with people in the industry because you never knew when you'd need a favor.

I nodded. "I think they're pretty good. They're young, but that doesn't impact their ability to perform or captivate a crowd."

He raised an eyebrow. "Telling me that they're 'pretty good' doesn't exactly give me confidence in their abilities."

I sat back for a second, collected my thoughts, and spoke again. "Let me rephrase that. I think they're a good bet. They're young, have a solid fan-base in New York already, and have been performing together for six years. They have an established collaborative relationship with each other and I think their ability to write, record, and sell albums would not present a huge risk for Rialto."

He smiled. "That's more like it. Tell me what you've got. I'm all ears," he said, sitting back in his chairs with his arms folded behind his head.

I presented him with the folder I compiled, had him pull up a few YouTube videos of the band that they had uploaded over the years, and told Clark about my impressions of the band based on their show that I saw. I gave him a few minutes to contemplate after I finished talking, knowing the man was very intentional with his words. Clark always thought intensely and thoroughly before speaking - a trait I certainly was jealous of since I tended to spew whatever came to my mind without thinking about it for even a second.

"Let's give them a shot," he said with a wink. I beamed.

Atticus Finch would be the third band I'd discovered and I hoped that they would be more successful than the last band I found who had so many disagreements during the production of their album that even Fleetwood Mac would have been disgraced with their lack of professionalism and communication.

As I left Clark's office, I found Santana perched eagerly at my desk with two Starbucks cups in her hands. "How'd the meeting go?" she asked, extending one of the cups in her hand into mine.

I took a sip and practically moaned as the pumpkin spice latte hit my lips. God, I loved fall if only for the fantastic coffee selection. "It went well. Clark signed off on a band I found last night, but we're going to give it some space and one more show before we approach them and offer them a contract. You'll probably end up working publicity for them if it works out. I'm sure you won't mind us working together."

She laughed and nudged my shoulder. "You should be so lucky to work with me, B." She took a sip of her coffee and shifted to face me as I slouched into my office chair and turned to my email. "Speaking of working, how is the whole online dating thing working out so far?"

"I just joined last night. It's not like I'm going to get a ton of traction in just over 12 hours."

She shook her head. "Actually, people usually get the most emails from potential dates within the first week that you join. People on that site are always looking for something - rather, someone - new. Besides, you're attractive. I'd be surprised if you didn't have a few guys already hitting up your inbox."

I pulled up my email and frowned. No notifications. "The last email I received was from NYCDate thanking me for joining. That and an email from Cooper, which I'll probably just delete."

She looked at me, confused. "Didn't you get an email saying that your profile has been approved?"

I peered at her, equally puzzled. "Uh, no? What does that mean?"

She grunted and brought her eyes to her forehead as she shut her eyes. "Did you submit your profile for review or did you just save it, Blaine?"

"I have no idea." I typed in NYCDate into my browser and logged in when the site popped up. After I looked at my profile, I noticed in the top righthand corner it said 'Not Active.' "It says 'Not Active.' What does that mean?"

"B! It means you didn't finish your profile and people can't see it!" she said practically screaming at this point. "Ay dios mio, por favor. Dime, que estás haciendo? Quieres novio? Pienso que no!" I just looked at her with deer in the headlights eyes, not realizing that she'd get that upset over something so trivial.

I lightly rubbed the hand she had on the desk and spoke to her, quietly. "San, what's going on? Why are you upset about it? It's really not a big deal."

She sighed. "Blaine, I've seen you achieve so much in your career and you're so happy. I just want to see you share that happiness with someone because you really deserve that," she said as he looked at me, care exuding from her chocolate brown eyes. "You're one of my closest friends and I just want the best for you. Because you're amazing."

I smiled and squeezed her hand. Santana might act all tough, but she really was such a wonderful, caring person and I was so lucky to be a recipient of her kindness and affection. "Thanks, Santana. I want that for me too. It was an accident, I swear. But I think I should give it some time before I activate my profile. Now that we're trying to work out a deal with Atticus Finch, I won't have enough time to regularly talk with folks or be able to respond to emails."

She nodded in understanding and took another sip from her coffee, her gaze shifted from my eyes to the computer in front of me. "So when do you think you'll turn the thing on? It seems like a waste for you to have the profile and not use it."

"This is true. How about I turn it on next Friday? We'll hopefully have Atticus Finch's next show out of the way and their contract would be in negotiation if all goes well. Once they're locked in, it's just a waiting game for awhile and I'll be able to juggle all of New York's eligible bachelors who are vying for my attention," I said with a laugh.

She rolled her eyes. "Please, B. Friday sounds good, but I'd guess that a good amount of bachelors in New York will be wanting your attention... and in your pants."

I smacked her hand lightly. "Yellow light conversation at work, Santana? Tsk tsk. I should report you," I added with a wink. "Next Friday, I promise, okay?"

She nodded and grinned. "Okay. Now enjoy that coffee and remember how much you love me for bringing you your favorite coffee. I might need you to repay me one of these days," she said walking toward her desk. Santana never paid for coffee - one of the baristas at the Starbucks down the street had a massive crush on her and she used that to her advantage every once in awhile. Poor guy, he had no idea who he was dealing with.

I chuckled and focused on the screen in front of me; closing out of NYCDate and focusing on my work email.

I checked

Atticus Finch's band manager to set up a meeting for next week. I grinned as I pulled out the card that Zach had given me and thumbed over the familiar name that was raised beneath my fingers.

I grabbed the phone on my desk and punched in the numbers and soon the phone rang.

"Hey, this is Blaine Anderson. Is this David Randall, formerly of the Dalton Academy Warblers?"

KURT

It felt weird to have time off, but it felt even weirder to wake up in the my own bed in New York for three days in a row. I had forgotten how comfortable my bed was. Dad and I picked it out just before I moved

into my apartment with Wes, a present he gave me after I graduated from Parsons. The comfortable bed combined with the sheets I had agonized over purchasing made my bed feel like a cloud and on mornings like this when I didn't have to do anything, it made it nearly impossible to get out of bed.

I glanced at the clock and noted the time, nearly 10:30am. Since I worked at the theater, we would usually wake up late and go to sleep late. It was a lifestyle I didn't always like since I tended to be a morning person, but I couldn't wake up at 7am if we have to be at the theater until 1am on any given night. My sleeping preferences would probably be better suited for a 9 to 5 job, but my personality would never allow myself to be a corporate guy; I would stick out like a sore thumb.

Around 11 I finally managed to drag myself from my bed and get in the shower. I had agreed on Monday night to meet with Wes for lunch today since I had nothing better to do during the day and it'd give me a chance to re-experience New York now that I was finally a permanent resident again. After 45 minutes, I was out the door - hair coiffed, dressed warmly for the considerably cooler weather that had appeared overnight, tumbler with tea in-hand - and walked the three blocks to meet Wes for lunch.

It was a nondescript diner that Wes and I discovered when we were in college. The New School, which Parsons is a part of, was located near here which is part of the reason we decided to stay in this area once we graduated. Parsons was near the Flatiron District and Wes' classes at The School for Public Engagement were concentrated in Greenwich Village, but Chelsea had always been where we spent most of our time. Our third week in school, we found this diner after a particularly rough rehearsal for our college's a cappella choir and decided it would be Our Place ever since.

I walked in the door and the bells on the door jingled to signal my entry. I looked around and saw Wes speaking animatedly into his phone, gesturing with his hands as they flailed wildly around him. I sat in the seat across from him, apologizing when the booth squeaked and he stopped wiggling around.

"Hey, David, I'll have to call you back. But definitely count me in for Friday night. I can't wait! I can't believe... yeah, I know. It's been awhile since we...totally. Friday will be great. See you later, man!" he said as he ended his call.

"So what was that all about?" I asked as I took a menu from its slot next to the ketchup and salt and pepper shakers.

Wes was practically beaming. "I just got a call from a buddy of mine from high school and it turns out one of our good friends is in New York City and might have given him a huge boost in his career without realizing it."

"Is this guy in town for the weekend?"

"Nope. Apparently he lives here. David and I had no idea. We kind of lost touch once I went to college since he was a couple of years behind me, but I'm just glad to have another Warbler in the area."

"Ah, one of your singing friends, right. I still can't believe that we grew up near each other but never met," I added.

"Well, there are people that live in Hoboken that we've never met, Kurt. It's not *that* weird. We're not all interconnected somehow," he stated as he perused the menu. I didn't know why he bothered to look - he always ordered the same thing.

"True. But New York is huge. It's less likely that we'd meet everyone here. But Ohio isn't nearly as densely populated. It could have happened. Especially since we both competed in show choir."

He shrugged. "Well, we're friends now so there's no use in dwelling on what could have been, right?"

I nodded as I took another look at the menu. The waitress came by and took our orders and just as she placed coffee in front of Wes, we broke our comfortable silence.

"So, I didn't ask you the other day, but has anything happened with the online dating thing?"

"Well, I emailed one guy," I said quietly and looked around the restaurant. I could practically feel his intense stare after a minute before I turned to him. Yup, dude was giving me a pretty heated glare right now.

"Kurt. You emailed one guy. That's all that I get?" He looked a little hurt, to be honest.

I sighed. "Look, I just - I don't want to get my hopes up, okay? You know I've been really selective about who I introduce to my friends. I just don't want to get other people involved with anything until I know it's something with potential. Someone that I feel is worthy to bring around you and maybe, one day, my family." I looked at the table as if it had the most interesting thing in the world written on its surface.

As I looked up, his gaze had eased to one of compassion. "Why do you have to wait, though?"

"I just want to be sure of something - rather, someone - before I bring him into my life fully."

He looked at me, confused. "That kind of seems like you're distancing yourself on purpose. How will a guy get to know you unless he sees how you are with other people?"

I sighed, a little afraid to utter the words out loud. "I kind of am distancing myself. But more than anything, I'm distancing my relationships from you guys." I heard him gasp as I kept my gaze on the table. "I'm just not sure that I'm going to pick the right guys and I'm afraid that I'm going to pick another guy that you and everyone else will hate. I haven't exactly picked winners in the past. I mean, you met William and he was a disaster."

"Kurt," Wes said. I looked up at him. "Not every guy you date is going to be like William. You said it yourself, you know more now about what you want. And you know you don't want someone like William. So you won't pick someone like him again."

I took a gulp from my tea as Wes continued. "I get that you don't want to introduce us to just any guy - I know I'm incredibly intimidating." I snorted and he winked at me. "But if the reason that you're not introducing me to guys is because you're afraid of what I'll think or what Mercedes will think, then we're not doing a good job at supporting you. You are so much wiser than you give yourself credit for. Just go with your gut on this one. And whenever you want to introduce me to whatever guy you want, I'll do it with a genuine interest to get to know the guy."

I smiled, but I had to get one thing off my chest. "But if you don't like the guy, can you please tell me sooner rather than later? The way that things unfolded with William... they were horrible. And I think if you had told me about how you didn't like him before, I would have been more inclined to realize that we had issues."

"I can try. But Kurt, have you tried to talk you out of something? You're pretty damn stubborn," he said as he sipped his coffee. I rolled my eyes. "Honestly. I will try. I can, for you."

At that moment, the waitress dropped off our lunch and we sat quietly for a minute; me thinking about what Wes said, Wes probably doing the same. I placed a bite of home fries on my fork before getting in one last thought about the issue before we moved on to less dense subjects. "Thanks again, Wes. You really are

a good roommate. And I know we don't want to dwell on the past, but I do wish I had met you earlier. You're pretty awesome."

He looked up from his sandwich and smiled. "Thanks, man. That means a lot coming from someone as picky as you."

"Bitch, please," I said with a chuckle as I took another bite.

We finished our food, talking about everything from Wes' upcoming deposition (it was his first), to my excitement about coming into the fold at Bring It On! The Musical, to his plans to reunite with his friends that Friday night. As we were preparing to pay, my phone buzzed with a notification from my NYCDate app. I stared at it for a second before unlocking my phone to read it. Reading its contents, I looked up and couldn't wipe the grin off my face.

"What is it?" Wes asked.

"That guy. He messaged me. He really liked my profile and wants to go out next week."

CHAPTER FOUR

Friday, October 12

KURT

Tonight was the night that I started working on Broadway. On. Broadway.

I couldn't believe it. Working for the touring company of Bring It On! The Musical was pretty great. We got to start off in Atlanta for a few weeks as we fine-tuned the show before we brought it to the rest of the country to see what they thought. But having it - and me - on Broadway meant things were looking up. I didn't think I'd be doing anything behind the scenes on Broadway since I always thought I would be a star, but this seemed like a good way to mesh both of my passions and still feel extreme satisfaction and joy in my job.

Besides, working on Bring It On! meant that I could use my experience in the Cheerios, my love for clothes, and being involved in Broadway. It was a win-win-win in terms of being able to utilize my talent to the fullest.

I lagged my pace and took my time as I got ready for work. Call tonight was at 5 for me since it was my first day and I'd mostly be observing so I had plenty of time to prepare myself for the day. I woke up at around 10:30 and leisurely went about the day; watching TV, snacking when I felt like it, took a long bath, checked up on Facebook, and spent a lot of time thinking about the date I was going to have on Monday. It seemed a little forward on James' part to ask me out straight away, but after we messaged a bit back and forth, we agreed that we could take this weekend to learn a little more about each other before Monday so the initial awkwardness of the way in which we met would hopefully go away. We also decided that if at any point we didn't want to meet up on Monday that we would just tell the other person; no harm, no foul.

It seemed like a pretty mature way to go about things - something I wasn't used to. I hadn't had a boyfriend since William and that ended right before I turned 21, so I never really had experience about what it was like dating and being in a relationship as a real adult. It was certainly something I was enjoying thus far.

Pulling myself away from my email, I looked at the clock.

4:30PM

Shit. I had half an hour to make it to the theater. I still wasn't completely dressed and I hadn't packed up my stuff for the night. I scrambled around the apartment looking for various things before shoving my cell phone in my pocket, grabbing my bag, and running out the door.

Once I got to the street, I looked at my phone to check the time again. 4:45PM. I had managed to pull everything together in 15 minutes? A new record! I dug around my bag for my headphones before realizing I left them inside. Since I hadn't gotten down the block, I figured another minute or two to grab my headphones wouldn't hurt. Until I realized that I must have left my keys inside.

Dammit. Irritated, I grabbed my phone out of my back pocket and dialed Wes' phone number. Thankfully, he answered right away.

"Kurt?"

"Hey Wes. Where are you?"

"I'm just leaving the office on my way to the Blockheads off 50th. Why?"

"I, uh, left my keys in the apartment. Since Blockheads isn't far from the theater, can I borrow yours? I should be home by the time you're done hanging out with your 'bros' tonight so I wouldn't leave you up the creek without a paddle."

He laughed. "Sure thing. I should be there in about 5 minutes. Do you think you can make it there by then?"

I groaned. "I'll be cutting it close. I'll take the train and walk up that way. Ugh, I hate being late. And it's my first day! You know this is so unlike me. What if they-"

Wes interjected. "Chill out, Kurt. Just explain what happened. It's not like it'll be a habit. But yes, you can come and grab the keys. Just come find me when you get here."

"Perfect. Thank you, thank you, thank you!" I said as I hung up the phone and descended the staircase into the subway.

Thankfully the train arrived seconds after I walked onto the platform and I was up and back on the street with 10 minutes before I was due to report at the theater. It would take about 5 minutes to reach the restaurant and maybe another 5 to make it back to the theater. I might make it on time if I really booked it.

I rounded the corner and texted Wes to make sure he was there. Thankfully within seconds of me texting, he replied in the affirmative, noting that he was in the outdoor seating area. Within two minutes, I was walking up to the restaurant and found Wes and one of his friends nursing a pitcher of margaritas. As I approached with a wave, Wes acknowledged my presence with a nod and started rummaging in his pockets for his keys.

"David, this is my very forgetful roommate Kurt," he said as he pulled the keys from his pocket. I turned to David and shook his hand.

"Hey David. Sorry to meet you and run, but I'm going to be late if I don't get out of here soon," I said as Wes placed his keys in my hand.

David smiled and shrugged. "Well, it's nice to meet you. Hopefully we'll actually get to talk sometime soon. I can't believe in all this time I'm just now meeting Wes' fabulous roommate."

I laughed. "Wes is giving me far more credit than I deserve, I assure you. Well, gotta run." I turned to Wes, "And thanks," I said as I turned on my heel and bolted back down 50th.

"You're welcome!" I heard him yell after me. As I rounded the corner with the keys still jingling in my hand, I ran straight into a guy heading into the restaurant, dropping Wes' keys in the process. I grunted and adjusted my bag on my shoulder before bending down to pick up the keys, only to find them in the hands of the man who I'd collided with.

"Here you-" he said.

Without looking up I grabbed the keys, yelling "thank you, and I'm sorry!" over my shoulder in his general direction as I continued down the path toward the theater.

BLAINE

I was thankful that I didn't end up activating my online dating profile right away - this week had taken so much out of me, I didn't even want to imagine how trying to be active on that site would have played into my schedule. Before we can approach a band with a contract, there's so much we have to work out; agreements with the label, ensuring that the band's name doesn't match other one in the music industry, press plans, marketing briefs - the works. And that's even before we can actually sign the band. We have to know that we have the resources in place first before we can pull them in for the ride of their lives.

By Friday night, I was exhausted but really looking forward to meeting up with David. Turns out, David was indeed my old friend from Dalton and had been living in New York for a few years. He managed Atticus Finch as a favor, his younger brother was in the band, but he was interested in pursuing a career in band management but had settled on working at a marketing firm in the meantime to get office experience until something in his field of interest presented itself. Without realizing it, I might have made the guy's year. His band would have to record an album and possibly tour to promote it - requiring him to quit his current job and take a full time role with the band, complete with great pay thanks to the advance and future royalties from the band's record.

I was more than happy to help him in that way, even if it had been on accident. David was a great friend back at Dalton but he and I lost touch since he was a senior when I was a sophomore and the minutiae and business of life took over and phone calls and emails became few and far between.

In order to kick off our professional interactions as well as rekindle our friendship, I invited David out to dinner on my side of town at Blockheads near Times Square since it was near home, the office and the venue where tonight's gig would take place. Though it was a little chilly, their outdoor seating area meant we could enjoy the autumn air and split a pitcher or two of margaritas before we ventured out to Atticus Finch's show later that night. Besides, who could ever say no to a burrito?

My thoughts on the walk to the restaurant found me reminiscing about my days as a Warbler and the fact that I hadn't seen David in about 10 years since he didn't come home from UCLA very often due to the price in airfare. I really did miss David and his former counterpart Wes. Those guys made my sophomore year at Dalton amazing; taking a chance on me to perform when they could have just as easily held the position of soloist themselves. They were always gracious, caring, and charming and I hoped that hadn't changed over the years.

I was jolted from my thoughts as I neared the restaurant and was pummeled by a man who was very obviously in a hurry who hadn't seen me in his path. He groaned and I noticed he had dropped his keys. Stooping down and picking them up, I held them out for him.

"Here you- "

He hurriedly grabbed the keys from my hand and ran off. I shrugged and kept walking, only to hear the man yell "thank you, and I'm sorry!" as he jogged down the street. He must not be from around here; most New Yorkers would have just yelled at me for being in their way even if they were the ones who ran into me.

I looked into the patio area of Blockheads and found David who was frantically waving at me. I waved back meekly and walked over to the table. As I got closer, the other guy sitting at the table turned toward me and I stopped, shocked at who it was.

"Wes?!" I gasped.

"Hey man! Long time no see," he exclaimed as he reached in for a hug. I hugged back enthusiastically - I couldn't believe it! I was just thinking about how the two of them were a dynamic duo and here they both were, back in action again.

"It's like the three amigos all over again," David said with a chuckle as he stood from his seat and hugged me.

"It's so crazy. I was literally just thinking about you as I was walking over here," I said, looking as Wes as we all took our seats around the table. "Thinking about how you guys made my sophomore year awesome and I hoped that neither of you had changed since I saw you last. Which, when I did the math, I realized was 10 years ago. When did we get so old?"

Wes shrugged as he poured me a margarita in the remaining glass on the table. "We're not older, just wiser. I refuse to grow up."

David rolled his eyes. "Wes, you're a lawyer. Growing up is about to hit you full force, my friend."

He scoffed and took a sip of his drink before turning to me. "So, Blaine, you're in the music business - not that I'm surprised. Tell me what's been going on since I saw you last."

I sat and thought for a minute. "Geez, I have to summarize the last 10 years into a short conversation. That will be rough," I chuckled.

He shrugged. "Just try, I guess. Don't worry, I'll be sure that David and I do the same. It's only fair."

I nodded. "Well, the last two years at Dalton were great. Ended up as lead soloist and head member of the council once you jokers left." They laughed as I continued. "Kept Trent and Nick in line. Not much to say other than that for the end of Dalton. Got a good scholarship to Marymount Manhattan and I majored in business management and minored in music. Ended up getting an internship at Rialto my senior year and got hired once I graduated. It's kind of weird how it all happened, really. I didn't even know that I wanted to work in artist development until I got the internship and ended up loving it so much."

David smiled. "That's great, Blaine. You were always a really dedicated person. The amount of time you spent working on your solos made the rest of the guys look like slackers."

"Well, thanks. I certainly did try. I still sing every now and then at open mic nights and karaoke, but I'm happier developing the talent of others for now."

"You made a really good mentor at Dalton, I'm sure that's still true now," Wes added. "So, what about your life in New York? Now that we have the back story, what's going on now?"

"I live in Hell's Kitchen in a studio apartment. It's small - like everywhere else in New York - but I love my neighborhood."

"What about friends? Or, more specifically, a *boyfriend*?" David asked, eyebrows arched in interest.

I shook my head. "No boyfriend. But friends, I definitely have. I'm really good friends with one of the girls I work with - Santana. She and I have been friends for years since we both started as interns at Rialto at the same time. And I made friends in college that still live in the city, but I don't see them much. My work keeps me pretty busy, but I'm trying to get myself out there more and meet people."

Wes laughed and drained his margarita glass. "I don't get it, Blaine. You were the one guy in high school we were sure was going to be a major heartbreaker. You had - well, still have - the looks, charm, kindness, moves. But no guy right now? This might be pushing it a bit, but when was the last time you had a boyfriend?"

I practically stared a hole into the table, trying to avert my eyes from David and Wes. "Uh, probably four or five years ago?"

David placed his hand over mine. "There's nothing wrong with that, B. Don't let Wes being an ass make you think less of yourself. You still are all of those things and I know you'll find someone, when the time is right." I smiled, thankful for the reprieve.

"Sorry, Blaine. I'm not trying to be mean about it, but you are just like my roommate - you guys both don't realize how amazing you are and I want both of you to be snatched up by Mr. Perfect sooner rather than later."

I looked at him over the salted rim of my glass. "I didn't know you had a roommate, Wes. I never thought you'd be the type to have to share with anyone." David laughed at my comment and Wes scowled as best as he could before laughing his head off.

"Believe it, dear sir. Yeah, my roommate is pretty great. David actually met him a few minutes ago. He works for a theater and his first day is today."

"Oh," I said, surprised. I never would have imagined that Wes would live with an actor. Wes was never the type of person to deal with the theatrics of overly emotional or needy people, which most actors personified to a tee.

"Speaking of my roommate," Wes continued, "maybe you could do what he did. He joined an online dating site and it seems to have worked out for him. He already has a date lined up for Monday night."

I laughed heartily then realized that David and Wes were staring at me, perplexed. "Oh, sorry. I - uh - actually just joined an online dating service too. My friend Santana met her girlfriend online and said I should give it a shot. I haven't fully activated my profile yet since I wanted to be sure that a certain band's contract was firmed up before I could pounce on the available men of New York City," I said, winking at David who was chuckling under his breath.

"Well, before we get to the contract, let's hear what you guys have been up to for the last 10 years," I said, sitting back in my chair, eager to hear what my former classmates had done with their lives.

CHAPTER FIVE

Friday Night, October 12

KURT

I had arrived to the theater with 2 minutes to spare and I silently thanked my personal trainer for kicking my ass enough so I'd be in good enough shape to run the 3 blocks to the theater without feeling like I was going to die.

I took a moment outside the theater door to take a breath and mentally collect myself before stepping inside. The warmth inside the small hallway was a change from the chilly air outside, but what felt even more foreign to the world outside the door was what was going on backstage at this moment. The halls were filled with people scurrying around and the walls were lined with photos of the cast and crew - goofing off backstage, photos from rehearsals, sheet music that had been doodled on and autographed by various cast members, call sheets. Although there was a lot on the walls, it all made the place feel less like a workplace and more like a home. It reminded me of the entryway at my dad's house in Lima - the photos of me, Finn, Carole and dad lining the hallway scattered with things Finn and I had drawn when we were kids.

It was a stark contrast to the world of touring theater. Everything was temporary; no photos could be placed on the walls since you'd only stay in the same place for three weeks tops. Even the cast was pretty temporary - we'd get new cast members and retire old ones so quickly that we had to make all of the costumes a little more "generic" so they'd be able to fit multiple people in a given week. The designer in me loathed this fact because tailored clothes always looked better than things with a general size, but you have to do whatever you can to make it work.

I was immediately pulled from my thoughts when I felt a finger poking my shoulder. I looked down and saw a short woman wearing all black with a headset perched on her head, poking me. "Geez, are you deaf? You Kurt?" she asked hastily.

"Uh, yeah, I'm Kurt. Kurt-"

She interjected. "I know who you are. Roselyn is waiting for you, I'll take you to her," she said before turning and speed walking down the hallway. I stood for a second in shock before jogging after her. She led me down the labyrinth of offices, dressing rooms, make-up rooms, and storage closets before leading

me up the stairs to the dressing area just to the side of the stage. She stopped and motioned for me to go into the area behind the dividers. I walked in as the woman knocked on the divider, catching the attention of the woman inside who I assumed to be Roselyn.

"Rosie, here's Kurt. You got it?" the short woman said sternly.

Roselyn smiled. "Yes, thank you Sara," she said kindly as the woman, who I finally knew as Sara, backed out of the room and vanished. "Don't mind her," Roselyn said as she motioned for me to take a seat next to her as she continued pinning the costume on the form in front of her.

"Is she always that..."

"Short? Bitchy? Yes. Don't worry, she's the only one here who is like that on the regular. Most people around here are really nice," Roselyn added, as if she could read my mind as to what I'd ask. I knew I liked her already.

I dropped my bag next to her and watched for a moment as she continued her work. "Well, I know I'm not supposed to do much other than watch you work, but is there anything I can help you with? Something I can do? These idle hands will be up to no good if I don't do something."

She laughed. "Thanks, Kurt. If you could grab Tori for me, I'd appreciate it."

I looked at her, puzzled. "Tori?"

She paused. "Oh, yes. Sorry. Tori is the lead actress. I'm working on her costume right now and I need to make sure I got the fit right. She should be in Make-Up; just follow the signs. Make-Up is just around the corner," Roselyn said, motioning to the sign on the back wall.

It was true, Make-Up was literally around the corner maybe 20 steps past where the dressing area was. Make-Up was in an actual room as opposed to a sectioned off area of the side stage because the lights that surrounded the mirrors would interfere with the production when the stage lights were dark. I walked into the room to see a woman with blonde hair set in curlers wearing a robe sitting in one of the chairs as another woman was rummaging in the make-up in front of the mirrors.

I knocked lightly on the door. "Uh, are you Tori?" I asked as the girl in the chair turned toward me, nodding in the affirmative. "Roselyn asked me-"

"Hummel?"

My gaze shifted from Tori to the only other person who could have spoken to me; the make-up artist. "Uh, yes?"

She looked at me with a chuckle. "Wow, never thought I'd see you again," the girl said, still looking at me through the mirror. I squinted trying to figure out who she was. She looked familiar, but I couldn't...

"Zizes?" I exclaimed upon the realization.

She laughed heartily. "Yeah, I know. Sometimes I don't recognize me either," she said as she turned around and I saw her face-to-face. She looked down at Tori who looked utterly confused at the exchange she had witnessed. "Tor, why don't you go see what Rosie wants. Me and this guy gotta have a little chat," Lauren said as she motioned for Tori to leave. The blonde girl scuttled past me and walked toward the dressing area, leaving me with Lauren once again.

"Lauren, I-I can't believe you're... geez. Sorry. I was not expecting to see you here. I mean, it's been, what...?" I said, stuttering.

"I know," she said. "It's probably been eight years or so."

I sat in the make-up chair closest to the door. "When did we get so old?"

She laughed. "We still aren't old. We're in our twenties, we're healthy, and I don't see any wrinkles on that face of yours so clearly we aren't aging as much as we think."

"You bet I don't have wrinkles. I work hard to make sure stuff like that doesn't happen!" I exclaimed, feigning shock that she would even insinuate that I would have wrinkles.

She rolled her eyes and sat in the chair Tori had just sat in. "My, you haven't changed a bit, Hummel."

"Well, thanks, I guess. But you, my dear. Wow. You have changed a lot," I said, eyeing her appearance. Post-graduation had done her well. Her presence still commanded the room as it had in high school, but she'd lost a considerable amount of weight and had abandoned the hodge podge pieces from her previous wardrobe and was now wearing black slacks with a scoop neck turquoise sweater, which only accentuated her lighter skin and dark hair. Her collar bones peeked out, slightly visible due to the cut of

the sweater. Her outfit looked like they'd been picked up from the Loft not a bad choice - albeit generic - but you could tell she really looked like a totally different person. A much more confident, put together person at the very least.

She blushed at the comment. "Yeah. Once high school was over, I just had enough, you know? I wanted to stop being the girl that shoved people around. I wanted to let myself be close to other people rather than push them away. But I knew the reason I did that was because I was unhappy with myself." She sighed then continued. "So, after high school, I told my parents I wanted to move out of Ohio and start over somewhere new and reinvent myself. They made a deal with my aunt who lives in Brooklyn for me to stay with her for the summer after graduation and figure out a plan. And once I got there, I didn't want to leave. So I developed a plan centered around New York. I went to cosmetology school, bartended on the side to make some money, and got a house in Bushwick with three other girls. One of the girls I ended up living with was a personal trainer, so I asked if she would help me get my health on track and she kicked my ass for over a year, but here I am now," she said, gesturing to her slimmer physique.

"That's so great, Lauren. I'm glad you're happy with yourself. I always thought you had such strength and confidence, so I never would have assumed that you weren't entirely satisfied with yourself, but I'm so glad that you are now," I said, reaching out to touch her arm in support.

"Thanks Kurt. Sometimes I have to pinch myself to see if it's real, ya know? Especially now - this is my first job as a make-up artist and that coupled with the fact that I live in New York and get hit on on a regular basis; it's like a dream come true," she said as she sat back in the chair.

"I know what you mean," I said as I mirrored her position in my chair.

She turned to me. "So, how'd you get here Hummel?"

I peered over but maintained my position in the chair with my head drooped over the back. "I moved here during the fall after we graduated from McKinley. I interned at Vogue for a little while to earn some money and realized fashion was where I wanted to be. So I applied to Parsons for fall admission and started taking classes. I really liked it - especially designing - but I didn't want to actually work for a label. I had seen how exhausting it was to work for a clothier when I was an intern and I didn't want to be locked into something like that for the rest of my life. So, I shifted slightly to costume design and loved it. After graduation, I got picked up to work on the tour for Next to Normal, then went to the tour for this show, and now I'm here."

She smiled at me and I returned her grin. "That's so great. And now we get to work together! Who'd have thought?"

"I know, right?" I said with a laugh.

She sat up from her chair and worked her way over to the make-up at the mirror. "Well, sorry to cut this short, but I need to get back to work and you should probably go join Rosie. But do you want to get lunch or dinner sometime soon? This weekend is kind of packed for me since I'm still working as a bartender for the next few weeks, but I'd love to catch up properly if you have time."

I beamed. "Of course! Let's regroup after the show and schedule a time, is that okay?"

She peered up at me from the mirror. "Sure thing, sweet cheeks. Talk to you later," she said as she busied herself with the make-up.

As I turned and left the make-up room, the smile I'd had remained plastered on my face. I was so happy to be working my dream job and, potentially, to have regained an old friend in the best city on earth.

BLAINE

David, Wes and I emerged from the subway at the 14th Street stop, making our way to the Highline Ballroom off 16th. I loved this part of town - it was the perfect blend of sophisticated with good restaurants and cobblestone streets with the trendy boutiques, hotels and bars nearby - but it was exceedingly expensive so I rarely came down here unless it was for a show. My neighborhood wasn't even really far from here - maybe 2 miles or so - but it certainly felt like a different world as we passed effortlessly stylish people emerging from the designer shops.

"This diner my roommate and I go to isn't too far from here," Wes said as we continued walking down 16th. "Chelsea became our stomping grounds in college so we would swing by the meatpacking district whenever we could manage it since there's some great stuff over here. My roommate was more concerned with the boutiques over here and I was more into the ladies that were in those shops." He laughed, "obviously, it was a win/win situation."

I chuckled. "Sounds like you got yourself a wingman there, Wes. David, did you know Wes' roommate was taking your job?" I said with a nudge as David rolled his eyes.

"No one could ever be as good of a wingman as Davy, here," said Wes as he grabbed David's shoulder. David just smiled.

Once we got to the venue, we flashed our IDs and went in and made a beeline to the bar. I was glad it was Friday since me and the boys had already downed two pitchers of margaritas and we were clearly on our way to having more alcohol in our future. I decided to switch to beer since I still needed to maintain some level of professional decorum when I finally introduced myself as Blaine Anderson music industry professional, whereas Wes and David kept on the liquor train with their rum and cokes.

As we found a spot to stand toward the back with our drinks in hand, the lights dimmed and the intro music began. I looked to my left and saw David grinning at the stage as the lights started to come up. I gave him a friendly nudge and he looked at me and beamed. He was probably just as excited about this as the guys would be - this could really change things for him if all went well. I gave him a nudge. "Are you ready for this?" I asked with a wink.

He just laughed as the first notes blared from the lead guitar.

They played their first song before Zach introduced the band and the crowd was even bigger than the one I encountered in Brooklyn. I couldn't help but be a little smug about finding these guys. Not only did they seem like they actually could manage to make it big, I had reconnected with some friends that I had lost. It couldn't get much better than that, really.

Well, it could. It'd be better if there was a guy standing by my side - as excited and proud as I was at this find. But hey, Mr. Right is out there... somewhere. I thought about what he might look like, the different types of smiles he might have, the way his voice would sound when he laughed - I just wanted to know everything about him and I hadn't even met this dream guy yet, but I was thrilled to even think of how wonderful he would be when I found that he did exist. He *did*, right?

I was pulled from my reverie when Wes had poked my shoulder. "Dude, their set is over. It was great!" Wes exclaimed as he looked expectantly at me. How long had I been in dreamland thinking about my dream man? Sheesh, get it together.

David looked at me, uncertainty on his face. "Do - uh - you... uh," David sputtered. He wasn't sure if the deal was in the bag - I could tell. But I knew the moment The Boss signed off on them that the deal was as good as signed in our eyes.

I calmly placed my hand on his shoulder and his questioning eyes met mine for just a second. I smiled and nodded. "Bring me to your boys, David."

David was beaming and wrapped his arms around me. I couldn't help but chuckle as the guy trapped my arms by my sides due to his overexcited bear hug. "Blaine, you will love the guys. They're the best. Like, I can't-"

I interrupted. "I know, David. Calm down. You're definitely the first manager to hug me after that, but I'd like to think it's because it's me and that you wouldn't hug just any ol' dude." He laughed sheepishly as Wes was wiping his eyes from crying at David's overtly physical "bro moment" that we shared. "Let's go," I said, gesturing toward the backstage area.

David practically skipped ahead of me as Wes was shaking his head behind me, clearly amused with how the normally emotionally composed David was acting out of character tonight. Wes and David were normally so calm and collected so it was certainly a funny change. But between the alcohol and the fact that this guy's career was about to blow up, I could understand his excitement. I'd felt that way once too.

David found the green room where the band was packing up and knocked on the door before walking in. "Hey guys!"

Each of the boys looked up at David with enthusiastic smiles and excited greetings. "I wanted to introduce you guys to someone," David said, his demeanor shifting to professional mode rather than his previous freak-out persona. "This is-"

"Blaine, right?" Zach asked as he put his guitar pick in his mouth. I was surprised that this kid still remembered me. He must have met hundreds of people at his shows, and yet he still remembered my name. I smiled internally - this kid was perfect front man material; charismatic, knew how to work a room, remembered details about people. Oh yeah, they'll be just fine.

I nodded. "Yes, I'm Blaine. Blaine Anderson, if we're getting into specifics, and I'm with Rialto Records."

The pick from Zach's mouth dropped and I could practically hear the tiny plastic object hit the ground with how quiet it got in that room. Each of the guys just stared.

"Rialto Records? Like THE Rialto Records?" asked one of the guys who I assumed to be David's brother since they looked like they could've been twins.

I nodded again. "The very same. I'm actually in artist development and I must say, I was very impressed with you guys when I first saw you in Brooklyn. And I wasn't the only one." I had to add that dramatic pause - the looks on their faces was always the best part of my job; seeing the amazement that their lives could change really, really soon. I continued, "My boss is very interested in working with you guys in the coming months. I'd be your liaison with the label and I'd help you guys work through the writing and recording process along with marketing and just helping you navigate the whole-"

"Ohmygod - WE ARE GOING TO RECORD A RECORD!" Zach exclaimed as the rest of the boys started jumping up and down. I smiled and looked over at David whose smile was practically stretching his face to new lengths with how big his smile was.

"Guys... GUYS!" I yelled trying to regain the attention of the room. The guys settled back into their places, content smiles still on their faces. "Yes, I'm here to help you record a record. It won't be easy - there will be days that you'll hate each other, where the words won't come, where you won't be able to think in anything but chords and lyrics. But me - and David, of course - will be here to make it a whole lot easier. We have a meeting set up for next Wednesday to come to our office, get things signed and start coming up with a plan for your record. Does that work for you guys?"

Zach stepped forward and shook my hand. "You bet your ass it works for us," he said with a grin.

"Pleasure doing business with you," I said with a laugh. At that point, everyone was laughing and grinning. Days like these were the best days.

"We should celebrate!" Wes, who had been standing quietly by the door the whole time, finally decided to join the conversation - clearly wanting to hang out a bit more.

David chuckled and I shook my head. "Sure thing, killer," I said. My phone buzzed in my pocket and as I pulled it out I saw a text from Santana. I grinned. "We will celebrate! And I have one person I'd love for you guys to meet."

CHAPTER SIX

Late Friday Night, October 12

KURT

The show went great and watching the flurry of activity as I helped Roselyn dress and redress the cast during their many costume changes was more exhilarating than I would have imagined. Sure, I had done this when I was on tour with the show, but somehow doing this on Broadway felt different. It felt bigger, more monumental, more... like my dreams coming true.

After the show Lauren and I decided to head to Westway Diner, which was around the corner. Westway is pretty popular with the Broadway set since it's so close to Times Square, is open 24 hours, and has a decent health score rating. Plus the wait staff was okay with us singing and laughing for hours on end; I'm sure we were annoying patrons, but they took it in stride and we showed them our thanks with our presence and our generous tips.

Lauren and I found ourselves in a booth near the small bar on the right side of the diner near the register. It was the best place to people watch since you were in prime real estate to see the whole seating area along with the sidewalk outside and the kitchen. The best part about living in New York was definitely the people - mainly because there were so many of them and nearly half of them were certifiable.

We ordered coffee and perused the menu for food options before I heard Lauren yelling out to someone at the checkout counter. "Brittany?" she asked as she pushed her glasses up her face. I looked up to see a blonde girl whipping her ponytail and turning toward Lauren and I.

"Lauren?" the girl asked in return.

"Hey girl! How are you?" Lauren said as she got up from the table to give the girl, apparently named Brittany, a hug.

"I'm great. Things are going well for me - dancing and whatnot. Although I thought it'd be a little more like Center Stage dancing at a ballet company. So far, there's no Jamiroquai music in their collection," she said with a smile. I couldn't help but laugh, but the girl looked completely serious as she turned toward me. "Who's this?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Brittany, this is Kurt. We went to high school together and now he works on Bring It On! helping Roselyn." Brittany stuck out her hand and I shook it firmly. "Kurt, Brittany used to be in the ensemble in Bring It On! and was the dance captain as well. She left the show about a month ago to dance in the ballet." I smiled, impressed with her credentials. The girl clearly had a dancer's build - tall and well-toned, which was obvious even through her long sleeved shirt and fitted jeans. You would think she would look like one of the most elegant people in New York with the way she carried herself if it wasn't for the silly cat-eared skull cap on her head. Yet something about that cap told me that she wasn't exactly what people expected her to be - and I meant that in the best way possible.

"Why don't you join us?" I recommended as Lauren took her seat across for mine. Brittany shrugged and slid in next to Lauren.

"I was planning on getting my food to go, but I'm sure my cat would be jealous if I brought back food for myself and not for him, so this is probably best," she said as she motioned to the waitress to bring her a cup of coffee. I looked at Lauren for a minute, trying to gauge if she was serious or not, and Lauren shook her head with a smile as if to say that this was just how she was.

I liked this Brittany girl already.

"So Kurt," she said as she sipped on the black coffee that was placed in front of her. "Tell me more about you. You went to high school with Lauren. Where?"

"Oh - uh - well, I'm from Ohio and went to high school there. I met Lauren my junior year when I was in a singing group at my school and she joined us for the year before deciding she was too good for us," I said with a chuckle as Lauren kicked me under the table. "Ow! Anyway, so, yeah. I'm from Ohio. Went to college here in New York and did some costuming for touring theaters for a while before coming back to work on Bring It On!"

Brittany smiled. "My girlfriend is from Ohio, too. I hear it's nice there. I'm actually from here - I grew up in Queens but I live in Hell's Kitchen now." She took another sip. "Were you a cheerleader?"

I looked at her, puzzled. As did Lauren. "Uh, yeah. How'd you guess?"

She shrugged. "I was one too. You know how some people have gaydar? Well, I think I have cheerdar. I can tell when people were cheerleaders - or dancers. It's like we're a special club of people and only members can determine who other members are."

I couldn't help but laugh out loud at this girl. She may have seemed like she was a little off her rocker, but she was sweet and just a really inquisitive and observant person. "Well, your cheerdar is correct. I was for one semester. But I like to think that experience helped me with being on this show, you know?"

She nodded. "Oh, totally. I mean, it helped me with my routines knowing that they were based in dance and cheer. The two are pretty similar after all."

I was intrigued by Lauren's friend, who I hoped to add to my fold someday as well. "So Brittany, what's your story?" I asked as I sipped on my coffee.

She looked over at Lauren, almost asking for her approval before she spoke, before speaking. "Well, as I said, I'm from Queens and my parents and two little brothers still live there. I'm a dancer and I started out by taking dance classes when I was a kid and ended up loving it almost as much as I loved my Hello Kitty collection. So, as I got older, I kept taking classes and I went to LaGuardia School and focused in dance. But I also did cheerleading with a local team in Queens at the community center because I wanted to make sure I wasn't going to end up all Upper East Side." I laughed at that comment, I'd never imagine a girl like Brittany living in the Upper East Side so I couldn't imagine why that would be a concern of hers.

"And after graduating I ended up getting picked up for a national tour with the Rockettes since, you know, I'm tall and stuff. And that led to working with other shows once the Christmas season was over. I came back and auditioned for a few shows in New York when my mom got sick a few years ago..." She paused and stared at her coffee cup - willing herself to continue. Lauren protectively reached around her back for support and Brittany gave a bleak smile before continuing. I certainly knew how she felt with the story of my mom and all.

"But she's fine now. But, it was hard back then seeing her like that. Anyway," she said with a much lighter tone. "I ended up staying in New York because I loved it and when I was added to Bring It On! a friend from high school said that they were holding auditions for the ballet so I tried out and got the gig. It's kind of a Cinderella story, but no glass slippers. Those hurt. I should know."

I grinned. "Wow, Brittany. That's incredible. I'm so glad to have met you. And if you're friends with Lauren, you must be a pretty good person since she is rather picky about who she spends her time with."

Brittany smiled and nudged Lauren's arm. "Yeah, well, same can be said about you. She must like you too. I'm glad we're friends now, Kurt."

I nodded and looked at Lauren who seemed amused at our conversation. "So, Brittany, tell me how things are with you in the romance-" Lauren started before she heard a phone ringing. Brittany maneuvered to grab the phone out of her pocket. "Sorry guys," she said to us as she walked toward the exit to take her call outside. "I'll be back in a minute."

As she walked away, Lauren started laughing before peering at me through her glasses. "So, yeah. That's Brittany."

I laughed. "She's really fun. Seems like a nice girl. I bet she was fun when she was in the show."

"She was one of the best," Lauren said with a sigh. "I was bummed when I heard she was leaving, but dancing with the New York City Ballet is a once in a lifetime opportunity - especially since dancers have such short careers."

"I can only imagine," I said as Brittany came back to our table.

"Alright guys, I think I'm going to head out," Brittany said as she placed a few bucks on the table to cover the cost of her coffee.

"But we didn't even order yet!" Lauren exclaimed.

"I know, but my girlfriend invited me to go with her to a party with some people from her work, so I said I'd join her. But let's meet up again soon - and this time on purpose," Brittany said with a wink. I laughed and she turned her attention to me. "It was great to meet you Kurt. Get my number from Lauren; I have a feeling we're going to be best friends," she said before leaving the restaurant.

"Me too," I said in her general direction as she walked away.

BLAINE

They were at the bar for maybe ten minutes before Blaine saw Santana walk through the door and inching her coat off to expose a tight purple dress under her cream colored coat. She looked around and I motioned for her to join us when she met my gaze. She gave a small wave and headed over.

"No need to dress like that on my account," I said as she approached the table. She immediately punched me in the arm as she dropped her coat on the seat next to me.

"Whatever. You're just jealous your legs don't look this good in a dress," she said with a grin. "So, what are we doing here?"

I laughed. "Remember that band that we're going to start working with?" She nodded. "Well, it turns out that their band manager is a guy that I was pretty good friends with in high school. He and I lost touch once he graduated - he was a few years older than me - but he lives here and is apparently the manager of Atticus Finch."

"And what's better is that he brought an even better person back into the picture," Wes added as he sat down in the seat across from Santana. I rolled my eyes as Santana looked on, confused.

"San, this is Wes. Wes also went to school with me. He's an attorney now and lives here in New York as well."

"Just around the corner, actually," Wes added as he eyed Santana up and down, clearly checking her out.

"It's nice to meet you, Wes. Though I don't think you can use that pick up line on me. My girlfriend will be here soon," she said with a smirk as she hung her coat on the back of her chair and sat down. Wes looked dumbfounded.

I laughed at his inability to speak. "Don't be a tool and imagine her with her girlfriend, Wes. Please try to be a gentleman in front of a lady," I said with a wink. Wes growled at me and crossed his arms.

"Alright, I have two rum and cokes and a - whoa, who is this?" David asked as he approached the table with our drinks. He set them down on the table before extending his hand to Santana. "Hi, I'm David."

"Santana," she replied as she shook his hand. "To avoid the same embarrassment that Wes just experienced, I don't play for your team."

David laughed. "Well, I wasn't even going to go there considering how I'm engaged. But I was more surprised that you are the person Blaine wanted us to meet. I had hoped that Blaine would bring a guy, even if he doesn't have a boyfriend at the moment."

I looked at Santana who had a devilish grin on her face. "Oh, Blaine, I am going to like this guy," she said giddily. "I hope you guys gave him a hard time about his lack of a man like I did. The guy needs to get some."

"We couldn't agree more," David said, chuckling. "Well, we never imagined Blaine as a guy to 'hit it and quit it' but he definitely should have a guy in his life."

I rolled my eyes. "I can't believe I'm hearing this from all three of you right now," I said incredulously. "I would excuse myself to the bathroom to avoid all of you guys, but I'm afraid as to where the conversation would go in my absence."

Santana rolled her eyes. "Oh please, B. I'm not afraid to have this conversation with you present. As they say, real friends will say what they have to say in front of your face rather than behind your back."

Wes and David nodded in agreement as I sat back in my chair and huffed before gesturing for them to continue. It was true - I'd rather know what they were saying than have me be oblivious to whatever they were trying to concoct.

David looked at me, trying to bring peace with his glance. "Blaine, look. We're all happy. Well, Wes is, well, Wes. But I have Paula and Santana has a girlfriend too. We just want you to be happy." I started to retort that I didn't need some guy to be happy before Santana cut me off.

"Blaine, I know you don't need a guy to be happy. But I know that you really want to have a guy in your life and possibly a family some day. Don't you think your parents want to have grandkids that aren't from Cooper's loins?" I laughed. Santana had met Cooper's kids twice and they were just like their father both times, charming and annoying as hell. That's what happens when you have twin boys that are the spitting image of their father I suppose.

She continued. "Blaine, you know I'm normally all tough shit, but I am a softie when it comes to the love department. And you, apparently," she winked. "And now that I have co-conspirators, we're only going to try harder to get you what you want - whether that's a guy or something else. We just want you to be the best B you can be."

Wes shook my shoulder as if he was intentionally trying to shake me out of my comfort zone. "Yeah, Blaine. As I said before, my roommate is putting himself out there, it's time that you do too. If he could do it, I know you can. And he's about a billion times more reserved than you are."

I looked at him puzzled. What actor would be reserved? "I thought your roommate was an actor?"

He shook his head. "Nope, he just works in a theater. Backstage. Costumes. I should know more specifically what he does, but he kind of loses me when he goes on a tirade about his work. Besides, he spent the last few months on tour with a show so he wasn't home for a while but now he's back in Manhattan and I no longer can bring home the ladies to my apartment."

David rolled his eyes. "Puh-lease, Wes. How often do you actually have women back at your apartment? You're a lawyer - and a new one at that. I'm sure you spend most of your time in the office anyway."

Wes feigned disgust and looked like he was going to say something in return before shaking his head and taking a rather large gulp of his drink. We all couldn't help but laugh - Wes' act was up.

"Speaking of your roommate," I said. "You should invite him to hang out with us. I'm sure Santana invited her girlfriend Brittany," Santana shrugged guiltily before I dismissed her, acknowledging that it was okay that she had invited her girlfriend. "Besides, the more the merrier."

"I would, but he already texted me and said that he was at dinner with an old friend and needed to be home by midnight. Knowing us, we're going to be up until the sun comes out," Wes said as he drank the last of his rum and coke.

I shrugged. "His loss, I guess. But I kind of want to meet this roommate of yours. I never imagined you having a roommate and since it's not David it must be someone awesome since I was convinced that the two of you would live together even after you married different people." Wes rolled his eyes and David laughed as he faked making lovey dovey eyes at Wes. "What's your roommate's name, anyway?" I asked.

"Kurt," he said simply.

I took a last sip of my beer and put the empty bottle back down on the table. I looked over at Santana who looked like she was lost in a different place. Her perfectly manicured finger was dangling into the bourbon she was nursing and a slight smile crept onto her face.

"Santana?" I asked, trying to get her attention. At the mention of her name, she snapped up. "Is everything okay?"

She looked at me with the same smile on her lips. "Yeah, just - just having a flashback I guess. A friend of mine was named Kurt and I haven't talked to him in almost ten years. I was just thinking about him, I guess. I wonder what he's up to," she said, not really needing me to respond.

Santana came back out of La-La Land and eyed the empty glasses and started rounding them up. "Alright boys, next round is on me. What are ya having?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Monday, October 15

KURT

Oh man.

I had not been on a date in so long. Well, not a real, proper date. I think the last date I went on was when I was still in college and Lord knows that was too long ago for me to want to admit. I don't really think I'm old, but I think it's weird that the last time I went on a date, it was in the last decade and light colored denim was still in style.

Wes had spent most of the weekend rekindling his bromance with his friends from high school, but I was thankful for the reprieve. It gave me the weekend to focus on getting to know people at work, getting used to my new weekend routine, and thinking about my date with James today.

I wished that I still had my friends from high school here with me now to give me a pep talk about this date but the only female friend from high school I really kept up with was Mercedes and sometimes Rachel. But Rachel was busy in LA now, having abandoned Broadway for the silver screen a year after we graduated. But Mercedes was still my number one lady; she had recently moved to Chicago - which was so much closer than LA - and was working as a jazz singer. She joked that she was working her way back to New York so she could join me, but I knew that she loved Chicago more than she wanted to admit. Plus, it meant that she was a bit closer to Ohio and if there was one thing Mercedes loved most in this world, it was her family. And me, of course. But I was really missing her today.

James was going to meet me at the restaurant at 7pm, which surprised me since I figured he'd need to be at the office until late given that he said he was a bit of a work-a-holic, but I didn't want to overthink that. What I really needed to focus on was what I was going to wear.

In high school, I felt like my wardrobe should speak for me - it was loud, different, flamboyant, and sometimes over the top. I think back then I was looking for something to speak for me rather than me to use my words to speak for myself. I wanted people to be able to read me like a book - and they certainly did - but when I went to college and was surrounded by people who looked and dressed more like me, I realized that I wanted to use my life story and my words to speak for me rather than my clothes. My interest in fashion would never die, but long gone were the days of kilts, one-shoulder sweaters and long

sweaters with tights. I was a bit more reserved, but preferred tailored suits and fitted button ups with slacks to my previous pieces. Though I still loved to add flair with my shoes, socks or even accessories - I could never abandon my collection of brooches if I tried.

It was nearly four and I had finally decided on a pair of black slacks with a light blue button up and a gray twill vest with black boots and my black pea coat. I secured my favorite brooch, a rhinoceros that I wore when I was in high school, to the pea coat. I had spent most of the morning readying myself with a shower, shave, and styling my hair, but I didn't want to put on the outfit until the last minute in case I spilled something on it.

Since I had a few hours to spare, I grabbed myself a cup of tea and read through some of my emails before being jostled from my routine by Wes' keys clanking in the door around 6:15 - early for my roommate.

"Lucy, I'm home!" he belted as he kicked off his shoes and placed them on the shoe rack by the front door. I rolled my eyes at him. He insisted on doing that every time I was home and it was irritating, yet endearing, and showed no signs of stopping any time soon.

"Hey Wes. You're lucky you weren't just saying that to an empty apartment, I'm going to head out soon," I said as I started heading toward my room.

"OOOOH - your daaaaaaaaate is toniiiiiiiiiiight," he said in a girlish voice as he opened the refrigerator door.

"Whatever!" I yelled at him over my shoulder before picking up my clothes off the bed and starting to exchange my loungewear for my outfit for tonight.

"So, whatcha wearing?" he said as he stood in the doorway with a beer in his hand.

"WES! God, I'm changing in here. Can't I get some resemblance of privacy?" I shrieked.

"Kurt, we've known each other for years. I don't get why you still insist on having your 'privacy' when you're changing. It's not like I haven't seen what you've got going on before," he said with a shrug as he sipped on his beer.

I sighed. "I know, old habits die hard, I guess. Blame that one on high school PTSD from the locker room."

I knew Wes wouldn't know what that meant - Dalton was like a beacon of hope for me in high school and I don't even think they had locker rooms - but my family could never afford private school, so I was stuck at McKinley with all of the homophobes that Lima had to offer. I had some struggles in school, including a very confusing run-in with one of the jocks who bullied me then turned out to be gay, but it was all in the past now. But I still couldn't change in front of guys because I always assumed that they thought I'd be checking them out or something. Blame it on Lima, I guess. I thought it was kind of ironic that I helped people dress and undress for a living yet I couldn't bring myself to change in front of another guy - let alone my roommate of a few years.

"Just give me like 5 minutes and I'll give you a full fashion show, okay?" I said as I pulled my pants off the bed.

"Fine!" Wes huffed as he closed the door and walked away. I heard the couch's leather squeak from his weight, so I knew there would be no more intrusions from him and I'd be able to change in peace.

About four minutes later, I checked my reflection in the full-length mirror in my room and nodded approvingly at my ensemble. I could still bust it out every now and then.

I emerged from my room and found Wes staring at ESPN on our TV. I coughed to get his attention and his eyes shifted from the TV to my outfit. He smiled.

"Yup, that'll do," he said.

I laughed. "Well, since I have the approval of a straight guy, I can only hope that this gay guy I'm about to meet will like it too."

He grinned mischievously. "Yeah, I don't think you'll have a problem with him liking your outfit, Hummel. You look hot," he said as he drained the last of his beer.

"Thanks dear," I said as I swung on my coat, grabbed my keys and walked to the front door. "Don't wait up."

I shut the door behind me, hoping to not hear whatever sexual innuendo Wes was about to throw my way and headed down the stairs onto the street. James wanted us to meet at Cafeteria, a great restaurant not too far from where I lived. Rather than take the trains which would likely be congested due to the rush

hour traffic, I decided to walk. I thought about putting in my headphones and blaring some music, but the hustle and bustle of the city calmed me as I walked over.

As I walked toward the restaurant, it struck me that I wasn't really that nervous about this date. I honestly couldn't remember the last time that I really was excited about a romantic interest in the first place. Perhaps it was because I was meeting this guy from online and I only knew about him the few things that he and I chatted about over the dating site's secure email over the weekend - which wasn't much - but I was still glad to be getting out there. At the very least, this guy was really attractive; that wasn't a bad thing. But it did worry me that I wasn't really nervous. I mean, shouldn't I be nervous or excited or something?

Oh well.

As I rounded the corner, I flicked on my phone to check the time - it was 6:59 on the dot. Thankfully, I was right on time.

As I stood across the street from Cafeteria, I noticed that James was already there. His picture really didn't do him justice. He looked like he could be Armie Hammer's twin; he had a thick head of blonde hair, chiseled jawline and a sharp, masculine nose. He was dressed in a navy suit with a camel coat over top and a white scarf casually thrown around his neck. The man knew how to dress - I could tell his suit was Ralph Lauren from the cut of the slacks that poked out from beneath his coat. I looked down at my wardrobe again and gulped - I knew I was a well-dressed man, but this guy definitely knew the difference between something you'd pick up at Barneys and something you'd find at TJ Maxx.

I took in a deep breath and moved across the street once the crosswalk signaled the all clear. As I stepped up onto the curb, I took in one last breath and stopped in front of James.

"James?" I asked as the man looked up from his phone and into my eyes. He immediately smiled and I immediately was blown away by the gorgeous grin on his face.

"You must be Kurt," he said with a slight Southern accent, extending a hand. I shook it tentatively; who introduces themselves to a date with a handshake?

"I am, it's so nice to meet you," I said genuinely. It was true. It was nice to meet him. It would also be nice to look at him while we had dinner.

God, what is wrong with me?

"Shall we go inside?" he asked. "I got a reservation so they're ready whenever we are."

I smiled and nodded as he led the way. He rushed ahead of me to grab the door, which immediately made me blush.

"Sorry," he said. "It's the Southern in me. I'm told to always open the door on a date."

I smiled meekly. God, is this guy from a fairytale or something? "I don't mind. It's... nice. Most New Yorkers would have just let the door slam in my face."

He laughed. "The one thing I don't understand about this city is its lack of manners," he stated. "Whenever my parents come up here, they're appalled at how people act here. They're just so used to the way it is down South that they just can't get used to it," he said.

He smiled at the waitress who was at the front of the restaurant and she practically swooned. I rolled my eyes. *Oh please, honey*, I thought to myself. *He plays for the other team.*

"Two for Monroe," he drawled. His accent just made the girl grin bigger and I was taken back by his accent again. It was certainly something I could get used to if he was going to talk like that all the time. Whoever decided that accents were hot was totally, 100% correct. The waitress flustered as she grabbed two menus and gestured toward the seating area. James waved for me to pass in front of him and I obliged as I slipped the coat off my shoulders before I felt a hand grabbing at its collar.

"Allow me," he said as he took my coat and placed it over his arm. As we approached the table, he gingerly placed the coat on the seat behind me as I sat down before removing his own coat and placing it on the back of his chair. With the dim lighting and the candles flickering on the table, I finally had the chance to look at James a bit closer. His jawline was definitely pronounced and he really did almost look like a fairytale prince. His eyes were a deep green which fit naturally with his blonde hair and tanned skin. If this was how all the boys in the South were made, I was clearly living in the wrong part of the country.

"So, Kurt, I got to know you a little bit online this weekend. Tell me more about yourself," he stated once our waiter took our drink orders.

From there, our conversation took off. He asked a lot of questions about me; what growing up in Ohio was like, how I decided on going to Parsons for college, how my career had landed me on Broadway, what stores I liked to shop in the most. He seemed to perk the most at some of the stores that I mentioned, suggesting that he shopped at a few of my regular haunts as well. By the time I had finished going on and on about myself, we had devoured appetizers, at least two rounds of drinks, and nearly finished our entrees. It felt like I'd been talking for ages.

"Enough about me" I said as I took a bite of my macaroni and cheese. It wasn't typically what I would order, but it's what the restaurant is known for and after eating it, I understood why. "How about you? What's it like growing up in the South."

"It's pretty great. It's really different than here," James said as he sipped on his red wine. "Sometimes I forget that New York and Alabama are in the same country - the people and environments are so different."

I chuckled. I could only imagine that growing up in Alabama had to be an even weirder experience than growing up in Ohio. "What was it like to be gay in Alabama? I know it was a struggle in Ohio."

The subject made James tense, he shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Well... I...uh."

I held my hand up to stop him. "It's okay, I shouldn't have brought it... it's just," I sighed. "It was hard for me, I just wondered if it was the same for you," I said.

He took a deep breath, seemingly relieved that he didn't have to talk about it. "Yeah, I just... don't really want to talk about it, if that's okay." He paused and looked at me, worry gone from his eyes and replaced with an emotion I couldn't quite put my finger on. "I'm amazed at how open you seem to have been when you were growing up."

I blushed. "Thanks, I guess. It felt like I had to be at the time, but now I just... am who I am, you know?"

He sighed. "Sure thing."

We finished our dinners, chit chatting about things like our favorite movies (mine being *Moulin Rouge*, his being *Inception*), favorite stores (mine being Michael Kors, his was Billy Reid) and I learned more about his dog, Barley, and a little bit about his career on Wall Street. I still had no idea what he specifically did since it was all Greek to me, but I tried to listen as best as I could even though I was perplexed by his talks

about stocks and bonds and 'favorable markets.' By the time dessert was mentioned, I declined since I couldn't imagine being able to eat more food and still be able to fit into my pants and he stealthily slipped the waitress his credit card to pay.

He signed the slip as I awkwardly thanked him for dinner. He looked up from signing the slip and grinned and I couldn't help but smile in return. How'd the guy get his teeth so white in the first place? "It's my pleasure, Kurt. You're really a great guy."

I blushed as I stood and pulled my coat on. "Thanks, James. You're not too bad yourself," I said as I lightly touched his forearm, testing the waters with a slight physical touch. As much as I loved being affirmed with words, there was something about physically touching someone that made me feel a connection with someone. I always maintained that holding hands was severely underrated and even if I was a grown man in his late-twenties; I couldn't get enough when a guy would hold my hand. It was like my relationship crack or something.

James tensed at first before taking one of his arms and drooping it over my shoulder. Since he had a few inches on me, my shoulder hit just at the crook of his arm and the sudden closeness brought a whiff of his cologne - Polo #2 - and the faintest smell of laundry detergent. In return, I put my arm at the small of his back and held it there loosely, not wanting to push us together since I still wasn't sure what he'd think of that. It was a first date after all. And since I hadn't done this in so long, I wasn't sure what was "normal" at this point anyway.

We stood outside of Cafeteria for a minute, side-by-side before he turned and faced me, releasing his hands from my shoulder but still standing close enough where I could feel the heat coming from his body.

"I really had a great time tonight, Kurt," James said.

"Me too," I replied. He leaned forward and gave me a hug, wrapping his arms around my shoulders again and I clasped my arms around his middle. He tightened for just a moment before pulling back. Once our faces encountered each other's again, he moved his hand and scrubbed his neck and sheepishly looked at the sidewalk, as if it was the most interesting thing he'd seen in ages.

"This is a somewhat odd coincidence, but we happened to get tickets for a client to your show on Wednesday night and I'll be accompanying them. I had no idea that it was for the show you worked at

until you told me where you worked tonight, so please don't think I'm trying to stalk you or anything," he said, a slight uncertainty in his voice.

I giggled. "It's fine. If anything, it means you might see me again." I blushed. Dear God, did I just ask myself out on a second date with his guy? Smooth move, Kurt.

"Well, I was hoping for that anyway," he said with another winning smile. "I'll call you later to set up our next date, okay?"

"Sounds good to me," I replied.

He handed me his phone and I took it, understanding that he was asking for my number. I carefully typed my number in and handed it back to him. Upon reading my phone number in his phone, I saw a smile on his face as he turned back to me. "Thanks again Kurt," he said, going in for another hug. This one lasted a bit longer and I inhaled deeply, holding onto the overwhelmingly manly smell that radiated off of him. Before he pulled away, I felt his dry lips graze my cheek as he pressed a light kiss into it. I was stunned and my gaze met his as he backed away.

"Bye," he whispered before turning and walking down the street.

I stood, dazed for a minute before pushing the button at the crosswalk to head home. As I stood there, I felt my phone buzz in my pocket. I looked at the screen and opened the text that had just come in.

I can't wait to see you again, Kurt. -James

I smiled and placed the phone back in my pocket. The date had gone well; James was a gentleman, he was really attractive, was interested in me. It couldn't have gone much better.

So why did it feel like it still wasn't quite right?

CHAPTER EIGHT

Wednesday, October 17

BLAINE

I made a point to get to the office extra early today. Well, early for me - at 8:00. Equipped with my coffee in hand and a pep in my step, I settled into my desk, took a deep breath, and booted up my computer. Today was the day that we were meeting with Atticus Finch to sign on the dotted line and I couldn't be more thrilled for the new band and my old friend.

I loved everything about my job, but the excitement and exhilaration that happened during this initial stage made me get excited every time. It was the same kind of excitement that one feels on the first day of school, on a first date, on New Year's Day - it's the excitement that this one thing could change the rest of your life. And maybe it would... for me too.

As I waited patiently for my computer to start up, I looked to the photos I had tacked onto my cube's wall. We were encouraged to make our office spaces look homey since we did spend a lot of time there, and the first thing I added were photos of my friends and family. There were photos of me, Wes and David from high school surrounded by our fellow Warblers. There was a picture of me and Santana from the NKOTBSB concert from a few years ago - that night was the night she and I both realized we had a penchant for boy bands and 90s nostalgia. It had solidified our friendship even more than I had originally expected. In the center was the Anderson family photo that we took each year at Christmas. My mom, dad, Cooper and I making goofy faces in front of our family's fireplace. We have a photo like that every year and I love replacing it each new year when my mom sends me the "official" copy in the mail.

There's one thing that's missing from the wall; and that's a picture of me with my arms wrapped lovingly around a guy's shoulders; looking longingly into his eyes as he smiles at the camera with an equally elated grin on his face.

I sighed. Someday, it will happen.

I mean, it *will*, right?

I was taken out of my stupor when the start up noise resounded from my computer's speakers. I quickly turned the speakers down - the night before I had stayed late at the office finalizing everything for today's

meeting and I *may* have been blasting some Third Eye Blind in the process - but not before I heard a muffled voice coming from down the hall.

"Blaine?" the voice asked.

"Yeah?" I shouted, not sure where the voice was coming from.

I looked up and saw Santana walking toward me; dressed to the nines as always in a red pencil skirt, structured white button up and black stilettos. Her black glasses on her nose and the bun on her head screamed librarian, but her demeanor would suggest otherwise.

"What brings you in this early, B?" she asked as she grabbed the coffee cup on my desk and took a swig.

"That's mine, San," I replied, hastily grabbing the cup from her hands. "And you know I like to be here early on signing day. It's a big deal for me and it hasn't happened too often. Plus I want to be sure everything is in place for when David and the guys get here."

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, whatever. Like you weren't already beyond prepared yesterday when you stayed late to finish paperwork and turned down an invitation to join Britt and I for dinner," she said with a chuckle.

I grinned. "You know me, Mr. Prepared. Besides, I'm sure my presence wasn't missed, I know you enjoy your time with Britt more than you'd care to admit sometimes."

She beamed. Santana had been dating Brittany for upwards of five years and God, she really loved the adorable blonde. "Speaking of, Brittany and I will be celebrating our five year anniversary soon. I can't believe it."

"Oh please, the way you guys look at each other - you had to know you were going to end up together and staying together."

She sighed. "Well, you know I'm not always the easiest person to get along with, but she brings out the best in me and with her I'm like a different person. Not in a bad way or anything," she corrected quickly.

I nodded. I had seen how she transformed when she was around her girlfriend - it was really a wonderful thing to witness. Where Santana would be snarky and short with people, around Brittany she was sweet

and patient and showered her with compliments, light touches and affirmations. And now that I knew that they had met in an online dating site, I had to hope that my dream of adding a boyfriend to my cubicle wall couldn't be too far behind - I just had to have faith and believe in love.

"Don't worry, San. Your secret is safe with me," I said with a wink.

She groaned. "You're nuts."

"They're the only nuts in your life anyway," I retorted.

"Well, you and your *nut*s should join me for lunch today. Maybe bring David? He seemed really cool the other night and I'm sure we could bill it to Rialto if we talked a little shop while we ate. Besides, I'm sure he's ready to get the ball rolling - he seems like an eager guy."

"That he is," I said as I focused on my email that had just pulled up. "12:30 work for you?"

"Perfect," she said as she sashayed away.

...

"This place is amazing," David said as gaped at his surroundings. I knew David to be a strictly pizza and Chinese guy, so even something as simple as Cosi was lost on him. It's not like Cosi was a fancy place - it was near Times Square so inexpensive and it being a chain restaurant was sort of implied - but though its proximity was nearest to the tourist epicenter of the city, it still managed to maintain a limited amount of class. And the food was pretty good.

Santana rolled her eyes as she settled into the booth and I squeezed in next to her, leaving David to his own side of the table. I perused the menu for a moment and decided on the lobster sandwich before taking a minute to look around. People watching was one of my favorite things about life. I liked to imagine what the people around me were thinking, what kinds of lives they led, their passions - it was a little game I liked to play in my head.

One person in the restaurant peaked my interest. There was a man sitting by the window facing the street who was so incredibly striking. The first thing that caught my eye was the way the man held himself - he looked poised and polished even though I could only really see him from the chest up. His posture was perfect with his back still straight as he leaned over the table to reach for his leather bag that was perched

on the table. He was wearing a crisp white button up with a navy vest and a green scarf looped casually around his neck. The view from his neck to the top of his head only got better - his skin was a luminescent pale shade with slight color at the cheeks. His angular jaw was settled into a comfortable smile as he read whatever papers he had sprawled across the table and his nose was hidden slightly by the coffee mug at his lips. His hair was a chestnut brown - lighter than my own hair - and swept into a seemingly careful shape atop his head. As he lowered his coffee cup, I got a peek at his lips - slightly thin, but rosy and flushed, probably due to the heat of the coffee he probably drank. Just as I was about to give him another once-over, I was met with his steely gaze.

Oh shit, he saw me looking at him. Looking wasn't even the right word - gazing, admiring... none of which were good since this guy was a total stranger.

I gave a slight smile - I couldn't hide the fact that I'd been looking at him - and looked back to David and Santana, who had already started discussing their initial plans for their band to announce that they had signed with us.

"I definitely think we need to coordinate efforts with your social media platforms along with our own to announce the signing. From there, I'll see if we can get the local press to pick something up before moving to some of the more indie publications. Do you have any magazines that you've worked with before that might be interested in your boys?" Santana asked as she sipped on her water.

David shook his head. "Our band has been so small and localized, we haven't had much buzz outside of Manhattan as far as I know."

Santana scoffed. "Well, consider me your fairy godmother."

I laughed. "You're one bad ass bitch of a fairy godmother," I said as I poked her side, playfully. This caused Santana to shift in her seat before slapping me upside the head then immediately giving me a hug as if to apologize for the gesture.

David laughed. He had only seen Santana and I interact the other night at the bar and since he wasn't our typical client, we weren't afraid to be more like we really act around each other rather than the more professional sides to ourselves when we were on true client lunches. "You guys are like a weird married couple," he said as he slowly drained the Coke in front of him.

Santana laughed loudly this time, practically holding her side to contain herself. "Yeah, us... married... although we certainly have been told that we would make an appealing couple, it obviously would never happen."

I nodded. "Oh honey, now don't say that. We could be really happy!" I suggested playfully as I kissed her cheek lightly before she pushed my face away.

"Gross, B. Get your man-loving lips off of me."

"Santana, *you* started it. Besides, let's keep this about mostly business while we're here, okay?" I said, attempting to bring the conversation back to their announcement plans. While Santana and I might have been playful in front of David, I still wanted to attempt to maintain some level of professional decorum. Besides, I didn't really have any interest in what they were saying, I just wanted to get a better look at the guy at the window and the only way to do that without bringing attention to my actions would be to distract them.

I looked over at Mystery Man again. Thankfully he wasn't looking back this time, but I was met with an unfortunate sight. The guy had a human-sized Ken Doll standing at his table, a really well-dressed Ken Doll. The man scooted into the chair across from him and reached for the hand that Mystery Man had on the table.

I grunted and forced myself back to the conversation between Santana and David. *Of course this guy has someone like that as his boyfriend*, I thought to myself. *He's so incredibly attractive.*

KURT

I wanted to get into the theater early today so I planned to eat lunch at Cosi, a casual restaurant near the theater, and go over our costume inventory before going to work. Since the show had been on Broadway for a few months, Roselyn wanted to go through our inventory and notate any costumes that should be cycled out, updated, repaired or removed. In order to distract myself from thinking about my date with James, I spent most of Tuesday night after the show carefully cataloging our costumes - complete with photos - before making my final decisions and presenting them to Roselyn.

I had arrived at the restaurant before noon and before long, I looked at my watch and realized it was already 12:45 and my head had been buried in my work for over an hour. The waitstaff here kept refilling

my coffee cup as it emptied and since I had finished my food about an hour ago, my table was completely dominated with photos and papers with costume descriptions scribbled on them.

I took a moment to sip from the fresh cup of coffee that had been placed in front of me before finally peeling my eyes away from my work and met almost immediately with a man from across the restaurant who was looking at me.

At first, the man seemed startled and had a deer in the headlights look in his eyes before offering me a small smile and turning back to his company. As he turned away, I snuck a better look at the stranger who was honestly rather incredible looking. Well, he was incredible looking based on his profile at the very least - I couldn't really make out his whole face from the angle I was sitting at. The first thing I noticed was his hair - it was a dark brown with a slight curl; somewhat unusual to see on a guy. It was cropped close to his head, but was neatly styled with minimal product which flaunted his natural waves gracefully. He was dressed in a simple black suit with a thin lapel accompanied with a bright pink tie. I was surprised by the pink - that's a rather bold statement to make, even with something as simple as a black suit - but it seemed to work for him. He turned back in my direction to flag down the waitress; giving me an open view of his face his face. He had a classic, Cary Grant look about him, his jawline was strong and defined and his lips somewhat full. His nose was equally masculine placed perfectly between two wide eyes and dark eyebrows. Soon he was laughing and his lips revealed a glowing, toothy smile and a crinkle in his eyes and I was taken aback by the way his face looked when he laughed.

But soon I was pulled out of my fascination when I him turn back toward his table and lean in to the person sitting next to him as a woman's arm and perfectly manicured hand snaked around his waist and pulled him in tight. From what I could tell, it looked like he had given her a kiss. Ugh. Of course.

Naturally, this guy is straight, I thought to myself. It's just my luck. All the guys I find attractive end up...

"Kurt?" A voice pulled me from my train of thoughts. I looked up to find James, who was looking at me expectantly.

"Oh - uh - hi!" I said flushed, slightly embarrassed that I had been on a date with the guy at my table and was thinking about an attractive stranger instead. "Please have a seat," I said, gesturing to the empty chair across from me.

"Thanks," he said as he sat down. He immediately reached for my hand that laid on the table and I couldn't help but smile. Him initiating the contact felt really nice, especially since I wasn't sure what to do with physical contact during our date the other night.

"I'm surprised to see you here," he said as he rubbed lightly over my knuckles.

"Yeah, same here. What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I'm meeting our clients here. The ones that are going to the show tonight? They actually wanted to come here. Well, it's because they own Cosi - you know, the chain - so they can eat for free and it's not too far from our office or the theater. It seemed like a good place to meet up," he replied.

I nodded. "Sounds like you'll be with these guys for awhile," I said as I clasped my coffee cup in my spare hand and brought it to my lips.

He shrugged. "Yeah, but it's part of the territory. At least I'll get to see you afterward, right?"

I grinned. He was being really sweet, which I loved. Maybe I was wrong about the other night. Maybe I was expecting too much from a first date which is why it felt weird.

"Of course," I replied. "Did you want to-"

I stopped when I heard a gasp escape his lips. He looked out the window to my left and visibly stiffened. He removed his hand from mine and straightened his posture from the more relaxed one that was evident before. He coughed and brushed an invisible crumb from his jacket before standing up from the table.

"Is everything okay?" I asked him.

"Uh - yes. It's fine," he hastily replied and offered his hand for a handshake. "Thank you Kurt. I look forward to seeing you this evening," he said curtly before turning on his heel and heading toward the door.

I sat, puzzled. *What the hell just happened?*

I saw him meet some men at the door who had just come in, smile plastered on his face as he shook their hands. One of the men, an older gentleman who practically oozed money, clasped his hand on James'

shoulder before what seemed like introducing him to the people from the group. The men laughed at something that the older man said as James continued to smile and laugh lightly at the man's joke. The waitress grabbed menus for the men before ushering them toward their seats across the restaurant. In a single moment, I saw James' eyes flicker back to mine and he had an apologetic look on his face before it was quickly removed by what I now knew to be a fake smile directed at the man across from him.

I broke eye contact to look for the waitress before gesturing for my check. She nodded and quickly brought it to my table. I rooted around in my bag to find my wallet before pulling out enough cash to cover my bill and started packing up my belongings.

As I shoved the papers into my bag, I couldn't help but be confused at everything that had happened. What was the deal with James? Why was he acting so weird? I put the last of the papers into my bag before buckling the bag closed and draping it on my shoulder.

Before leaving, I took one last glance at James who was completely enthralled with the conversation at his own table. His fake smile was still set on his face and if I was being honest, I started to wonder if any of the smiles he had shared with me were real.

But then looked one last time at the curly headed man who caught my attention before. The woman who had been sitting next to him must have left, and I could see his face head-on again before having it obscured by the back of the head of the guy he was sitting with. He looked like he was equally involved with his conversation at his table, but unlike the smile on James' face, his seemed genuine. Genuine and gorgeous.

Ugh, get ahold of yourself, I thought to myself as I made my way out the door and onto the theater. I hoped that work would, once again, provide a welcome distraction from whatever it was that was going on with James... and keep me from thinking about the hot guy from the restaurant.

CHAPTER NINE

Wednesday Night, October 17

BLAINE

I couldn't believe I had been at the office for almost 12 hours. Sure, living in New York meant that people worked a lot since we lived in the city that never sleeps. But normally if I worked a 12-hour-day, it ended with me at a show with a beer in hand. Unfortunately, today was not one of those days, as I was still clicking away at my keyboard trying to send off emails to various departments who were gearing up to announce Atticus Finch's deal on Friday afternoon.

During lunch, Santana and David had agreed that Friday would be the best day to announce since the band was going to host a concert on Thursday night to announce the album to their local fans as a "thank you for sticking with us." The band invited me and some of the people they'd be working with at Rialto to the gig and Santana hoped to use the photos taken that night to accompany the announcement. Since I had discovered them at The Bell House, David thought it was perfect that they'd announce their new album there. And they already had a gig there, so it aligned perfectly.

"Anderson, come here when you wrap that up," Clark yelled from his office.

"Just a minute," I said as I proofread the email to accounting, who would need to set up a billing code for Atticus Finch's expenses. I clicked send and grabbed the nearest pad and pen before jogging over to Clark's office.

"Have a seat," he said as I entered the doorway. I sat down quickly and waited expectantly for him to rattle off whatever he had called me into his office for.

"You won't be needing that," he said, gesturing for the pen and paper in my hand.

I furrowed my brow. "Uh, okay." I tucked the pen behind my ear and let the paper rest on my legs.

He sat back in his chair, took a deep breath, and spoke. "Blaine, I've been really impressed with your work. You've only found a few bands and I know that not all of them went as planned once they got into the recording booth, but you've really made some gambles and I think Atticus Finch is the best one yet.

"I'm not the only person who's noticed the great job you're doing. I've had nothing but great reports from all of the people we work with along with our partners in the industry and they speak nothing but good things about you. I'm thankful for that because if you look good, I look good. And in an industry where things change quickly, the one thing that needs to remain constant is our reputation at Rialto as well as our partnerships with people in the industry."

He moved to sit more forward on the chair, arms extended onto the desk with his fingers intertwined as he twiddled his thumbs before continuing. "That being said, I want to send you to Atlanta on Saturday. There's a producer there that I want to use for Atticus Finch and I want you to be the one to tell him about the band."

I sat back, stunned. I hadn't traveled much for work before. I had gone to South By Southwest once and another convention in Philadelphia, but that was it. And it would also be my first work trip by myself.

"Okay... who am I going to meet there?" I asked. It was the first question to come to my mind even though I had a billion others buzzing around in my head waiting to be asked.

"Jeremy Reed," he stated.

My jaw dropped. Jeremy Reed was one of the biggest names in the industry and had made a name for himself by producing some of the best albums of the past ten years from the indie set. He had worked with bands like The Shins, Death Cab for Cutie and The Black Keys - all of which were currently on my playlist - and had moved his shop to Atlanta because it was an emerging city in the music scene where space was less expensive, things were more relaxed, and the paparazzi didn't exist. Being able to work with Jeremy Reed meant that you were set - and if I was going to work with Atticus Finch, it meant that Jeremy and I would have to become close. The thought of having daily conversations with Jeremy Reed blew my mind.

"Blaine? Earth to Blaine," I heard Clark say with a chuckle as I was pulled from my thoughts.

"Why me?" I asked before immediately clapping a hand over my mouth. I couldn't believe I just asked that. My dad always said to 'maintain confidence in the workplace and soon the responsibilities will match.' If I just doubted my own ability in front of Clark, he might doubt it too. *Good job, brain.*

Clark didn't seem phased by my outburst and he laughed a little at my obvious embarrassment. "As I mentioned before, you do good work. You're really something, Anderson. Working with Mr. Reed will only

improve your career. And I know you're really interested in producing and I think this would be a... natural step toward that direction. I had hoped that Jeremy would act as a mentor to you so that one day you can be a producer."

Holy shit, I think I'm dreaming.

"I have faith in you, Blaine. If all goes well with Atticus Finch, I think I can see a promotion in your future," he replied calmly.

Now I was slack jawed and my eyes were bugging. Clark just looked at me and laughed. I clearly was not doing a good job at hiding my emotions. Then again, I never had been; my mom always said that I had a very expressive face. "Blaine, chill out. I know this is a big opportunity but you really deserve it. But let's not dwell on that for now; you have an album to complete first. So, first thing tomorrow, work with our travel partners and get yourself on a flight for Saturday to Atlanta. Meet with Jeremy in the studio on Monday and fly back Monday night since we need you on Tuesday for our planning meeting. It's a short trip, but it could be the first of many."

"Okay," I said quickly, so quickly that I practically shouted at Clark who was surprised by my outburst.

"And get outta here, Anderson. You're too young to spend your evenings at the office. That's what you do when you have kids and a wife at home that you're trying to avoid," he said with a wink.

I laughed. "Well, thankfully that's not in my destiny, Clark," I said with a knowing smile. Clark knew that I was gay, as did most of the office, but he couldn't help but crack jokes. One time, Clark witnessed one of our visiting producers asking if Santana and I were married after observing one of our interactions at work. The incident made Clark laugh riotously as he quickly corrected the producer, but he'd been dropping what he called 'straight jokes' ever since.

I hurried out of his office and collected my bag at my desk before heading to the elevator. Once inside its quiet protected interior, I let out a loud "whoop!" before doing my standard celebratory dance - the amazingly graceful and oh-so-stylin' cabbage patch. Since the building would be empty at this time of night, I was thankful that the elevator had little chance of opening at one of the floors and subjecting myself to the embarrassment of someone seeing me. I was acting like an idiot, but I couldn't help it. This was big news.

Once I exited the lobby and made my way to the street, I bundled my scarf up under my pea coat and fumbled for my phone in my pocket. I was still jittery and filled with excitement from the announcement and I needed to share it with the world. I could be a producer for THE Rialto Records. Me, Blaine Anderson. Record producer.

Whoa. Okay, I really need to simmer down before I start hyperventilating in the middle of the sidewalk.

As I unlocked my phone, I opened my contacts and wondered who to call. The first people that popped into my head were my parents, but they were traveling in Italy for their anniversary so they didn't have cell phone service. I thought about calling Cooper, but he'd texted me a photo that morning of the shoot he was doing in LA, so I knew he wouldn't be able to answer right now. I thought about texting Santana, but I wasn't sure if she would be congratulatory or somewhat snarky. Yes, Santana was one of my best friends, but she and I were pretty competitive when it came to work stuff and I wasn't sure how my possible promotion would sit with her - especially since she hadn't been promoted since we transitioned from being interns to full-time staff. I didn't want to seem like I was gloating - so I could tell her later.

I grudgingly shoved my phone in my pocket after shooting Cooper a quick text to call me when he was off work. I guess I'll have to keep it bottled up for now.

It was a moment like this that made me wish I had someone to call my own; who'd support me and be excited for something so monumental as this. He'd be the guy I could call when something great happened, when I needed advice, or even when something bad happened. Sure, I also missed the intimacy and sex that came with relationships, but more than anything I missed the companionship and the feeling like I was spending time with my best friend and enjoying his company.

As I made my way toward my apartment, I found myself dreaming of the time when I would spend the whole way home talking to Mr. Right as he told me about his day, I would tell him about mine and we'd share I love yous before turning in for the evening - or even before seeing him at the door to our apartment ready with a hug and a kiss.

God, I hope that time is coming soon.

KURT

The show went on without a hitch. Thankfully I spent the time before the show clearing out the costumes and making a few repairs on a few that I had noted during lunch that day. The busyness of work had kept my mind from thinking about the awkward interaction with James, but now that the show was over and I knew James was somewhere on the premises, I couldn't avoid the thoughts anymore.

James and I discussed that I would meet him and his business associates at the side stage after the show in case they were interested in seeing backstage. He wasn't sure if they'd want to go backstage, but having the potential to go backstage could be a good idea; especially if he was trying to schmooze. Unfortunately, we had decided on that before his weird... whatever it was that happened this afternoon. But my word if my vow - or so my dad says - so I grabbed my coat and waited at the stage door for James to show up.

After making small talk with the security guards who manned the area to keep the fans of the show in check while they were waiting on autographs, I saw James' blonde hair peeking out from the masses. It wasn't hard to miss - the guy was pretty tall; nearly as tall as Finn. I greeted him with a small wave and he reciprocated, a look of relief on his face.

"I wasn't sure if you were going to come," he said exasperated. "Look, I know it was really... weird... with me at Cosi and I'm really sorry about that. It's just," he paused to take a breath.. He was staring intently at his shoes afraid to meet my eyes but soon continued. "There's a lot happening at work right now and there's a lot riding on this investment strategy. I don't want to jeopardize it in any way - I need to be on my game all the time."

He looked up at me and I forced a small smile. I could understand that the stress of a big deal could be a lot, but did it warrant his Jekyll and Hyde behavior? "Look James, I get it. You have a lot going with this deal. But the way you acted at Cosi really freaked me out. It was like you were pretending you didn't know me. And I know you don't really, but it was just... odd."

He smiled meekly. "I know. And I really am sorry."

"It's okay. Just... don't make a habit of it, okay?" I said as I lightly nudged his shoulder. He practically beamed back, hoping that the joke equated my forgiveness. And really, it did. Could I really be mad at the guy for having a stressful day? "So, are they still here? Did they want to come backstage?"

He looked stunned. "Oh, uh, yeah. A couple of the guys had to leave, but Mr. Levinson and my boss, Mr. Poole, are still here. I'm sure they'd love to see backstage."

"Well, bring 'em back. And don't worry about this guy," I said, motioning to Jason, our theater's security guy. "He's harmless," I added with a wink. I heard Jason faintly chuckle in the background as James looked up at him.

"Okay," he said. "I'll be back in a minute."

I leaned back against the wall again before Jason came up to me and took a spot leaning against the wall next to me. "So who's that?" he asked.

"James," I stated plainly.

"Anything I need to worry about?" he inquired.

I rolled my eyes. "He's fine, Jason. I'll let you know if that changes," I replied.

Jason was a great security guard and an even better guy who was incredibly protective of the cast and crew of the show. He was a big guy; he used to be a private bodyguard for some celebrity living in New York, but decided to move to working for a theater so he could cut back on hours and take his two young daughters to see shows thanks to the comp tickets we were given as a perk of the job. Jason didn't seem to miss working for the privileged of New York and his daughters really loved coming and visiting him at the theater. Plus, he had become my "New York Burt" as I liked to call him, so it felt nice to always have someone on my side - especially when that someone reminded me of my dad.

Soon James was back with the two men. I smiled and waited for James to introduce us. "Mr. Levinson, Mr. Poole, this is Kurt Hummel. He works in the costume department for Bring It On! and offered to take us backstage to poke around and meet some of the cast."

Mr. Levinson extended his hand, "Please, call me Sean. And thank you for taking the time to show us around tonight."

"Not a problem," I said. I turned to Mr. Poole whose face was unreadable. I extended my hand and he just looked at it for a moment before shaking it hesitantly. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Poole," I said quickly, hoping that my hand wasn't too sweaty as I shook his hand. God, this guy was intimidating.

"Yeah," he said roughly. I looked at James who shrugged lightly, dismissing his actions as if it was something that came with the territory. I did my best to shake it off and plastered a smile onto my face as I opened the stage door.

"Please come in," I said, motioning for the guys to walk inside. Mr. Levinson - uh, Sean - led the pack, slight grin on his face. Behind him was Mr. Poole who let out a loud sigh before crossing the threshold. Last was James, who reached behind me to hold the door open for me and added a wink as his hand lightly brushed mine against the handle. I blushed at the touch. What a gentleman.

As James shut the door behind him, I moved to the head of the group and motioned toward the various offices and dressing rooms downstairs. Sean seemed to be soaking up all of his surroundings and occasionally snapped pictures with his phone. I was thankful to have at least one enthusiastic person on our "tour" - Mr. Poole just looked irritated and James looked like he was having some sort of internal battle as his attention shifted between me and Mr. Poole.

"If you follow me upstairs, I can show you the side stage and the dressing area for our primary cast along with the stage itself. You haven't experienced Broadway until you've stood on one of its stages," I said with a slight chuckle.

Sean laughed as he ascended the stairs behind me. "I can't thank you enough for taking me back here," he said. "I have three daughters at home and they love this show. They were really jealous when I told them they couldn't join me tonight and were on the verge of disowning me out of jealousy when James told us that he knew someone who worked at the theater. I'm glad that my daughters are living vicariously through my 'exciting' life for once," he explained with a laugh.

"It's my pleasure really," I replied.

"Speaking of James here, how exactly *did* you meet?" asked Mr. Poole. It was the first sentence the man had formulated in my presence and I was slightly taken aback.

"Well, he and I..."

"Kurt and I met at a coffee shop," James interjected quickly. "Our orders got switched and soon we got to talking and became quick friends. Besides, when does it hurt to know a guy in the theater in New York City?"

Mr. Poole nodded and looked around to admire the sets that had been pushed to the side stage as I shot James a glare that could have frozen over a volcano. So this guy was acting weird at Cosi - like he didn't know me - and now he was lying to his boss about how he knew me. Something was seriously wrong with this guy and I just wanted to get this tour over with so he and his guests could be gone.

James looked at me with apologetic eyes, but I couldn't even look at him for more than a few seconds without rage boiling deep inside of me. A fake smile graced my face as I continued to show them around the theater, still not making eye contact with James who was trying to get my attention through light touches and his proximity to me. I was afraid that if I looked at him or acknowledged his presence that I would fly off the handle and throw a bitch fit. As much as I wanted to scream at him, ask him a billion questions about his peculiar behavior, and bitch him out out of spite for whatever he had going on in his mind, I knew it would not end well if we were in front of his boss and one of his clients. I at least had the professional courtesy to know if I was going to chew out the guy I went on a date with, I would at least wait until they had left.

Thankfully there wasn't much to see after that point - a few of the cast members were still lingering around and I introduced them quickly before they left the theater to head home. I closed out the tour by taking them back through the costume and makeup area before scooting them out the side stage door.

"I know I've said it a few times, but thanks again Mr. Hummel," Sean said as he shook my hand fervently.

"As I said before, it's not a problem. But please call me Kurt," I replied. "And if you and your daughters are ever back here to see the show, just talk to Jason here and he'll be sure to get me so I can give you another tour."

"Oh wow! Thanks Kurt! Harvey, why don't you and I get a cab, I'm sure James would like to spend some time with his friend," Sean said.

"Yes," Mr. Poole said. "Farewell Kurt," he grunted as he breezed past me.

James turned to me and the smile that had been plastered on my face dropped immediately. "I - uh - am going to see them off and I'll be right back, okay?" he asked, looking slightly afraid.

"You better," I snorted.

The panic set into his eyes as he quickly jetted over to the cab and shook hands with Sean and Mr. Poole before closing the cab door behind him and slowly walking back toward me.

"James, what the hell-" I started before James cut me off my grabbing my arm. I yanked my arm back and crossed them over my chest.

"Kurt, don't. You don't understand," he said, sadness dripping from every word.

"What don't I understand, James? Earlier at Cosi you were acting weird and you just *lied* to Mr. Poole about how we met. Why would you lie to him? Better off, why are you lying to me?" I was fuming by this point. James just stood there silently.

"He doesn't know," he stated.

"Doesn't know what?" I asked. I was afraid of the answer, but I'm sure I knew what was going to fall from his lips.

"He doesn't know that we're dating. I couldn't tell him, Kurt."

"I'm not expecting you to tell him that you're dating me - that's irrelevant. And really, we've only been on one date. It's not like we're *together* or anything. I got the impression that he's not really impressed with anyone - much less someone as lowly as me. But I would never say anything to embarrass you. But why did you lie to him? Were you embarrassed of me?" I spewed the questions at him quickly and he struggled through each insinuation before his face flashed from scared to anger.

"No!," he shouted. "Because I'm embarrassed of me!" he exclaimed.

That I was not expecting.

"What do you mean?" I asked, a slight edge still seeping from my words.

James sighed. "Kurt, I've never been in a relationship before. I've never dated a guy before. I've never even kissed a guy before."

"Wait, what? How is that possible?" I asked. Sure I wasn't exactly rolling in ex-boyfriends either, but James was *really* attractive and would certainly be snatched up by any number of gay guys that I knew.

"I've spent most of my life just not dating people because of the fact that I was gay and living in an area where being gay was frowned upon. You know how you mentioned how you struggled with being out when you were in high school? It was worse for me, so I just didn't tell people. Whenever my friends would ask me what girls I was interested in in high school or college, I would just say that I hadn't met The One yet and that I was waiting for the right one before I started dating. My friends thought I was just being a romantic or something, but really it was because I didn't want to tell them I was gay.

"The things that they would say about the gay kids that were in our schools was horrible and I couldn't imagine that happening to me. I was on the football team, I was popular with the cheerleaders, I was raised in a Catholic home. How could I be gay? I don't know how to act around people now - I'm afraid to tell boss and my co-workers about that fact about me because I don't know if they'll still accept me if I'm gay. God, I wish I had a choice in all of this," he said as he looked down at me with tears in his eyes.

"It's not like it was your choice to be gay," I said calmly. As mad as I was, I could only imagine how hard it had been for him growing up. But still, the man was 30 - had he...

"James, who knows that you're gay?" I asked.

His gaze was on the sidewalk again. "A handful of people."

I raised an eyebrow but pushed further. He wasn't telling me something. "Who knows?" He wouldn't answer me - he just stared. "James?"

"Just you," he said so quietly I wasn't sure if I had heard him correctly.

To say I was stunned was an understatement. How could a man who was 30 years old still not have told *anyone* that he was gay other than me? How has he been keeping this secret to himself for so long? How could he be denying part of who he was all this time?

"James..." I started before taking a pause to think through what I was going to say.

"Kurt, I know this is crazy. Yes, you're my first relationship." I practically choked at the word. Whoa there, slow down. I didn't use that term lightly but apparently the closeted gay guy dropped the word like it was nothing. I shook myself out of my stupor before tuning back into what he was saying. "But I really care about you and I really want to try and do something with this," he said, motioning between us. "I'm tired of being scared, I'm tired of running. I just want to be happy."

I smiled lightly before I shook my head. "James, that's so great. I'm so glad you're trying to be happy and that you're wanting to take this really bold step. But honestly, I don't think I can be that person for you," I stated simply.

He looked at me, a bit of despair peeking from behind his green eyes. "Why?" he asked brokenly.

I looped my arm in his and motioned down the street toward a diner at the end of the street. "How about we go get some coffee and I tell you about William."

CHAPTER TEN

Late Wednesday Night, October 17

KURT

The walk to the diner was awkward, mainly because James tried to clutch onto my arm with a death grip. As we approached the door, he opened it for me and I nestled into a seat near the window. James sat across from me and looked dejected at the menu that I placed in front of him.

The waitress came by and poured us both some coffee before turning her attention to one of the back tables. The minute she left, I looked up at James who was still sulking and staring out the window. I took a sip of my coffee, breathed in deep, and started.

"James, I want to start off by saying that I'm really sorry about how all of this turned out. I really enjoyed our date and it's been nice to get to know you, but I can't be with someone who isn't out right now. Not..." I couldn't bring myself to finish the sentence.

He turned his attention back to me and I could practically see the thoughts and questions he had for me behind his eyes. "I still don't understand. You said something about William. Who is that?"

I sighed. This was going to be a long night.

"When I came out when I was 15, I resigned myself to be single for a long time. Ohio wasn't exactly bursting with gay men, so I figured I wouldn't find a guy until I was in college. When I first moved to New York and started going to Parsons, I met William - a guy who went to school with my roommate Wes. He was an international business major and had a lot of classes with Wes, so he was around our apartment a lot. After a few weeks, we ended up hanging out with just the two of us before William asked me on a date. I was pretty surprised that he asked me out since I had no idea that he was gay - despite me thinking that I had the best gaydar in New York City - but I accepted because I really enjoyed spending time with him and we had become close. We really hit it off romantically and we became exclusive after a month or so. It felt like things were finally falling together for me; I was living in New York City, I had a smart, attractive boyfriend, and I was working toward a degree in something I loved.

"A few months after we were together, William and I decided to spend summer in New York - him at an internship with Time Warner and me taking summer classes to continue to hone my design skills. Since

Wes would be gone, we decided that he could sublet Wes' room while he was out and it would give us even more time to spend together. At first he stayed in Wes' room, but after a few weeks our relationship... progressed... and we ended up staying in my room together night after night. It was really nice - I would come home and we'd get dinner ready, talk about our days, mess around sometimes, then we'd wake up together the next morning. It felt very domestic and I was in heaven.

"Around July 4th, William told me his parents were coming in town from Colorado. By this point, we'd been together for about 7 months and we were at the stage where meeting the parents seemed like a natural step. I was thrilled to meet his parents since he really valued their opinion in everything in his life, so I wanted to be sure that they'd like me too."

I had to stop the story to fight back the tears that were bubbling up. I hated this part of the story.

"But the day before his parents came to visit, he started to act really strange. The clothes that he placed in my closet were moved into Wes' room and he even moved his toiletries and other products into our second bathroom - like he was trying to really give off the impression that we were roommates rather than together like... that. When his parents arrived, things only continued to get weirder. Despite cleaning the apartment for what felt like days and moving his stuff around, he didn't invite his parents to the apartment when they first arrived. He would meet his parents at a restaurant or some tourist attraction and I wouldn't see him again until very late in the evening. When he came home, he looked exhausted and would go crawling into Wes' bed each night and would be gone before I woke up most mornings. After the fourth night of him being gone for hours on end, I asked him why he hadn't invited his parents to see where he was staying and he shrugged and said it never came up.

"One day, probably the sixth day into his parents' trip, I woke up and went out to make myself breakfast and found William's parents sitting on the couch. I quickly introduced myself to them and told them how much I heard about them, but they said they had never heard of a Kurt being friends with their son. I remember dropping the coffee cup that I was holding onto the ground and the coffee splattered everywhere and his mom started muttering something about her white linen pants being ruined, but I didn't care. The guy I was dating, having sex with - hell, falling in love with - hadn't even told his parents who I was."

The tears I held back were now trickling down my face. James sat silent, face contorted in a mixture of confusion and sadness.

"I don't remember much of their time in the apartment after that. I remember William coming in from somewhere once he heard the coffee cup drop; trying to salvage the situation and helping his mother, but I could barely see anything through the tears and my mind just couldn't comprehend anything else. I've never felt like less of a human being than in that moment. I had introduced him to my family, we had started talking about having a future together - but the two people he valued most in life didn't know I existed. With his parents admitting that they didn't know who I was, it was like he was trying to deny my existence. And you lying to your boss about how you met me just brought that feeling up again. I'm not saying that you're him, James, but I can't go down that path again. I can't have you denying who I am to your business partner. I can't do it," I said, tears free falling from my eyes.

After a few moments of silence, I heard him clear his throat. "I understand. And I really am sorry, Kurt. It's just all so new to me and I don't know how to handle it - being out, being gay, telling people. I can't force you to feel like you should give me a chance - and I really wish you would - but I see why you can't." I heard his voice hesitate before he tentatively asked, "if you don't mind me asking, what happened after his parents left?"

I hiccuped as I tried to regain my breath. "He came back at some point during the night because I could hear him shuffling around, but I stayed locked in my room. He tried to come and talk to me but I wouldn't open the door - at least not that night. The next day, I decided I wanted to understand why he'd done what he did. He explained that he wasn't out to his family and that he hadn't come out to anyone until he moved to New York. He said something along the lines that New York was his 'gay haven' since he could be who he really was here. But the moment his 'real life' was involved, it was like he resorted back to this 'straight' version of himself - and he described himself as that; 'straight William.'

"It wasn't the fact that he wasn't out that was the problem to me, it was the fact that he was lying about who he was and, by default, he would have to lie about the fact that I was his boyfriend. I wanted to be able to be open about my boyfriend and if I was with him, that wasn't going to happen. I told him that since he had already moved his belongings into Wes' room that he may as well take the next step and move them out of the apartment altogether and find somewhere else to spend the rest of the summer.

"I spent the next couple of days with my friend Rachel, who was living here at the time, to give him time to get his stuff out. I told him to be sure to take all the photos of us when he left as well. I went back to my apartment after 4 days and it was as if he was never there. I spent the rest of my summer just taking more classes and spending time with my friend Rachel and her friends at NYADA. Once Wes came back from

vacation, he found out on the first day of classes that William had transferred to another college out of state and that was that; a clean break."

I dried the last of my tears as I clutched my coffee cup and took a big sip.

James reached across the table and lightly touched the hand that I had on the table. "Thank you for telling me," he said. "I know it must have been hard to deal with a relationship like that. The fact that you didn't totally bitch me out for being... well, me... means that you're a saint." I laughed. "And I truly do wish we could keep dating, but I don't think you want that."

I shook my head, indicating that I didn't.

He sighed. "And that's okay." James squeezed my hand for a moment before bringing it back to his side of the table. "But, do you think we can still go shopping some time?" he asked, small smile on his face.

I grinned for the first time that night. "Of course - as friends." He nodded, acknowledging that he knew that would be the case. "But let me warn you," I continued, "you have no idea what you've just signed up for."

BLAINE

I sat on the couch, eyes intent on Conan on the TV in front of me, still feeling discontent after my dinner of leftover Pad Thai and part of a tub of cookies and cream ice cream. As soon as the stand-up comedian came on the show, I clicked the TV off and groaned as I stared at my reflection in the TV. What I saw was a man with hair going in every direction thanks to laying on the couch's arm, tie loosened at the neck and buttons half undone, clutching a pillow to my chest, surrounded by empty take-out boxes and a pint of ice cream. This was not exactly how I pictured spending the night after getting such great news from Clark. Rather than being excited and celebrating with my friends, I was sitting on my couch wallowing in the fact that I wanted to share my good news but felt like it was going to fall on deaf ears. Not that my family and friends wouldn't be supportive, it just wasn't the same.

God, I was lonely. But was there really anything I could...

My eyes flickered to my laptop that I left sitting on the coffee table in front of me. Oh, right. NYC Date. I had forgotten about it with all of the hubbub around the signing and, well, life.

I doubt Santana would be mad at me if I finalized my profile early, I thought to myself as I opened up the laptop and logged into the website.

As I hit enter, my phone started ringing from the other room. I jumped off the couch and ran past the divider in my studio apartment into the bedroom area and looked at the screen before answering.

"Hello Cooper," I said with a grin.

"Hey little brother! How's it shakin'?"

I laughed. Cooper had the weirdest catch phrases. "Not too bad, I guess."

He scoffed. "Well something clearly had to happen if you texted me to call you ASAP when I was off work. Is everything okay?"

"Of course everything is okay. If it was an emergency, I would have just called you. Or your publicist. Or... well, I would have gotten a hold of you somehow if it was really that important."

He paused. "Okay... so... what do you have to tell me? Oh my god, do you have a boyfriend?"

"Cooper why do you assume that I would have a boyfriend? Why is that the first thing that you'd think I'd have to tell you?" I chuckled. My brother was slightly ridiculous when it came to my love life. I think it was because he felt guilty for not being there when I was a teenager, leaving me to talk to mom or some friends from Dalton about the guys I had crushes on. I think he was trying to make up for lost time, which in Cooper World meant practically suffocating me with questions about the guys I was into, sending me emails of hot guys that he'd met in LA, and offering to set me up on blind dates all the time. It was sweet, but too much sometimes.

"A guy can hope, I guess. Okay, B. So dish."

"Well, I got some great news at work today and I felt like I was going to burst if I didn't talk to someone about it!"

He laughed. "Well I'm honored that you chose me. So what's the big news?"

"Well, did I ever tell you about the band Atticus Finch?" He was silent, so I assumed I hadn't. Geez, I don't talk to my brother enough. "Okay, so Atticus Finch is this band from here that plays a kind of indie rock multi-instrumental fusion, I guess. They're hard to explain. Anyway, I found them at a gig in Brooklyn and told Clark about them and I guess I sold them up enough because Clark green-lit them recording an album with Rialto."

"B! That's amazing!"

"Well that's not even the best part. He called me into his office today after work and was talking about how I do great work at the label and how he wants me to go to Atlanta this weekend to meet with a record producer for Atticus Finch. He wants me to meet THE Jeremy Reed, Coop."

"Uh, who's that?"

"Dear Jesus, how are we related if you don't know who that is? Okay, Jeremy Reed is the number one record producer of indie bands in the country. He's worked with a ton of indie artists for decades and he's basically my music icon," I rattled off to him.

"I thought your icon was that chick that sang 'I Kissed a Girl'?" he asked.

"Get a grip, Coop. That was so high school. And besides, even in high school it's not like I was obsessed with her. You know I listened to anything and everything - she just happened to be on rotation a lot because she was on the radio like all the time."

"Okay, okay - I surrender. Geez B. No need to get upset. Okay, so this Jeremy Reed is a big deal and you'd have to go to Atlanta to work with him or something." I could tell Cooper was trying really hard to understand my excitement, but he really wasn't into music like I was. Now, if I had been geeking out about JJ Abrams, he would understand. But Cooper didn't really get the whole music industry.

"Yes. Well, that's not even it," I continued. "Clark said he wants me to go to Atlanta to work with Jeremy Reed - which is awesome - but he said he also wanted to have him play more of a mentoring role with the hopes that with me under his wing, I'll be a producer as well."

"Holy shit Blaine! I mean, I don't exactly know what it means to be a record producer, but I know you've been talking about that since you were in high school."

"Exactly. It could really change things for me, ya know? It's thrilling and exciting and terrifying all at once."

Cooper laughed. "The best things in life usually are all of those things - at least at first."

I sat in thought for a moment. "Yeah."

I heard Cooper's voice hesitate on the other end. "Blaine, what's going on? I mean, you sound thrilled at this whole producing thing, but... normally you'd be acting like a crazy person with good news like this. But, you just - I don't know - don't seem like your all is in the moment. Are you worried about how this will all shake out?"

I sighed. "No, that's not it. It's just..." I paused, trying to figure out how to articulate what I was thinking. "I was so excited when Clark told me about meeting Jeremy Reed and the possibility of becoming a record producer with Rialto, but I felt like I didn't have someone to talk to about it."

"Blaine, you know you can always talk to me. And mom and dad will be so thrilled to hear about it when they come back. And I know you have tons of friends that-

"That's not what I mean, Cooper. I wish I had **that** person; the one person I could share my everything with. A guy that will be proud of me for this, who'd cook a celebratory dinner for the occasion and who I'd have by my side at all of the events surrounding this signing." I stopped again to push back some tears that were threatening to expose themselves. "I'm just so lonely, Coop."

"I can only imagine, Blaine. You're such a loving and kind-hearted guy - you're the kind of person who loves to be in love."

"That makes me seem like I'm just fawning after guy over guy and throwing around 'I love yous' with reckless abandon," I said, slight hurt in my voice.

"That's not what I mean. You just have so much of yourself to give, you want to share it with someone else. So far, you've done that with mom and dad and me and it's been fantastic. Knowing that I have you in my back pocket as my support system has really gotten me through some rough stuff. You are such an awesome guy and I'm so lucky to have you in my life. I really lucked out genetically - and I don't just mean with my killer good looks," he added with a laugh. "But now it's time for you to share that with someone that you choose to make your family - someone that you'll fall in love with. And Blaine, you've always been a bit of a romantic. Sure, you're afraid of saying the wrong thing a lot and you over-think things way too

much, but you are a romantic guy and you haven't been with someone in a while. It's only natural that you're itching to get back in the game. You're ready to share your love with someone."

"You're right. I mean, I do want to get back in the game. And I guess I am a romantic." I sighed. "Do you think it'll happen for me, Cooper?"

"Do I think what will happen, bud?"

"I don't know - love, romance, that guy that I've been dreaming of having in my life?"

"I don't know for sure, but I certainly think it will. But if anyone deserves to have that in their life, it's you."

I beamed. Cooper could really be a smothering, self-centered jerk sometimes, but he really knew how to be a great brother. "Thanks, Cooper." I started laughing as I dried the tears that had fallen down my face. "Well, today has certainly been quite the day; from signing a record deal, to hearing about a potential promotion, to practically having an emotional breakdown with my brother... who knows what tomorrow will hold!"

Cooper laughed as well. "You certainly have had quite the day, little brother. But I'm glad to have been included in your whirlwind agenda. Now... have I told you about the really hot guy who's playing my character's co-worker? I think he'd be perfect for you."

I groaned. "Cooper, how to you always go from kind and loving to a complete tool in under five seconds?"

"It's a gift, B."

I laughed. "Alright, so who is this guy?" I asked. As Cooper began to ramble on with another daft attempt to set me up with yet another one of his co-workers (who lived thousands of miles away, I might add) I shut the lid on my laptop, ignoring the website I'd left open on my laptop... for now.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Thursday Night, October 18

BLAINE

As much as I loved talking to my brother, he certainly could be exhausting. The long conversation with Cooper - which ended up lasting until 1am - coupled with a long day at the office wore me out. I spent most of the day working out my trip to Atlanta as well as wrapping up a few things with David and Santana to prepare for Atticus Finch's PR push that would happen tomorrow. There were a lot of details to handle in such a short amount of time that my brain could hardly wrap itself around the amount of stuff I was going to manage over the next few days and weeks.

Thankfully, tonight was going to end with a show at my favorite scouting venue with my newly-discovered band, no less. The only bad thing was that this gig was happening on a Thursday night, which meant no one could get too out of control without the possibility of a killer hangover the next morning. I never was a huge drinker myself - had one too many bad experiences with it in high school - so I wasn't too worried that I'd get out of control. But with Santana there, who knows what could happen. She was a woman who liked to party and I'm sure tonight would be no exception.

It was soon 6:00, which meant it was quitting time - and time to head out to Brooklyn for the night's adventures to begin. Santana asked David to meet us at Rialto so we could go over together since the 40 minute subway ride would be more entertaining than riding solo. Santana also had Brittany come along for the night's festivities. Brittany had made an... interesting... impression with David and Wes the night she met us for drinks in the Meatpacking District. When she arrived, she kept talking with Santana about this doll that she met at the diner with her friend Lauren who made people "look pretty all the time." I was used to Brittany's musings though I had no idea who (or what) she was referring to, but Wes and David were taken aback by her seemingly clueless demeanor but genuinely enjoyed her company and enjoyed her one-liners even more.

Santana and I emerged from our company's headquarters to find David and Brittany chatting away outside, bundled up and geared up for our voyage out to Brooklyn. Santana greeted her girlfriend with a kiss before latching onto her hand. "You boys ready for this?" she asked with a slightly devious tone.

David shrugged and I nodded in the affirmative as we made our way toward the Times Square subway station. Most New Yorkers hate being anywhere near Times Square; it's a horror to navigate with tourists

stopping every 5 feet to take pictures of the hundred of billboards and littered with street performers and people handing out flyers to board tourist buses or to go to some sale for cheap electronics. Not to mention all the taxis that barrel through the awkward intersection - it's enough to incite an eternal migraine.

But even after all of these years, I was still in awe of the bright lights of Times Square. I remember the first weekend I went to Times Square with a group of my fellow freshman my first week at Marymount. We all sat on the steps in front of The Olive Garden on that September night and watched all the commotion and hustle and bustle of Times Square for what felt like hours. I don't think I even talked to anyone as we sat there; I was taken away to a special place of wonder since I finally could see the place I had dreamed of being in for so long before my very eyes. It was like a dream come true. Back then, my eyes had scanned each billboard and light display - committing it to memory. The billboards had changed in the nearly nine years since I had first moved here, I still had a smile on my face as I perused the various billboards hocking beauty products or the vast amount of Broadway shows that were currently open. I hadn't seen a Broadway show in some time and I was beyond overdue; I had only seen one or two of the new productions. Clearly that would have to change soon.

We finally reached the subway and descended the stairs to leave the hurried subway station overhead to the quieter depths below. We were only at the station for a few minutes before the Q pulled into the station. Brittany pulled Santana aboard and settled into a seat by the window, David and I sitting in the seats perpendicular to then.

"I can't believe this is happening, man," David said quietly. "I know we signed yesterday and all that, but I don't think it'll truly be real for me until tomorrow. Seeing my name as their band management along with the articles that Santana is working on will be like the fruition of seeing my dreams come true." His smile cracked through as he shifted his gaze from the floor back to me.

"I certainly hope you plan on sending a copy of the article to your parents," I said with a smile and placed my hand on his shoulder, shaking it lightly. "I know the feeling."

He laughed. "I'm pretty sure they've already picked the frame out that they'll put it in once they get it in the mail." David's family still lived in Ohio like mine, so the likelihood of them seeing his band's article in the local paper was slim to none. But Santana had already secured a few dozen copies of the papers that the articles would appear in for keepsakes for the band, so I knew he'd have plenty of copies to distribute

to show off his work. "But haven't you already been around this whole deal-signing thing before? I doubt it's old news to your parents by now," he said.

"They have already experienced my excitement with my first signing a while back, but if this goes well, it could lead to so much more. And not just for you, my friend."

"What do you mean?" David asked, eyebrow cocked.

I quieted my voice a bit before continuing. "Well, the day that you guys signed, Clark asked me to come into his office and told me he's sending me to Atlanta this weekend to work with Jeremy Reed."

"No way!" he practically shouted; his outburst claiming the attention of Brittany and Santana who were whispering and laughing with each other before David cut the silence with his proclamation.

"No way what?" Santana asked.

I sighed. "Well, I got some news from Clark yesterday once we finished wrapping up those documents for legal. He said he's sending me to Atlanta to introduce myself to Jeremy Reed this weekend."

Santana's eyebrows practically reached her hairline. "Wow, B. That's... huge." I couldn't quite tell if she was happy, jealous or angry.

"It is. And I'm sorry for not telling you guys earlier. I knew you," I said, motioning to David, "Were still on your celebratory path after signing your band and you," now motioning to Santana, "Had already left for the day and I didn't want to bother you. I wasn't sure if you'd be... upset or something." I couldn't quite meet her eyes since her face so rarely depicted her true feelings.

"Blaine, you totally could have called me about this. I'm glad you're getting this chance - you deserve it. You're great at your job. And I'm not just saying that because you bought me coffee the other day," Santana said. "I am, however, mad that you didn't tell me sooner! Jerk."

I rolled my eyes. "San, I just didn't want to seem like I was rubbing it in your face. Not that I would... well, you know what I mean."

She shook her head, signaling that she didn't mind at all. "I totally get it. But I would have been so excited to share that good news with you. I'm not as huge into music as you are but even I know what a big deal it is to work with Jeremy Reed."

I laughed. "And that's not even the best part of it." I looked over to David whose eyes were practically bulging from their sockets, unsure of how the news could possibly get sweeter than working with the best record producer in the industry. "Clark said that he doesn't just want me to work with Jeremy Reed for this album; he wants to make him my mentor. To help me become a producer at the label."

Santana squealed and Brittany clapped happily. I was certain that Brittany was clapping because Santana got excited and had no idea what I was talking about, but I took it as a compliment anyway. "Blaine! That's spectacular!"

David was beaming too. "Yeah man, that's amazing. I'm guessing this is where you want to move career-wise, right?"

I nodded. "Absolutely. Artist development has been great to help me see what's valuable in a band and its makeup, but I really want to apply that knowledge in the recording booth and see my product happen in album form."

"It's going to happen," Santana said. "I know it will."

"Thanks Santana," I said. I started laughing when I saw the trio still gaping at my news; jaws open, smiles plastered on their faces. "No need to get so emotional, guys."

Santana took the opportunity to reach over David and hit me on the arm. "Ow!" I exclaimed.

"That's what you get. Let us be happy for you, B. That's what friends are for," she stated.

The rest of the train ride was spent in more chatter - talking about my upcoming trip to Atlanta, promising David that we could try to make him BFF with Jeremy Reed too, Brittany asking if I could bring her back a peach from Georgia. The chatter made the ride go even faster and knowing I had my friends' support made the night even sweeter - a drastic contrast from my pity party the night before.

The night couldn't get any better.

...

"Rialto's taking care of the first round of drinks!" Santana proclaimed as she slapped her corporate card onto the bar counter. Unfortunately Lauren wasn't working tonight, but the girl behind the bar seemed competent enough to manage the ridiculousness that would be this party. We quickly put in our orders - me sticking with a Newcastle - before Santana, David and I joined Atticus Finch backstage.

"You boys ready?" Santana asked as she sashayed into the green room. The guys all rolled their eyes and chuckled as Santana entered the room. Her first introduction with Atticus Finch that Wednesday had been entertaining since their bassist, a gangly guy named Joel, tried to hit on her for hours before Santana set the record "straight." From there, the guys had eased into her presence and were now comfortable with her in-your-face persona.

"Ready as we'll ever be!" David's brother, Phil, stated.

"Great," I interjected. "David is going to stay back here with you guys tonight since I'm sure he's seen your show enough." He rolled his eyes as I continued. "Santana will also stay back here and work with the photographer to make sure we're getting the shots we need for the press launch tomorrow. She'll also coordinate group photos and individual shots with this time we have before the show. Basically, just do what she wants."

"You heard him, boys. Anything I want," she said with a devious grin.

They all groaned and I laughed. "Take it easy, Santana. They're still newbies."

She rolled her eyes. "Fine," she acquiesced.

"I'll be out front enjoying the show. But have a great show, guys. And get ready for the ride," I said with a grin before heading out of the green room. As I closed the door, I could hear Santana as she barked orders at the band members. *They were in for a long night*, I thought to myself.

I took a moment to look at my watch. Time had flown by and it was already 9:30 and the show was slated to start at 10. I ordered myself another beer - thankful that Santana had left the company tab open so I wouldn't have to dip into my cash for another beer, and tucked into the back corner and watched people start to trickle into the venue.

By the time it was 9:55, the place was getting pretty packed and I fought my way back to the bar for my third and final beer. I noticed Brittany had made some friends with people near the front of the crowd - she always managed to make friends wherever she went - so I left her in peace as I approached the bar.

"Blaine, it's good to see you," a voice bellowed from a few feet down the bar. I looked to my left and saw Lauren leaning over the counter as the bartender poured her drink.

"Hey!" I exclaimed and shuffled my way down to her. "What brings you here? I'm guessing you had the night off tonight, otherwise I'd expect to see you behind the bar rather than in front of it."

She laughed. "Yeah, my last day at the bar was actually yesterday. I can't remember if I told you, but I'm working make-up for a show on Broadway now, so I don't need this side hustle anymore. But it's actually why I'm here. One of my co-workers had a rough night last night and I brought him here to try and take his mind off things. Since he couldn't ever get out here while I still worked here, I figured I could still bring him by. And I knew this band was back and since they weren't as horrible as that yodeling group, I figured it'd be as good a night as any to come by."

I nodded. "Yeah, they're pretty good - good enough to get signed with Rialto."

She squealed. "That's great Blaine! I know you had a big part in that."

"I did indeed," I stated. I looked to her left and saw no one with her. "Where's your friend?" I asked.

"Oh, he went to the restroom. Wanted to wash his hands after the subway ride I guess."

"Is he *just* a friend?" I asked suggestively. Lauren and I never talked about our dating lives since we weren't the best of friends, but I figured since I was a little buzzed and he wasn't around, it couldn't hurt to ask.

She scoffed. "Hardly. He's gay. Oh, and here he is," she said, motioning to the man emerging from the bathroom.

Oh my god, I thought to myself. It's him.

The night just got infinitely better.

KURT

"Kurt, this is my friend Blaine," Lauren said as I approached the bar. Lauren was obviously introducing me to this guy to her left, but from 30 feet away, I could barely get a decent look at the guy. As I got closer, I realized the guy looked familiar. It was the man from Cosi and he was just standing there gaping at me. *Ohmygod, ohmygod, ohmygod, keep it together*, I thought to myself. Thoughts of him hugging me and hoping that he smelled as good as I imagined drifted into my mind before I shoved it to the recesses of my brain. *Chill Hummel, you don't even know if this guy is gay.*

I tried to keep it together as I held out my hand to shake his. "Nice to meet you," I said pleasantly. I looked at him expectantly but also managed to get a better look at his attire. I couldn't help it - clothes were my life after all. He was wearing something similar to what I had seen him in at Cosi - this time a navy suit with a blue gingham undershirt and a red tie. Very classic but not too conservative. I definitely appreciated it, probably too much if I was being honest.

He looked stunned for a second before extending his hand into mine. "Uh, I'm Blaine."

I laughed. "She said that already."

"Oh right," he said with a chuckle. I couldn't tell if he recognized me from Cosi, but I didn't want to seem like I recognized him either. How weird could it have been if I admitted I had been gawking at him at the restaurant? Then again, he had looked at me at the restaurant as well, but why? Maybe I looked familiar or something. Or maybe I had something on my face that day. Or maybe... I was jolted from my thoughts as I heard Blaine's voice over the crowd. "How do you know Lauren?" he asked.

"It's a funny story, actually. Lauren and I went to high school together but I hadn't heard from her in years. We reconnected recently at the show that we work for," I replied.

"That's awesome," he said. "Lauren has been my buddy when I'm here working-"

Blaine was interrupted by the lights dimming and the crowd beginning to scream. He smiled apologetically when he realized he wouldn't be heard over the crowd before turning his attention to the band. Now that his attention was otherwise occupied, I peered at him cautiously as I turned to the bar to try and order a drink - him facing the stage with me looking in the opposite direction. Well, sort of the opposite direction - I still wanted to get a better look at this guy.

As the band started up a slow smile crept onto his face and now that I was up close, his smile looked about a hundred times better than it had that day at the restaurant. His eyes crinkled at the corners and his eyebrows relaxed. Once the beat of the drums kicked up, Blaine bopped his head up and down, the slight movement shaking his wavy hair ever so slightly. The minute the lead singers vocals took over, he closed his eyes and I gawked at his long eyelashes as they cascaded on his face. Most of the girls that Lauren worked on in make-up were probably jealous of this guy's lashes. A moment later, his eyes clapped open and he looked over toward me and his smile only grew bigger.

Damn. Just, damn. Those eyes, that smile... swoon.

When Lauren said she wanted to take my mind off things with James, I wasn't sure what she meant. I was worried she was going drag me to some horrifyingly tacky gay club, but she said she wanted to go somewhere more low-key and where the drinks would be free. I wasn't about to turn down free drinks after the past 24 hours. I wasn't sure if tonight would be a total blast, but little did I know I was going to run into that guy from Cosi. The odds of me running into him twice in a week were slim to none. And running into the gorgeous stranger - whose name I now knew to be Blaine - just made my night.

And I welcomed the - I mean, Blaine - as a distraction and he was definitely keeping my mind off James. I wasn't trying to forget him per se, we still planned on being friends, but the last 24 hours were so stressful I needed to not think if I could help it. Last night ended with James and I trying to start a friendship through hours of conversation; talking about nothing and everything all at once. The more we talked, the more I realized how great of a guy he was, but I still didn't think I was ready to be with someone who was struggling in where he was with his openness in his sexuality. The conversation came to a close at 3am, much to James' chagrin since he had to work the next morning at 8, and we parted saying goodbye with promises to go shopping soon since the holidays were around the corner and the sales were bound to reap us both some great bargains.

I awoke this morning... well, afternoon at around 2... to about 20 texts from Wes asking about last night. He wrongfully assumed I had "gotten some" since I was out so late, so I sent Wes a quick text saying that I'd explain later, but his mind was clearly in the gutter. Again. He said the story would have to wait until Friday since he was doing some bar review something-or-other, so he wouldn't be up when I got home tonight.

When I got to the theater for work around 5, I dished the whole thing to Lauren who had run out of the theater before James and his guests had come through the night before. I didn't tell Lauren about the

weirdness at Cosi and merely told her about how he acted in the theater along with our conversation at the diner afterward - leaving out the long-winded story about William since she already knew the Cliffs Notes version of what happened with my ex. She was shocked at James' actions and agreed that I had made the right choice, but said I should still go out tonight since I "looked like I needed to let loose." I wanted to take it to mean that I looked like I could use a good time, but I'm pretty sure it was code for "you look like hell." So, here we were. At The Bell House, watching some band, putting back drinks, and me standing next to a total dreamboat and totally forgetting about what's-his-face-who-was-becoming-my-friend.

When the band's first song ended, Blaine turned toward me with that killer smile on his face. "So, Kurt was it? What do you think-" he started before he was interrupted by a tall blonde girl came and grabbed his hand. This blonde girl looked really familiar...

"Brittany?" I asked.

She looked at me before the recognition clicked behind her blue eyes. "Kurt! Hey! Do you mind if I take him from you for a moment?"

I shrugged. "You don't have to ask my permission. We were merely standing in nearish proximity."

She smiled. "Thanks!" she exclaimed before ushering Blaine to the front of the crowd. I turned to fully face the stage as Lauren saddled up beside me. Brittany pulled Blaine along to the front of the stage and Blaine shot back a smile in our direction before turning his attention back to the blonde who was eager to dance with him. The band was still setting up for the next song, so it was quiet enough to talk to Lauren for a moment.

"What's his story?" I asked.

Lauren shrugged. "I don't know too much about him, but he was one of my regulars. I know he's from Ohio, he's in the music industry - he signs bands for a big record label - but that's about it. We never really had any in depth conversations. Most of the time, he was here on business."

I nodded in understanding then gestured toward Brittany. "Is he with her?"

She shrugged again. "I'm not sure. I may have been friendly with Brittany while she was on the show, and she said she was dating someone. But in the time that I knew her - which was maybe 3 months - she never

brought anyone around or mentioned names. And you've heard her talk - I don't know if I would have followed anyway."

The music started back up again so the rest of the questions I had buzzing through my head would have to wait. Damn, I thought to myself. I wish I had gotten a look at the person whose arm was wrapped Blaine at the restaurant. If it was Brittany, it meant that they were probably dating. If it wasn't, it either meant he was friends with Brittany, dating the girl who was with lunch with him, or - what I hoped to be true - dating none of them and possibly single and... maybe... gay? I mean... a guy can hope. Right?

Why do all the cute ones end up straight or married?, I thought to myself.

As the set continued, I stayed by the bar and asked Sara - the bartender that Lauren was friends with - to keep the Long Island Iced Teas coming. By the time I was on my second drink, I couldn't peel my eyes from watching Blaine and Brittany on the dance floor. I knew Brittany would be a fantastic dancer since, well, she was one. But Blaine surprised me; the guy had moves. At first he did just kind of swayed in place and let his arms move around him, but as the beat picked up he moved with more purpose and you could tell this guy had at least a basic understanding of dance.

When the third drink was safely in my hands, I was two sheets to the wind and Blaine managed to look hotter than ever. I wished it was me draped over his shoulders the way Brittany had her arms wrapped around his neck. I could see them laughing together, sharing some kind of private joke and my jealousy raged from within.

Wait, what? Why am I getting jealous of a guy I just met? I must have had more to drink than I thought. Normally I could compose myself better, but clearly after the emotional rollercoaster that is Kurt Hummel's existence along with the potent alcohol that I downed way to quickly I was kind of a wreck.

About halfway through my fourth drink, I flagged Lauren down who was hanging back with Sara and asked her if we could get out of there. I was enjoying the show... well, I was enjoying the view and the music wasn't bad at all. But watching yet another hot, straight guy dance around in front of me when I so hoped that he was on my team was just too much for me to handle.

She nodded and waved a small goodbye to Sara as we made our way out of the venue. I stumbled outside and pulled my coat tighter, forgetting the chill that was in the air outside after being in the toasty bar for the past hour.

"You okay?" Lauren asked as she guided me toward the middle of the path when my shuffling on the sidewalk started to drift me toward the street and oncoming traffic.

"Yeah. M'fine," I replied, nearly tripping on my own shoes.

"Alright Hummel, you're crashing at my place tonight. I would shove you into a cab, but I don't think you'd mind sleeping on my couch if it meant saving you a \$45 cab fare," Lauren commanded as we kept walking.

"Thanks Lauren. You're the best," I mumbled.

Lauren laughed. "Thanks Stumbles McGee."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Late Thursday Night, October 18

BLAINE

I could've killed Brittany for pulling me away from Kurt but it's not like I would be able to talk to him while the band was playing anyway. Rather than be upset that Brittany pulled me away from the first guy I've been attracted to in months, I let myself get lost in the music and danced with Brittany for a little while. But before long I started thinking about what I was going to talk to Kurt about once the show was over. There was so much I wanted to know about him; what did he do at the theater? what brought him to New York? what music did he like? what things made him laugh? did he like to be the big spoon or the little spoon?

Okay, well, maybe I shouldn't ask him that last one.

Every once in awhile I would look back at Kurt who kept his place perched at the bar with a drink in hand. I hoped that some guy hadn't bought it for him, but this show didn't exactly scream "lots of gay guys will be here" so I figured I might have been safe. Thankfully he didn't notice me looking at his hands while he was ordering his drink earlier because it would have been really awkward if he saw me scanning for a wedding ring. The search had come up empty - thank god - but then I started imagining how his fingers would feel intertwined with mine, how the pads of his fingers would feel against my face, the way he would grip my...

Mind, meet the gutter.

But all this thinking I was doing made me realize that Cooper might have been right about me being a romantic. Sure, my mind eventually went the sexual route, but before that I was thinking about how I wanted to hold hands with the guy. I mean, how many guys think about that on a regular basis?

My mind must have been too occupied with my thoughts because before long the show was over. If it hadn't been for the cheers of the people around me, I probably wouldn't have emerged from my thoughts at all. As I clapped along with the crowd, I immediately turned back to the bar with an expectant smile - only to have my smile change to a panicked frown as I noticed Kurt was no longer at his place at the bar. Crap. I hoped he hadn't left... and I really hoped he hadn't left on the arm of some guy. I figured Kurt already had a boyfriend since that guy that met him at Cosi seemed pretty cozy with him, but I wanted to

have hope that they were just friends since they hadn't come together to the show tonight. It probably wasn't smart to put my heart out there like that knowing that he probably wasn't available, but I had to remain hopeful. That didn't make me crazy, right?

I remembered how I ended up in the crowd in the first place - not wanting to abandon Brittany at this show where her girlfriend was working - so I turned back to her and saw her engaging in conversation with some guy she'd met. She probably wouldn't notice if I peeked around for awhile and I doubt this guy was going to let me peel her away from him anyway. *If only he knew that she wasn't exactly on his team*, I thought to myself before leaving her with him to try and find Kurt.

I weaved through the crowd and made my way back to the bar. I looked toward the bathrooms and saw no sign of Kurt or Lauren. I turned and checked the other direction toward the back exit; nothing.

"Excuse me," I said, trying to get the attention of the bartender who was closing out a tab at the cash register. She turned around at my call and raised an eyebrow expectantly. "Did you happen to see a girl with glasses, about this tall, and a guy - tall, pale, blue eyes, brown hair, black peacoat-"

"You mean Lauren and her friend?" she asked.

My eyes clapped open and a huge grin graced my face. "Yes! Are they still here?" I practically yelled it at her since I was so relieved that she knew who I was talking about.

She shook her head. "Sorry, they left about 15 minutes ago."

I looked defeated. "Oh. Well, thanks."

She looked at me quizzically. "Is everything okay? You seem upset that she left."

I sighed. "Yeah, you could say that," I murmured. "I just-"

"Hey! Can I close out now?" a guy yelled from down the bar. The man looked at her impatiently while pointing to his watch and she responded with an eye roll and deep sigh.

"I'll be right back," she said before moving down to deal with the man who clearly was far too important to wait like a normal person to close out.

I rocked on the balls of my feet and leaned over the counter, hoping that the bartender would come back sooner rather than later. But apparently tonight was not my night. "Blaine Anderson," I heard Santana bellow from the stage's microphone. "Blaine Anderson, please report to the green room." I turned to see Santana waving me to go backstage and signaled that I'd be just a second. She rolled her eyes before heading backstage again. I tried to get the bartender's attention to tell her I'd be back as soon as I could, but she looked to be arguing with the guy who'd yelled at her before and it didn't look like the conversation was going to end anytime soon.

I jogged toward the stage, climbed up the platform and ducked behind the curtain to enter the green room. The guys were all there, blotting the sweat from their skin and downing water. Their show had gone really well and had tons of energy, so these guys needed a reprieve before they experienced Santana's PR storm I knew she was cooking up.

"Oh, good. Blaine's here," Santana said before turning back to her clipboard. "We got some great action shots before the show and managed to take decent individual pictures of each of you as well, but we need to get some more 'beauty' shots of you guys performing. This way we can get up close and personal now that we won't obstruct the view."

"And why did you need me here?" I asked. "I'm not a part of the band, you don't need photos with me."

"That's where you're wrong," Zach said. "We asked her if she could take some photos of you with us as well. I mean, you're going to be a big part of this band so you should be in some of these as well."

I grinned, touched by the fact that they wanted me in their photos. Sure, I was just a rep from the label, but these guys were trying to incorporate me into their band family; I hadn't felt like this since I was in the Warblers. "I guess I can manage that," I said with a slight blush.

David lightly punched my shoulder. "Yeah, welcome to the crazy," he chuckled.

Santana rolled her eyes and motioned for me to position myself in the middle of the group - sandwiching myself between Zach and Troy, the keyboard player. "Alright, boys," she said as she placed herself next to the photographer. "Let's take a few snapshots with Blaine and then we're moving out to the stage again, okay?"

We all nodded in agreement with smiles plastered on our faces as the photographer snapped away and took at least a dozen pictures before claiming he'd taken the perfect photo and asking the band to go to the next set up. The boys flocked to the stage, leaving David, me and my thoughts. I plopped down on the sofa and sat forward, resting my elbows on my knees as I brought my clasped hands to my mouth as if in a silent, retrospective prayer. Is it crazy that I was thinking about this guy that I had just met... well, officially just met... but couldn't get him out of my mind? I was certainly one to wear his heart on his sleeve, but to think of someone so strongly with such reckless abandon was rare even for me. The fact that I hadn't really felt anything about any guy in a while only proved that whatever initial attraction I felt for Kurt was surprising and had caught me off guard.

I had forgotten that David was in the room before he cleared his throat, causing me to jump as the noise as my thoughts cleared from my head. "Are you okay?" he asked me.

I nodded slowly, eyes still set on the ground just in front of my shoes. "Yeah, I mean, I guess. It's just... something happened that's kind of freaking me out right now and I'm not sure how to place my feelings about it." I could feel David's gaze on me, waiting for me to explain further. I sighed. "There's this guy..."

"I knew it!" he exclaimed.

My eyes shot up and I saw him shaking his fist in the air triumphantly; I couldn't help but chuckle. "How could you have known David? We just talked about my love life - or lack thereof - last week. How could you already assume that it was a guy. It's not like I could've scrounged up a boyfriend in that short of time. I swear, you and Wes act like middle school girls when it comes to the romantic interludes in my life."

David laughed. "Blaine, when it comes to love, you wear your heart on your sleeve. You've had this weird look on your face all night and I knew it wasn't because of the show and it wasn't because of the band; it had to be because of a guy."

"I'm really easy to read, aren't I?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Not really. You were like this in high school - lovey looks in your eyes when you had a new crush and the way that you'd practically skip around Dalton like you were wandering down the yellow brick road if the guy you liked would talk to you. But you forget that even though I haven't seen you in awhile, it's not like you've completely changed in the past few years." He sat up on the armchair across

from me and settled back - resting his hands behind his head. "So, who's the lucky guy to have snagged the attention of Blaine Anderson?"

I stuck my tongue out at him, causing him to laugh, before starting. "I just met the guy today, but his name is Kurt. He was here at the show tonight with this girl that used to bartend here."

David quirked his eyebrow. "That's it? That's all I get?"

"What else do you want me to say, David? Do you want me to tell you how his smile was so shy and sweet that I could barely talk to him when we were first introduced? How his eyes are such a crisp, light blue that they felt like they could see all the way into my soul? How I imagined his long and slender fingers would look between mine? How..." I stopped when I saw David's hand fly up, signaling me to stop.

"Damn, Blaine," David interjected.

I shrugged sheepishly. "Yeah."

"So you have it bad," he concluded.

I nodded. "You could say that."

He grinned. "Yeah, when you start rambling like that, I know it's best to stop you while you're ahead. Not that I don't want to hear about the amazing and wondrous Kurt, I just know you'll probably go on about him for hours and we do have to leave at some point." I laughed as he continued. "So did you get to talk to him?"

I shook my head. "Not really. He and his friend got here right before the show started so I only talked to him for maybe 3 minutes tops. I was planning on talking to him before Brittany..."

Oh my god. Brittany! I had forgotten about Brittany! She knew Kurt - or at least recognized him and he knew her.

"Brittany what?" I heard David ask, effectively pulling me out of my train of thought.

"Brittany! Brittany knows Kurt!" I exclaimed.

"And that's important because..."

"Because, David, he left before I could really talk to him or get to know him or get his number. Brittany might have his number!"

Now it was David's turn to grin. "So go talk to her!" he reasoned.

I bolted from the green room to search for Brittany. Thankfully as soon as I came out from the side stage, I saw Brittany standing in front of the stage, sipping on a water bottle and watching Santana with a smile.

"Brittany, I have to talk to you," I said breathlessly, the sudden movement along with my excitement betraying the normally calm tone of my voice.

"Okay," she said, taking a final sip before capping the water bottle. "What's up?"

I took a deep breath. "Remember that guy that you saw me talking to before we started dancing earlier?"

"Oh, Kurt?"

"Yes! Him. Uh, are you friends with him?"

She nodded. "I'd say so. We decided we were going to be best friends the other night when I saw him at the diner."

I was smiling like an idiot and kissed her on the cheek and as I pulled away she looked at me, puzzled. "What was that for?" she asked.

"Brittany, you have no idea how amazing it is that you're friends with Kurt. Please tell me you have his phone number or know how I can contact him." I looked at her with hope - hoping that for once, things would come out in my favor.

She shook her head. "Sorry, Blaine. I don't. You know I only have Santana's phone number in my phone - Lord Tubbington uses too much of our family plan for me to use any minutes other than to talk to Santana."

My face fell, instantly crushed. It was too good to be true, I knew it had been. Besides, Kurt probably was dating that Ken Doll that I'd seen at the restaurant and he was already way out of my league... all signs were pointing to the fact that he and I just weren't meant to be. I groaned. I just couldn't win.

"I really am sorry, Blaine," Brittany said. Sensing my distress, she gave me a light, lingering hug - holding onto me for a few minutes as I did my best to not droop in despair. "Sorry, I have to go to the bathroom," she said as she pulled away. "Can you please recycle this for me?"

"Sure," I said, taking the empty water bottle from her hand. As she retreated to the bathroom, I found my way to the recycling bin near the bar and pitched the bottle inside.

"Hey," I heard a voice beckon. I looked up to see the bartender collecting her coat and purse from behind the bar now that all of her patrons were checked out. "You were looking for Lauren, right?"

I nodded.

"You seem like a decent guy - not to mention your friend up there left me a really awesome tip," she said motioning to Santana who was barking orders at the photographer, "so I pulled her information from the most recent posted schedule for you. It's a little against the rules, but I don't think you'd tell anyone. You won't, right?"

I shook my head as she handed me a bar napkin with the ten-digits scrawled on it signifying Lauren's phone number. I looked at it with such reverie that I could barely make a coherent sentence come out of my mouth. "I can't.. this is... you don't know... thanks."

She laughed. "You're welcome. She's really cool, so be nice to her."

I looked at her slightly confused. Why wouldn't I be nice to her? "Uh, I will?"

She nodded. "See you around..."

"Blaine," I said, extending my hand to her.

"Sara," she replied.

"Thanks again Sara," I said as she released my hand. She gave me a wink before bundling up in her coat and heading out the exit. I stood there staring at the napkin before David found his way to my side.

"Is that Kurt's number?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Not quite, but it's the next best thing."

"What does that mean? Is it the phone number for the Kurt Fan Club?" David chortled.

I rolled my eyes. "No. It's the number for his friend that he came with tonight."

"So when are you going to talk to... Lauren?" he asked as he read her name from the top of the napkin I held with a death grip in my hand. I looked at my watch - noticing that it was nearly midnight.

"Tomorrow," I said, with a voice full of hope.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Friday, October 19

KURT

I'm never drinking ever again.

Never ever.

Sure, I've been drunk before - this wasn't my first rodeo. But I had never felt this horrible after drinking. And it's not like I was putting a ton of drinks back, but I did make sure that the few drinks I did have really counted.

I groaned as I willed my body to sit up, clutching my head as my eyes blinked open - unwilling to encounter the sun that was pouring through the window. My eyes adjusted to the brightness of the room and I found I was in a spacious living room wrapped in a polka-dot throw on a mint green couch. This certainly wasn't my house...

Oh, right. I'm at Lauren's.

It was a little disorienting to wake up at someone else's house, even though I'd spent months on the road waking up in different places practically every week. Waking up in someone else's house felt so much more personal; like I was invading their space. I took a moment to gather in my surroundings. I remember Lauren said she lived with roommates and based on the living room alone, you could tell. The pieces didn't match; the sofa, armchair and loveseat were each different colors and styles and the posters and paintings on the wall lacked any kind of theme or similarity; a poster for Passion Pit on display next to posters for Reservoir Dogs and van Gogh's Sunflowers. Though things didn't match, the place still felt really homey and comfortable.

I heard a noise coming from the other room, so I rose to my feet, clutched my head, and followed the sound into what turned out to be a kitchen. I found Lauren pouring water into the carafe for the coffee maker before placing it under the drip and starting the machine. She turned around with a gasp and jumped slightly.

"Kurt! You scared the crap out of me!" she exclaimed, holding onto the empty coffee cup she was holding that read "#1 Bitch".

I chuckled as I leaned on the entryway. "Sorry, Zises. That wasn't my intention."

She laughed then looked me up and down. "You look like hell, Hummel," she said, turning back to the sink and placing her coffee cup inside. "Must have been all those Long Islands last night. You were really putting them back."

"Yeah," I said with a shrug. "I told you I had a rough day. I just dealt with it with a little less... grace than I normally would."

"And how would you normally cope with such a thing?" she asked as she turned back toward me, leaning against the counter and crossing her arms in front of her chest.

"Probably ordering take-out from some Thai or Chinese restaurant and watching a movie."

"That's kind of lame, Hummel," she stated. "If it wasn't for me, you'd be having a lame slumber party by yourself in your apartment. And to think I was originally planning on taking you out to a gay club last night." With that note, my eyes bugged out of my head, causing Lauren to laugh at my reaction. "Geez, I didn't think you'd hate the idea that much," she chided. "But I'll remember that for any future 'distractions' we may need to schedule."

I smiled. "Please do," I stated. "Can I get some of that?" I asked, gesturing toward the coffee pot, now filled to the brim.

She nodded and took a coffee cup out of the cabinet behind her, placing the cup in my hand. It read "I hate Mondays" and featured a picture of Garfield passed out in his bed. "And no, it's not mine," she said, sensing my curiosity about this particular cup.

I poured myself some coffee and joined Lauren at the small table in the kitchen. "So, you look like hell," she stated as I took a sip of the coffee. "I can only imagine that you feel equally as bad as you look."

"Yeah, I feel like hell. I'm surprised that I'm even talking at this point. My head is throbbing, my eyes feel like they want to be sewn shut, and I'm pretty sure my liver will shortly be inciting a riot along with my

spleen and upper intestine," I said as I gingerly placed the coffee on the table. "What time is it?" I asked as I looked around the room for a clock.

"It's about 12:30," she declared after inspecting her watch.

I groaned. "I was out for way too long, Lauren. I'm wearing yesterday's clothes, I reek of alcohol, and I have to be at the theater at 3 today to start working on alterations on some of the older costumes. Be thankful that you don't have to be there until 5."

She laughed. "I didn't get drunk like you did, so I'm pretty sure I could manage to make it to the theater with that timetable," she said with a wink. I replied with an over exaggerated eye roll as her phone beeped from the kitchen counter. She swiped her phone off the counter before unlocking it and reading something that prompted a huge grin on her face.

"What is it?" I asked as I took another sip of my coffee.

"It's a text from Sara - the bartender from last night. Apparently that Blaine guy that's been a regular at The Bell House for awhile - who I introduced you to last night - was looking for me after we left last night," she said. "She said that she gave him my phone number and he seemed really excited to have it when she left. Maybe he likes me or something!"

I winced shortly before shifting my face into a (somewhat fake) smile for Lauren's sake. "That's great Lauren," I said, hoping my voice would remain calm and clear despite my disappointment. Seriously; all the cute ones are straight or taken.

"I don't want to think too much about it, but I haven't had someone be interested in me in a long time. And Blaine is super attractive - like incredibly hot."

I nodded in agreement. Hot wasn't even the right word to describe that guy. He was gorgeous - but in reality, he was a freaking Adonis if you asked me. "He is," I concluded.

She cocked her head to the side. "I'm kind of wondering why he didn't ask me out beforehand since he's been coming in for at least a month or two. But who knows, maybe he thought you and I were together and he felt like he needed to pounce." This statement earned a scoff from me - people never assumed that I was straight; I was too well put together and slightly more effeminate than the average man to ever have

anyone believe that I was attracted to women. "Anyway, what'd you think of him when you met him?" she asked.

"Well," I said. "He certainly is really attractive. He's a little on the short side, but if that doesn't matter to you..." She shook her head that it didn't matter, so I continued. "He seemed really nice and really passionate about the band. You said he signs bands or something?" She nodded. "He just really got into the music when he was standing there and he was unashamed when he was dancing like an idiot after a while. And he had the best smile - I could tell after just one look. I'm sure he's beating ladies off with a stick." As soon as I said it, I saw the panic in Lauren's eyes. She was incredibly sure of who she was, but as someone who had recently lost a lot of weight, she still wasn't fully comfortable in her new skin. "But I can see why he'd like you Lauren. You're fun, opinionated, hilarious as hell, and you're gorgeous too. Don't sell yourself short."

She beamed. "Thanks Kurt. I would be more flattered if you were straight, but you have a discerning eye, so I'll take it."

"You just have to promise that if he asks you out that I can help you pick out what to wear on your first date," I said, silently admitting defeat in my head.

"Deal," she said, extending her hand to me in a handshake.

BLAINE

The marathon that was last night was really hitting me hard at work today. I didn't get out of control or anything, but after wrapping up with the band and prying Brittany away from a stray cat that she'd found outside of the venue, I didn't get home until about 3am. Thankfully, I had the foresight to email Clark and tell him that the gig went late and I'd come in after lunch in order to balance out my hours for the week.

I woke up around 10 to the sound of my phone going off. After looking at the display, I saw it was David.

"Hello?" I groaned into the phone.

"Rough night last night?" he joked. I grunted in reply, then David continued. "Well, I'm calling because I wanted to let you know that you're about to be famous Mr. Anderson."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, after talking with Santana this morning - which was hilarious, by the way, because she looks even more tired than I feel. Anyway, Santana and I - and Clark - talked it over this morning and we used the photo of you with the band on all of the press materials announcing the band's signing with the label."

I was confused. That seemed like a weird thing to do. Normally, bands would use a promotional photo of just the band itself in order to familiarize the public with the faces that would soon be displayed on album covers and commercials for the album's release in a few months. "Why'd you do that?"

"We agreed that you had already played an important part of the band's deal so you were already involved. Plus Clark said it would give a face to the label aside from the CEO for the younger audience to associate with Rialto. Basically, it's a win for Rialto and we both wanted to see your pretty face in the news."

I laughed. "You and Santana are certainly anything but unorthodox. But that's cool - I'm really honored that you guys did that. I know it's not normal protocol, but thanks for letting me know."

"I'm getting ready to post the photo on the band's Facebook page. Be ready to be bombarded with friend requests, my friend," he said as I heard him typing on his computer in the background.

"Thankfully that won't happen. I don't have a Facebook page."

"Are you serious?" David asked incredulously. "We live in the 21st Century. You had a Facebook in high school and college... why don't you have it now?"

"I kept getting emails and friend requests from people just looking to get their band signed or they had 'a friend of a friend' who was looking to break into the industry. I was sick of all of the requests, so I deactivated my account," I stated. It wasn't the first time I'd been asked that question so my answer was pretty rehearsed by that point.

"I guess that makes sense," David replied. "But it also makes sense as to why I haven't been able to get ahold of you for years."

"I have a Twitter!" I exclaimed. "I can't be out of the loop on everything social media-wise. Cooper would never allow it."

He chuckled. "I can't imagine Cooper would let you get away with much in the first place. Alright Blaine, I've gotta run and get things posted and ready to go for the boys. But we'll talk next week?"

"Sure thing, D."

"Well have a great day. Oh, and good luck in Atlanta!" he said as he ended the call.

I dropped the phone onto the bed beside me and lay staring at the ceiling for a while. It's amazing how much things had shifted in such a short amount of time for me. I wasn't sure I was ever going to get over that feeling that things were finally starting to come together.

...

The minute I stepped into the office, the whirlwind that was announcing a new artist was in full effect. Santana was busy hounding various press sites for coverage while I spent two hours helping field phone calls from songwriters and producers who we had worked with in the past trying to get in on the job with Atticus Finch. Most of these folks had never heard of the band, but everyone practically jumped at the chance to work with Rialto so it wasn't surprising to hear from so many people in one day.

Thankfully I didn't stick with the madness long since Clark had scheduled a meeting for me at one of the recording studios in lower Manhattan. He said this was an important part of the work that a producer did so I needed to familiarize myself with the process of scouting studios for the future. I couldn't help but be flattered at the way he casually brought up the possibility of me as a producer with Rialto, so my goofy grin was still in place as I made my way down to the studio in question.

By the time I made it back to the office, it was already 5 and most of the office had cleared out for the day. Although we probably all had business to attend to on the West Coast, most of us were practically married to our work email on our company-issued iPhones, so the big bosses knew we were getting work done even if we weren't present at our cube.

I dropped the goody basket that I had received from the recording studio onto my desk and found a bright pink post-it note stuck to my computer screen.

Don't forget about our little deal. -San

Our deal? Making deals with Santana could sometimes be like making a deal with the devil, so what had I agreed to... Oh right. The whole online dating thing.

I had forgotten about the fact that I had signed up. Clearly my memory had been on other things... or other people. Ever since I had officially met Kurt last night, I couldn't stop thinking about him. Well, if I was being honest, I hadn't really stopped thinking about him since I saw him at Cosi. But now that I had a name to match with the face, it was like my thoughts of him were heightened and I was couldn't help but think of him more often. I still hadn't called Lauren since I wasn't sure how to be like, 'Oh, hi, remember me? Yeah, can you give me Kurt's number because he's probably the most perfect looking person I've ever met?' without sounding like a total lunatic.

But a deal was a deal and I needed to activate my profile. I almost had done it the night I talked to Cooper, but it had been tossed to the side and I hadn't opened my laptop since. I generally avoided being on the computer when I was at home since I was on it enough at work.

I sat down and typed in my password to unlock my computer. After logging into the NYCDate website, I clicked on my profile and re-read the information one last time. My responses still felt completely inorganic and forced, but I'm not sure I was ever going to fully be comfortable with them in the first place. I double-checked my picture - I had selected one that Santana had taken of me in Central Park a few weeks ago of me wearing a white Aran sweater and dark wash jeans sitting on the grass mixed among the fall colors - and said a silent prayer as I clicked submit.

I thought about just ending it there and waiting to see who would contact me, but the curiosity swirling in my mind won out. I wanted to know what kinds of guys were signing up for this kind of site. Since it was a site where you had to pay for membership, I hoped that the people on here were of a higher caliber than people that were on a free dating site or - god forbid - Craig's List.

I clicked over to the homepage and found that there were dozens of photos of guys and girls who were members of the site. Well, having all of these girls mixed in here certainly won't work. I glanced to the top of the page and found the search bar. I selected 'guys who like guys' from the drop down menu and sorted the search results by compatibility percentage, then clicked OK.

Whoa. The search results turned up a few hundred thousand results. There are that many gay guys on this site? There are that many gay guys in New York City? Well, that second note didn't really surprise me. But

knowing there were that many guys - eligible guys - on this site gave me a glimmer of hope that maybe this could work out.

I scrolled through the first few people on the list and stopped dead. My face shifted quickly from one of sheer boredom to one of ecstatic joy.

No. Freaking. Way.

There, right in front of my face - with a 99% compatibility match no less - was Kurt. KURT! The fact that I had Lauren's number at my disposal now seemed irrelevant; now I had a direct way to talk to him.

I eagerly clicked on his picture - a really good one of him wearing a black v-neck t-shirt and smiling at the camera with his hair slightly spiked, blue eyes glinting - and his profile populated on the page. Reading details about him felt a little like I was invading his privacy and learning his secrets (since I didn't know anything about him aside from his name and that he was friends with Lauren), but I couldn't help but read more about the man who had captivated my attention for at least a week. I looked to the right of his picture - one that I was tempted to save onto my desktop - to find his information.

Name: Kurt. That much I knew already. *Occupation: Costume Director.* That explains why he was so well put together he looked when I saw him. The guy clearly knows about fit. Especially given how he fit in that vest he was wearing last night... *Age: 26.* Alright, he's my age. That's good. *Borough: Chelsea.* Even better; he's right around the corner. *Height: 5'10".* Well, I did like them tall... taller than me at least. *Eye Color: Blue.* Boy, didn't I know that already. *Hair Color: Brown.* A **perfect** brown... whoa Blaine. Stop with the googly eyes and keep reading. *Religious Affiliation: None.*None? Not sure what that means, but I'm not really religious either.

So far, nothing really new other than his age - which I was happy to learn was the same as mine - and religious affiliation, or lack thereof. Moving on.

Do you drink? Socially. I had observed that much, although he didn't seem like a beer kind of guy based on the liquor-based drinks he had last night. *Do you smoke? I smoked once in high school... from the wrong end of the cigarette.* No plans on reliving that moment anytime. Ever. I laughed. Why do I think this story is so funny... and adorable? *Do you do drugs? Hell no. (Just not my thing)* Me either. Seen too much of that being in the music industry to know not to mess with that. *Are you a morning or evening person? Morning.* *There's something exciting about a clean slate every morning to make your mark on the day.* I don't know

how he would manage to be a morning person working in a theater, but I hope he's at least a night person sometimes since I'm definitely not one to wake up early. Ever. But I like his idealism; that each day is like a fresh slate. Having that kind of optimism would be nice in a city full of people that seemed so jaded all the time. *Are you an indoor or outdoor person? Indoor.* I can think of things we can do indoor... OH MY GOD, BRAIN. Stop. *What's your ideal vacation? A trip to Paris and the French countryside, traveling by train.* That actually sounds way nicer than what I wrote. I wonder if he speaks French... *Do you think you want to have kids? Maybe. It seems a bit early to decide these things, but I think if I met The One, I'd want for us to come to that decision together.* Glad we're on the same page about that. Kids seems like such an awkward thing to talk about early in a relationship, but the nice thing about this site is that it gets that question out of the way right away.

Directly beneath these basic questions held the paragraph he had written about himself. Even if I hadn't met him in person and hadn't been totally captivated by his aura his... Kurt-ness... I'm sure I would have been eager to read more about him even now.

Hi there! I'm Kurt and though I've technically lived in New York City for years, I'm finally settled down with my amazing roommate in Chelsea; living and loving the city I've always dreamed of being a part of. I work on Broadway achieving my dreams and looking for the right guy to help me live one last dream - the dream of calling someone my partner; a partner in love and in life.

I enjoy Broadway shows (that should be a given by now) and I'm also interested in fashion and style. These two things are a huge part of my life, but they certainly aren't my only interests. I enjoy spending time with my friends and family and nothing makes me smile like a cup of hot cocoa and watching a funny movie with Thai take-out. My dad is my biggest influence in my life and I love getting my hands dirty and fixing cars alongside him back home whenever I have the chance. I love so much about my life, and now I'm looking for someone else to share in that love with me.

I sighed. I knew there was more of his profile to read, but this - the way he talked about his few passions and his desire to share his love with someone - sold me on him as an individual and not just a really attractive guy that I saw one time at a show. I already wanted to see him again and be taken in by the way his hair swept across his forehead or watch him smile, but now I really wanted to know about **him**. What else would make him laugh? What was he like as a kid? How close exactly is his relationship with his dad?

As I continued scrolling down the page, I was certain that I had hit gold - the long form questions still had yet to be read. I hated when I had to fill them out myself, but now that I had the same information

available about Kurt I was overjoyed at the thought of learning more about the intricacies of his personality... and something that I hoped to elaborate on at a later point. Perhaps on a date? Or twenty?

I mainly had interest in two of his questions - though I was sure I'd be committing all of his answers to memory soon to ensure that I knew as much about him as I could when I talked to him again.

Knowing how he was into clothes and remembering the way he had managed to pull off such an immaculate outfit at the show, I was interested to learn if he just wore that out or if it was his everyday appearance. Please god, let it be an everyday occurrence that he looks that hot all the time...

How would you describe your personal style or appearance? *As someone who works in costuming for Broadway, I'm very into clothing and fashion. Your wardrobe can say a lot about you, and I think mine speaks volumes about my personality and passions. I'm very fashion-conscious; I read Vogue and try to stay in-tune with the latest trends. While I'm known to mix in a few more classic pieces, I prefer statement pieces – brooches, hats, and scarves – because if you add those to a traditional wardrobe, it makes you stand out. And I love to stand out, be different, and embrace who I am.*

He certainly seemed like the type of guy who would always stand out in a crowd and not just because of his clothes. Based on the two times I had seen him, his appearance was fairly standard for a guy living in New York City - fitted jeans, button up shirts, vests, and sweaters - but knowing that he was always going to go the extra mile to establish himself as being a little different than the status quo, it made me admire him. I always thought I dressed okay, especially now that I had finally figured out what to do with my hair and no longer made sweater vests a part of my everyday wardrobe, but I never really wanted to stand out. But Kurt - ah, Kurt - he couldn't help but stand out. He was too flawless not to.

But the main question I wanted to know was what was he looking for. And, more importantly, would he be looking for someone like me?

What are you looking for in a partner? *The short and long of it boils down to one thing - partnership. Friendship and love are essential for creating a solid relationship and I'm looking for someone I can truly call my partner - and not just in a politically correct way. I want to love him and care for him and I want him to do the same for me. I want him to call me out when I'm hogging the covers, I want him to make me laugh, I want him to hold my hand, I want him to show me what love is. I'm hoping for a friend, lover, confidant, supporter, and - of course - partner... occasionally in crime. I want me to be his everything because I know that Mr. Right will be my everything - the one I'll love forever.*

Oh god, Kurt. **B**emore perfect.

Nope, not possible. It's was if Kurt knew what I wanted and could articulate it far better than me. But knowing that he wanted what I wanted, that just sealed the deal more than I ever could have imagined. Before, I was taken back by his appearance. Now, I was just blown away by **him**- all of him. Well, all of him that I had read about.

I quickly clicked the 'Message Me' option at the bottom of his profile and waited impatiently as the message center loaded. Instantly my joy and hope that I could contact Kurt was shattered with panic.

What was I going to say?! This first email could set the entire tone of... whatever we could become. It has be be perfect. But I'm afraid if I wait any longer to contact him that someone else will try and snatch him up. I didn't even want to think about Ken Doll and the possibility that he was Kurt's boyfriend, but I pushed that back in my mind since his profile showing up on this site, the fact that I saw him at Cosi that one time, and the how I met him officially at The Bell House - all of these had to be signs; destiny even.

Instead of thinking too much about it, I just let my fingers do the talking without letting my brain get too involved.

Subject: Hi Kurt!- good start I guess.

Message:

Kurt, I don't know if you remember me from The Bell House, but I'm Blaine. I saw your profile on this site and that, along with meeting you the other night, made me want to know more about you. You seem like a passionate and wonderful person and I'd be honored to get to know you even more. I'm going out of town on business this weekend, but if you're interested I'd love to talk to you more and maybe see if we can meet up again when I come back to New York next week. I really hope to hear from you soon. -Blaine

I read it one time to ensure that I had no grammatical or spelling errors and clicked send.

God, or whatever higher power is up there, I really hope this is it; that Kurt is it - that he's the one I've been looking for... forever.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Saturday Morning, October 20

BLAINE

"On behalf of today's flight crew, let us be the first to welcome you to Atlanta."

Once we were stopped at the gate, I groaned as I rose to my feet, placing my leather messenger bag that I had stowed under my seat on my shoulder. I was sore and exhausted.

Last night was spent in a sleepless stupor with excitement over the Atlanta trip and potential contact from Kurt bubbling up practically every five minutes. I could hardly recall leaving the office after sending my message to Kurt and didn't even remember how I got home. I threw my clothes into an overnight bag and parked myself in front of the TV for the night; beer in hand and laptop on the table. I kept the NYCDate website open all night, hoping for a message to come through from Kurt.

I had gotten at least a dozen messages last night, each one taunting me since none of them were from Kurt. Sure, the guys contacting me were attractive for the most part, but I still couldn't get my mind off Kurt. It felt unhealthy to think of how much I thought about him in the past few hours but I couldn't stop myself. And it was killing me to keep it bottled in, but I knew that involving Santana this early in any dating stage was setting myself up for her constant harassment. I had thought about talking about it with my old Warbler buddies, but I still hadn't quite reconnected with Wes enough to talk to him about my love life just yet and even my sharing with David the other night was still slightly out of character for me.

I was the kind of guy who wore his heart on his sleeve, but I was always afraid that by telling too many people about my dating life would end in mockery or worse - people constantly bugging me about my love life. I definitely wanted a relationship with someone - with The One, really - but being constantly bothered about your romantic interludes is not something a single person wants to deal with. Ever. It's too much pressure and I already put enough pressure on myself in these situations by being such a hopeless romantic.

In the end, I spent most of my night staring at my computer and putting back beers before passing out on the couch at 2am. Thankfully I had the foresight to set an alarm on my phone and managed to bring it with me into the living room otherwise I would have missed my 9am flight.

I was glad that I wasn't expected to meet with Mr. Reed until Sunday afternoon for brunch because I definitely could use the day to relax and get some sleep before having what could be the biggest meeting of my career. Plus I had been born in Atlanta and my dad was from here; it'd be nice to see the place I hadn't visited since I was 13 for my grandmother's funeral.

The air felt warmer than the blustery wind of New York City as I walked through the walkway to the main terminal. I was thankful for the change. Although I liked the fall and cold weather, I hadn't packed a lot of warm clothes since my normal winter wear wouldn't exactly fit in one small bag.

I navigated the busy terminal and flowed with the crowd headed toward baggage claim and ground transportation. Though I had initially planned on just taking cabs and Atlanta's subway system to get around, Clark had insisted that I rent a car since everything in the city was fairly spread out and calling for taxis would become bothersome after a while. I certainly didn't complain since this was on the company dime, but I hadn't driven a car in about seven years; who knew how that would go.

The airport was packed, but I was thankful that I hadn't checked any bags because the crowds waiting in baggage claim appeared daunting. Balancing my overnight bag along with my messenger bag, I made my way to the rental car area and within five minutes was behind the driver's seat of a Nissan Sentra. I initially had laughed when I saw the car since it looked so tiny from the outside, but now that I was behind the wheel of the car it felt like I was driving a boat. Being a New Yorker and never driving makes anything with four wheels feel like it's too big.

I easily pulled out of the parking lot and followed the signs leading toward I-85N toward my hotel in the center of the city. I had asked the travel team where they'd recommend for me to stay and they'd insisted on Midtown; praising the area's proximity to good local restaurants, walking distance from the city's main park, and fairly easy to access from the interstate. Since I didn't want to spend too much time behind the wheel of a car, I agreed and they booked me at the Georgian Terrace.

The hotel was easy enough to find at the major intersection of Ponce de Leon and Peachtree Street - two of the city's most well known streets. The hotel itself was gorgeous; an older building across the street from what looked like a 1920s theater with a neon sign stating "Fox" on the outside. I vaguely remembered hearing something about this place from my grandmother, but I couldn't place exactly what she'd said now.

Within twenty minutes of pulling the rental into the garage below the hotel, I was checked in and had found my way up to my room on the 10th floor. I gingerly placed my bags on the bed and walked over to the window and pulled back the curtains. I could see across to the Fox Theatre - a tidbit the receptionist had mentioned upon my arrival - and a smattering of buildings beyond that with a brick exterior. If I looked closely, I could also see the highway splitting through the city; something I was vaguely familiar with now that I had driven on it. As quickly as I had pulled back the curtains, I put them back in their closed position and moved back toward the bed. I pushed the bags onto the floor, dropped face first into the pillows, and fell asleep - dead to the world.

KURT

Work yesterday had taken a lot out of me. After leaving Lauren's place, I barely had time to shower and dress before I was jetting out the door. Wes was there eagerly awaiting the story I had promised him about James, but I apologized profusely as I slammed my bedroom door shut and rushed through getting dressed. As I dashed out the front door narrowly forgetting my keys, I could hear Wes laughing and yelling something like "you're not off the hook" before I darted to the theater.

The work itself went off without a hitch as did the show and thankfully, I soon found myself back at my apartment at nearly midnight. I was thankful that the hustle and bustle of the show had prevented me from running into Lauren and potentially having to hear her talk about Blaine because I wasn't exactly in the mood to help her dissect the guy's every move. Plus the bender the night before coupled with the lack of sleep in my own bed had put me in a foul mood and I didn't want to say something I'd regret later.

I had been exhausted and within minutes of returning to my quiet home last night, I had changed into pajamas and swiftly fallen asleep.

But now, in the morning, it wasn't so quiet as I awoke to sounds of Wes in the kitchen grinding coffee beans. I muttered curses under my breath as I gazed over to my alarm clock beside the bed. 10:00am. I was glad it wasn't any earlier than that otherwise I probably would have killed Wes. I considered myself a morning person, but after the past few days I didn't want to be awake any earlier than possible.

I pushed back the duvet on my bed, whipped my legs around and winced slightly as my feet hit the cool hardwood floor. I wiggled my toes against the wood for a moment before standing with an audible groan and making my way out to the kitchen.

"Good morning starshine," Wes said with a grin as he poured the ground coffee into his French press. I grunted back in reply and grabbed a glass from the cabinet next to the sink before shuffling to the fridge to remove my carton of orange juice. "You don't want something stronger?" Wes asked, motioning to the vat of coffee in his hands. I shook my head and poured the juice and placed it back in the fridge before grabbing a bagel from the bread box and plopping down at the breakfast table across the kitchen.

"You're awfully lively this morning," Wes noted. I shrugged, still unwilling to speak. It wasn't that I was avoiding speaking to Wes, I just wasn't quite awake enough to deal with the onslaught of questions I knew he had since I hadn't talked to him in a few days. He seemed to realize that I'd talk when I was ready and he quietly prepared himself coffee and toast with jam, joining me at the table once his breakfast was complete. By that point, I had already eaten half of the bagel and the juice was nearly gone.

Feeling more apt to talking, I started off with a bang. "Things didn't work out with James," I stated simply. Wes looked up from his coffee mug before placing it back on the table, quirking his eyebrow in confusion.

"How can it already not work out with him?" he asked.

I sighed. "He was still in the closet." Wes' eyes bulged and I knew I didn't need to elaborate any more than that. He remembered what it was like with me and William and when I had spent dozens of nights crying over the heartbreak of my first boyfriend, I had promised Wes - and myself - that I wouldn't date a guy in the closet ever again.

"I'm sorry," Wes said cautiously, taking a bite of his toast. "So," he said between bites, "now what are you going to do? Did you email any other guys from that site?"

"No," I replied. "I am kind of bummed after this.. whatever it was with James, so I'm not sure that I should keep up with the online dating thing. What if they're all still in the closet?"

"That can't be the case, Kurt. You're out and you're on that site. I think you just found one that wasn't as brave as you. Don't give up just yet. Just ride it out for a few more weeks and see what happens," he said.

"I guess," I said, still uncertain that love would come my way through the internet. I thought about James and even thought about some of the other guys whose pictures I'd seen on the site before my mind eventually turned back to Blaine. I couldn't forget the guy - even if he was straight and into Lauren. It was like reliving high school with having another straight crush.

"You okay?" I heard Wes ask, effectively pulling me out of thoughts of the most attractive man I'd met all year.

"Yeah, I guess," I lied. Really, I was a mess. I didn't even care about the James thing anymore; I couldn't help but think about Blaine. But I couldn't talk to Lauren about it, but maybe... "Wes, I need your advice about something."

"Okay, shoot," he responded.

"There's this guy..." Wes practically spilled his coffee as he hurriedly placed his cup on the table and clapped his hands together, eagerly awaiting to hear what I had to say. I rolled my eyes and continued. "So, this guy."

"Does he have a name?" he asked.

"Uh-uh, no way. No names right now. If I tell you his name, you'll try to stalk him or something. Besides, I don't know his last name anyway," I retorted.

"So what's the harm then?" Wes chided.

"No way. My story, my rules," I proclaimed. Wes slunk back slightly in my chair before motioning for me to continue. "So this guy. I met him when I went out with Lauren last night."

"Who's Lauren?" he asked.

"Oh, sorry, I forgot you don't know her. Lauren and I went to high school together. She works with me at the theater doing hair and make up. I hadn't seen her in years and we reconnected backstage when I first started." Wes nodded in understanding and I kept the story moving. "Anyway, I went out with Lauren last night to this place in Brooklyn, some bar club place she used to work at, and met this guy there. He knew Lauren since he was a regular and we chatted for a minute before this girl Brittany, who used to be in Bring It On!, pulled him away to dance with him."

"I'm not seeing where this is headed," Wes said, confused.

"Bear with me," I insisted. "This guy... Wes, he is probably the most attractive man I've seen all year. And that includes James and you know how hot he was." He nodded in agreement. I had shown his picture to Wes at one point and he had whistled approvingly at his appearance. "But he was there with Brittany, at least I think he was, but then he also was apparently looking for Lauren afterward since he basically chased down one of Lauren's bartender friends trying to figure out how to get in contact with her."

"So, you have a crush on this guy. But you think he's straight?" he asked cautiously. I nodded sheepishly. "Do you know for sure?"

"I mean, no. But all signs point to the fact that he's straight. He was talking to me one minute then he was pulled away by Brittany and spent half the night trying to get in contact with Lauren!" I exclaimed.

"Kurt, calm down," Wes said, gently touching my hands that rested on the table. "I'm not trying to ask to get your hopes up, but I wanted to be sure that you weren't just over thinking things. I know you're afraid that you're always going to have crushes on straight guys - or closeted guys - but I just wanted to be sure that you knew about him before you went on some crazy tirade in your mind."

I nodded in agreement. "I just... when will I have a crush on a guy and it'll work out and he'll be gay, single, out, and amazing in every way that I have on the checklist in my head?" I asked, not expecting an answer.

"I don't know," Wes stated as he drained the last of his coffee. He rubbed my hand one last time before pulling back and looking at me apologetically. "Look, I'm sorry to hear this story and have to leave, but I'm meeting David to go shopping for a Halloween costume. But we can talk about this more when I get back?" he asked. "I think it might help if I ducked out and you can just... think, ya know? I realize it's a lot to spring on you this early and I know how much you hate me in the morning anyway."

I laughed as I rolled my eyes. "It's fine. Get outta here."

Wes laughed as he stood, placing his plate and mug into the sink before grabbing his keys and wallet and scooting out the door. Once the door clicked behind him, I was left with my thoughts again. What a dangerous place to be.

I put my glass in the sink, swearing that I'd wash it later, before heading back into my room and opening up my laptop. If I was going to be left alone to my thoughts in this apartment alone, I was at least going to

listen to music so it wasn't so quiet. I turned on my signature dance mix and let the beats pump through the laptop speakers, tentatively swinging to the beat until my phone pinged.

I hustled to my bedside table and unlocked my phone to see a text from Wes... and about a dozen more along with three missed phone calls and numerous emails. I forgot that I hadn't checked my phone since I arrived in the theater last night - whoops. I replied to Wes' text - he'd asked me if I wanted to hang out with him and David after shopping, which I politely declined - and went through the additional texts I had gotten from Mercedes, Finn, Roselyn, and about four from my dad. None of them were urgent, so I figured I could reply to them later.

Instead, I was more intrigued about the notification that had popped up from my NYCDate app. I had received messages from a few other guys other than James, but the emails had thinned out in the past few days. I tapped the app and my inbox popped up, noting that I had one new message.

Subject: Hi Kurt!

I clicked on the message before nearly dropping my phone onto the floor.

You've gotta be kidding me.

Right next to the body of the message was a picture of Blaine. *That* Blaine. The Blaine that I thought had a dreamy smile and excellent dancing moves... and a hot ass. Can't deny that last part.

Wait. But how'd he find me on here? He's straight...

Oh.

Well. That's an interesting development. I got over my momentary shock and read his message.

Kurt, I don't know if you remember me from The Bell House, but I'm Blaine. I saw your profile on this site and that, along with meeting you the other night, made me want to know more about you. You seem like a passionate and wonderful person and I'd be honored to get to know you even more. I'm going out of town on business this weekend, but if you're interested I'd love to talk to you more and maybe see if we can meet up again when I come back to New York. I really hope to hear from you soon. -Blaine

Commence flailing. I immediately dropped my phone onto the bed and started dancing around my bedroom, not even caring if my movements matched the beat of the music that played in the background.

He remembered me from The Bell House. He wants to get to know me. He's... out of town. Well damn. I mean, I don't know why I would expect to meet up with him immediately after getting a message from him, but I certainly had hoped. It wasn't as if we didn't know each other on at least a small level - we had met each other once. Well, technically twice. But I'm still not admitting to gawking at him at Cosi.

I tapped out of the message center and clicked on Blaine's name, pulling up his profile. The first thing to show up on my phone was a larger photo of Blaine's smiling face - wearing an impeccably smart sweater - looking back at me. God, he was gorgeous.

I scrolled down a bit to read more about him.

Name: Blaine. Covered. Occupation: Artist Development. Okay, so he's in music; specifically artist development. I have no idea what that means. I guess I'll have to ask him... maybe on a date? *Age: 26.* Same age; that's nice. *Borough: Hell's Kitchen.* I wonder if I've walked past his house before. *Height: 5'8".* He was only slightly shorter than me... and I liked it. *Religious Affiliation: Agnostic.* I can get behind that.

So far, so good.

Do you drink? Sometimes. I witnessed that. *Do you smoke? No. Well, not often enough to say sometimes.* As long as he doesn't smoke around me, that's fine. *Do you do drugs? No.* Thank god. *Are you a morning or evening person? Evening.* *Waking up before 8am is a chore.* I laughed. I can imagine him being all pouty in the morning, his hair all messed up with curls every... Kurt. Stop. *Are you an indoor or outdoor person? Both?* Hopefully he's indifferent enough that he won't make me go hiking or something. *What's your ideal vacation? A driving tour through Ireland.* That sounds nice, actually. I bet it's beautiful. *Do you think you want to have kids? Potentially. It would depend on the guy since I wouldn't want to intentionally raise a kid without a partner. Besides, I'm not at a place to make that decision right this minute.* God, we are so on the same page about this. Are we on the same page about more?

My heart beat faster as I skipped down to his statement about himself. So far, he sounded amazing, no - perfect, on paper. Not to mention I noticed the 99% next to his photo near his photo - I mean, that had to be a sign, right?

Can I have directions? To where, you ask? To your heart.

Now that I've got the cheesy pickup line out of the way, hey there, I'm Blaine. The basics are I was born in Atlanta, raised in Ohio, and went to college in New York – which is how I ended up here. I like to think that I'm the best of all of the regions of the United States – old fashioned and chivalrous like a Southerner, accommodating and sweet like a Midwesterner, and artistically avant-garde and in love with the big city like a true New Yorker.

I work in the music business managing bands and it's been a dream come true. I'm passionate about music and listen to every type of music from rock to pop to jazz and even musicals. But if you listen to country, don't plan on me having any of that on my iPod.

These introductory paragraphs feel a little awkward, so I've enlisted the help of my friends to better describe me. They'd say I was a fierce friend who will always root for the underdog and that I'm the epitome of a gentleman; charismatic and charming with everyone I meet. They'd share stories about the time I performed an impromptu musical number with full choreography in Times Square on a whim (I wasn't drunk, I promise), the time in college where I drove 500 miles through the night to visit a friend who was having a rough time at home, and how I cooked a feast for 15 hungry musicians out of ramen, chicken kabobs from a street cart, and an assortment of random canned fruits and vegetables that managed to make its way into an article in Village Voice on how to feed a lot of people without spending a ton of money. They would also crack all kinds of embarrassing jokes about me, but I'll spare you those details unless you meet them in person.

*And what am I doing on this online dating site? Who knows, I could be looking for **you**.*

I hope to hear from you soon.

Okay, he just got more perfect. The rest of his answers seemed inconsequential. But honestly, I was curious about one last thing...

What are you looking for in a partner? *More than anything, I'm looking for a partner/companion – someone who will be my equal in life and in love. He should fight for me and fight with me. He should help make me a better person and who can teach me the ways that I can support and love them. I also want someone that I can come home to, who is willing to put up with my cheesiness, who doesn't mind if I leave my clothes lying next to the hamper rather than in them, and someone who would consider me their best friend. I'm looking for that once in a lifetime love, one that defines a generation.*

That's it. *He's* it. All the attraction that I felt wasn't in vain. Blaine... whatever his last name was... ticked off all of the boxes in my mind for the guy I wanted to be with. And what was even more exciting is that I still didn't know everything about him. But based on his profile and the one time I truly met him, he was definitely a candidate for the man of my dreams.

I could barely control my trembling fingers as I tapped back to the message center and hit the reply button at the bottom of the message Blaine had written. I willed my brain to stop freaking out enough to at least type a somewhat coherent and decent reply that wouldn't give away how excited I was right now. I needed my reply to be flirty yet funny and pithy; this response could set the tone of everything. I thought for a moment before anxiously tapping away on my iPhone's touchscreen.

Subject: RE: Hi Kurt!

Hi Blaine! Of course I remember you, how could I forget! I'm so glad you contacted me. I'd love to get to know you more as well. I guess we can email back and forth until you come back from your trip. Please don't spam me with emails from your mom's cat or something. Can't wait to hear from you! Kurt

khummel (a) freemail. com

I eagerly clicked send and threw myself onto my bed, arms splayed at either side of me and a grin still plastered on my face. I hope it wasn't too forward that I sent him my personal email address. Since he knew Lauren, I had to assume he'd be al...

Oh god. Lauren.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Saturday Afternoon, October 20

It was two in the afternoon by the time I woke up from my nap. I wasn't a huge napper, but I really needed it. My mind and body had been in overdrive for weeks and it was finally taking its toll. I felt slightly more rested but even more on edge as the gravity of my presence in Atlanta started to become real. I was meeting the one man I admired more than my father tomorrow morning for what could change the rest of my life. I needed to have an appropriate freak out session now rather than later while I was in front of him and would likely start blabbering - as I always do when I'm nervous - and say something dumb.

Thankfully knowing that I'm a bit of a spaz, I had pre-prepared questions for myself to ask Jeremy when the time had come. I also had asked Clark to send me some information that he knew about the producer along with any questions that he thought I should ask as well. I figured now would be as good a time as any to review these things and try to mentally prepare myself for tomorrow. Besides, I needed to not think about the fact that Kurt didn't reply to me. God, what if I read the whole thing wrong and he doesn't want to see me? I could tell my thoughts were creeping toward a negative place, so I forced the thoughts of Kurt and his lack of response from my mind before resigning myself to focusing on work once again.

Still laying in bed, I grabbed for my messenger bag that had found its way next to the bedside table. Groaning, I pulled my laptop from its compartment and threw it onto the bed next to me. Forcing myself to sit upright, I placed the laptop in my lap and leaned against the headboard.

Once the screen illuminated, I opened my browser and logged into my email. I clicked on the checkboxes next to the numerous junk emails littering my inbox before one peaked my interest.

From: NYCDat Subject: You have a new message!

I had gotten some emails from guys from the site already, but part of me bubbled up with anticipation every time I saw an email come through from NYCDat - was this the email response from Kurt?

I opened the email and screamed.

Dear Blaine,

You have received a message from Kurt. To read the message, please login.

Sincerely, NYCDate

It WAS from Kurt! I immediately started flailing my arms around and started shaking my laptop with disbelief. I flung the laptop onto the mattress and grabbed two pillows from the bed and squeezed them tightly before folding myself into the feathers of the pillow and giving a loud squeal.

If anyone had walked into my hotel room in that moment, they'd be surprised to hear that the noise coming from my room was not, in fact, from a teenage girl but a 26-year-old man who was fangirling his own life at the moment. I took a few more moments to try and calm myself before clicking the link in the email and switching over to the NYCDate website.

I anxiously entered my login information and clicked on the message center. There, amongst messages from lesser mortals, was the one from Kurt.

Subject: RE: Hi Kurt!

My heart skipped a beat as I clicked the message.

Hi Blaine! Of course I remember you, how could I forget! I'm so glad you contacted me. I'd love to get to know you more as well. I guess we can email back and forth until you come back from your trip. Please don't spam me with emails from your mom's cat or something. Can't wait to hear from you! Kurt

khummel (a)freemail .com

Oh. My. God. Not only did I get a message from Kurt, he gave me his personal email address. I wouldn't be so bold to do that on the internet after just one exchange, but it's not like we were total strangers. If I had been in my right mind the night of the show and not distracted by Kurt's presence, I would have given him my card and he would have gotten in contact by email or something at some point. And besides, if Lauren was friends with him, he can't be some serial killer. I could always tell she had good taste when it came to people she considered friends since she honestly liked so few people in the first place.

I switched back to the tab with my email account, created a new message, and carefully entered in the email address Kurt had given. I wonder what khummel was. I guessed that it was his name like most people's email addresses, but was his name Kurt H. Ummel? Kurt Hummel? Kurt Humerdon Carmel? I mean, people have weird ways of including their names into email addresses. Who knows - there could be thousands of people with the same name vying for the same email address these days.

Rather than focus on Kurt's potential last name - and vowing not to Google khummel as soon as I sent the email - I needed to think about how to break the ice in the real email world and make sure my email to him didn't get mixed in with the usual clutter of the modern man's email inbox. I debated internally for a few minutes on what to write in the subject line before relying on ol' reliable.

Subject: Hi Kurt!

I added the extra exclamation point because I wanted to convey my excitement to be speaking with him gradually. If I had entered the amount of exclamation points I thought in my head about Kurt, there would have been too many to fit in the subject line.

I took a deep breath and started typing away. It had served me well so far to not overthink things too much, so I figured I could just write out what I was thinking then proofread and make sure I don't sound like a total idiot before I send.

Hi Kurt! I'm so happy you messaged me back! I was surprised to find you on NYCDate, but is it wrong that I was really happy to see you on there? ;) Anyway, I looked at your profile before messaging you first - had to be sure that you were the right Kurt after all - and I was really blown away. I think it's fantastic that you work on Broadway doing costume design. I love Broadway more than I could ever say, so I'm also slightly jealous that you get to spend time working each day in the theater. Don't get me wrong, I love what I do, but Broadway? Amazing! So, aside from Broadway, what other things do you enjoy? I know you mentioned clothing and fashion being a big priority for you. What else do you like to do? I hope you didn't think my outfit the night we met was too boring; my best friend says I used to dress like Orville Reddenbacher, so I hope to not have offended you or your fantastic fashion sense with my outfit. I'm bummed that I'm missing out on a wonderful New York City October. Please give it my love for me! I hope to hear from you again soon. I'll be anxiously awaiting your response. -Blaine warblerblaine (a) freemail.com

I groaned as I realized that I still hadn't changed my email address to something more grown-up since high school. I didn't want to use my work email address since it seemed too formal and I only had the one personal email account. Oh well.

Also, is that wink at the end too flirty? Well, honestly, I was flirting with him. Or at least trying to despite the fact that I'm not with him in person. But it feels weird to flirt with someone over the internet. But I needed to get over that for the time being since there wasn't a chance of me seeing Kurt in person for at least a few days. The internet would have to do... for now.

KURT

I was folding laundry in the laundry room in the basement when I heard a familiar ping resound from my phone that I had left on the folding table. I had spent the morning cleaning my bathroom (yuck), washing dishes (double yuck), and doing laundry (triple yuck considering I was far too obsessed with the care of my clothes to actually enjoy such a chore) - and distracting myself from the events of last night.

I was still somewhat in shock that Blaine had found me on NYCDate and had contacted me. It certainly validated my feelings - or whatever you want to call them - toward him, but before long guilt rattled my feelings of glee with concern over what would happen once I told Lauren.

I was irritated at the whole situation, but I was fairly certain it had been a misunderstanding. I mean, it had been, right? She was so excited to have someone liking her - but why had he tried to get her phone number from the bartender? He was gay and he was just trying to be friendly with Lauren... right?

I shook my head out of that thought, and unlocked my phone before addressing the email that had popped up a moment before.

From: Blaine Anderson Subject: Hi Kurt!

I squealed before clasping my hand over my mouth and tapping on the new message. I only knew one Blaine and it had to be *him*. Thank god Wes didn't need to do laundry today either - I could not deal with him and this whole situation with Blaine right now. He would have too many questions about Blaine and what he was like and how we met and blah, blah blah; I didn't want to put that pressure on... this... before we at least had something to proclaim. Sure, I was being guarded again, but I felt like it was my right in this instance. We saw how my sharing about James had gotten complicated quickly - I wanted to be sure that the same wouldn't happen with Blaine before letting his existence come out of the woodworks.

I tapped on the message and read it carefully.

Hi Kurt! I'm so happy you messaged me back! I was surprised to find you on NYCDate, but is it wrong that I was really happy to see you on there? ;) Anyway, I looked at your profile before messaging you first - had to be sure that you were the right Kurt after all - and I was really blown away. I think it's fantastic that you work on Broadway doing costume design. I love Broadway more than I could ever say, so I'm also slightly

jealous that you get to spend time working each day in the theater. Don't get me wrong, I love what I do, but Broadway? Amazing! So, aside from Broadway, what other things do you enjoy? I know you mentioned clothing and fashion being a big priority for you. What else do you like to do? I hope you didn't think my outfit the night we met was too boring; my best friend says I used to dress like Orville Reddenbacher, so I hope to not have offended you or your fantastic fashion sense with my outfit. I'm bummed that I'm missing out on a wonderful New York City October. Please give it my love for me! I hope to hear from you again soon. I'll be anxiously awaiting your response. -Blaine warblerblaine (a) freemail. com

I was giggling the whole time I read his message. Was he being flirty? Over email? Bold, if I do say so myself. But I certainly am not complaining.

What was even more refreshing is that he took time to actually read about me and still wants to learn more. I know that's the whole point of us emailing back and forth, but having him ask me more about myself told me that he was truly interested in me. Me - Kurt Hummel - lowly man from Ohio who was apparently worthy of the attention of one Blaine...Anderson (had to read his last name again). Sigh.

I was never more thankful for my iPhone than I was in the past few minutes; it meant that I didn't have to wait until I got back up to my apartment to read his email and already start on a reply. Lord knows I don't want to keep the man waiting!

I tapped the reply button and began tapping away.

Hi Blaine!

I'm not sure it's a good thing that I'm on NYCDate, but now I think my opinion has changed. ;)

Working in costume design is a dream and having worked on touring productions in the past, Broadway is such a nice change and certainly a dream come true. That's fantastic that you like Broadway shows as well. Which is your favorite? You'll have to come and see Bring It On! (the show I work on) if you haven't already. I know a guy and I'm sure if you butter him up, he'll hook you up.

And yes, I love fashion and try to keep tabs on trends as much as possible. I used to be much more... devoted (my roommate would say crazy) with my wardrobe before, but I realized you can still be stylish and not have to traipse down to the store season after season. My wallet is thanking me for that realization. But in regards

to your outfit, I thought you looked great the other night - you'll certainly have no complaints from me. Please tell your friend that they're a liar.

What about you? What kinds of things do you enjoy? I know you're in the music industry though I still have no idea what you actually do since your job description from the site left much to be desired. You'll just have to explain it to me now. And I'll be sure to wish New York a hello on your behalf. If you don't mind me asking, where are you spending the evening? Are you on vacation?

Either way, I hope you're enjoying... wherever you are!

Can't wait to hear from you again. :)

-Kurt

I paused for a minute before making sure my phone hadn't done come embarrassing autocorrect and hit the send button. As I heard the notification that the email had sent, I immediately clenched my teeth in slight embarrassment.

Damn, I had come on strong. But there was something about this that didn't make me want to feel reserved in the slightest. Perhaps it was because it felt like it was easier to talk to someone through the internet these days or that I still felt like I had my guard up a little since we were still talking about things as menial as our likes and dislikes, but in a small way I felt... at east sharing these things with Blaine. Like I could just keep rambling on and just talk to him.

I was thankful for the fact that the last load of clothes were just finished drying because I have a feeling he and I might be exchanging emails for awhile. Hopefully - if I'm lucky - we'll exchange them all night.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Saturday Night, October 20

BLAINE

By the time I had unpacked my overnight bag and splashed my face with cold water in an attempt to wake myself from my nap, I realized I was starving. *What an inconvenient time for me to be starving*, I said to myself. I was perfectly content to sit in my room and wait for Kurt to email me back, but clearly my body had its own plans.

Stupid body.

I briefly debated ordering room service and having my evening go by as planned, but my common sense knew better than to just lay around and wait around for Kurt to contact me back. Not because I didn't want him to - god, I wanted to hear from him more than anything - but this seemed to be a pattern in my life and I don't want to repeat it yet again.

I stuck the keycard for my room in my pocket along with my iPhone and wallet and made my way down to the lobby. After getting the recommendation from the receptionist, I walked about six blocks and stopped at a Thai restaurant called Noodle. The receptionist said that the portions were big, the food was good, and they had a full bar.

The restaurant was fairly empty given that it was around 3 in the afternoon though the restaurant wasn't big to start with. Instead of sitting at one of the few tables the place had, I parked at the bar and perused the menu before the bartender approached me.

"What can I get you today, hun?" the guy asked with a wink. I chuckled a bit under my breath as I looked at the man behind the counter. He was tall - significantly taller than me - with a buzzed haircut, dark brown eyes and a simple black polo and black pants, which I guessed were the uniform of the restaurant. I had literally spoken to maybe five people in this city and one of them had already hit on me. So much for being a conservative part of the Bible Belt, I thought to myself.

"Whatever local beer you have on tap, please," I replied with a slight smile.

"*Anything* for you," he said as he shuffled down the counter toward the tap. I was extremely flattered by this guy. He was attractive and the Southern accent he had wasn't hurting him any, but I wasn't going to actually pursue anything with this guy for a multitude of one reasons. One reason I wanted to admit was Kurt, but I shoved that niggling into the back of my mind when the man brought me the beer.

"It's Sweetwater 420," he said as he rested it on the cocktail napkin he placed in front of me. "Best in town, aside from me of course."

I couldn't help but roll my eyes and laugh at that. God he was bold; bolder than the guys I met in New York and that really says something.

"Thanks," I said as I reached for the beer.

"Paul," he said.

I looked at him quizzically over the rim of the glass in my hand. *It really was good beer*, I thought as I put the glass back on the bar. "Excuse me?" I asked.

"My name. It's Paul," he replied.

"Uh, well, thanks Paul," I stated. "Can I place my order with you as well?"

"Sure thing. Are you going to eat here or take it to-go?"

"For here, I suppose. This...uh... Thai peanut noodle sounds good. With beef, please," I requested.

"Of course," he said, tapping the order into the computer in front of him. He fiddled around for a minute and I sipped on my beer for a minute and was about to grab for my phone in my pocket before Paul turned his attention back to me. "What brings you to our fine establishment on this Saturday afternoon?"

I took one last sip before replying. "I'm in town for business. Staying down the street actually."

"Whereabouts?"

"Georgian Terrace," I conceded.

He whistled. "Swank. You must be some high-powered executive to afford a place like that."

I laughed. "Far from it, really. Since it's on the company dime, they're setting me up there. Otherwise I'd still be at home right now."

"And where's home?" he asked with a heavy drawl. I'd be wrong if I didn't admit that his accent was precious.

"New York," I replied. "City, to be exact."

"I used to date a guy who lived in New York. I love when City Boys come Down South for the weekend. Well, please let me welcome you on behalf of all the rest of the Southern gentlemen," he said with another wink. God this guy was too much, I thought. "Have you been to Atlanta before?"

I nodded. "I was born here, actually. My grandmother used to live somewhere north of the city, I don't remember the name of the area now. I just remember it was off West Wesley Road." I was surprised that I remembered that information, but she always sent birthday cards and I can still remember her return address labels - Anderson in golden scroll along with her monogram. She insisted that it was proper for a Southern lady to have appropriate stationary.

"That's pretty swanky... sorry, what's your name?" he asked.

"Blaine," I replied. "But she was... swanky, as you say. Not me." Paul looked like he was going to ask another question when I felt a buzz coming from my pocket. I held one finger up, signifying that I needed a moment, before extracting the phone from my pocket and smiling at Santana's name and picture on the display. Paul looked at my phone curiously at the woman's photo on the display before I managed to accept the call and place the receiver to my ear.

"Hey there," I said with a slight flirtatiousness to my voice.

"God B, what is wrong with you? If you're trying to flirt with me, it seems just... wrong. Why are you acting weird?"

I laughed. "I'll explain later. What's up San?"

Paul busied himself at the sink behind the bar, cleaning glasses or something, trying not to eavesdrop but failing miserably.

"Well," she said. "I just wanted to see how things were going. And not exactly about that flight you had this morning. I meant about the dating thing."

I rolled my eyes. What was she, my mother? She was certainly starting to act like it now; my own mother had been asking me about boyfriend relentlessly for about two years now and I wasn't exactly eager to have Santana bugging me about it too. "It's fine, Santana. It's going well actually."

"Ooh, do tell." I could practically hear her salivating at the thought of me having some kind of salacious love life that she needed the details on.

"No way. Look, you know how I am with... these things," I said, realizing that Paul was still listening and not wanting him to be privy to the nature of my call with my best friend. "But I'm just trying to be cautious and take things slow. Don't tell me you don't agree that this is the best idea in a small way."

"I know, Blaine." She sighed. "I'm not trying to pressure you or make you tell me too much too fast. God knows I don't want to hear about you porking some other dude." I snorted at her inappropriate comment. I loved her when she was snarky. "But I just feel like you're so loving and that you should be happy and in love."

"That will come, Santana. But I need to be guarded about this for now. You know what my track record was in the past." I thought about the one relationship I had divulged to Santana - which I had only done because Santana had practically funneled tequila shots down my throat - and brought myself back to the conversation before letting my mind go too far off track.

"I know." She was silent for a moment and I took the silence to take another gulp of my drink before she continued. "Whenever you want to talk about it, we will okay? I'll try not to bug you about it, but I'm just curious and excited for you."

"Thanks San," I said.

"Well, why don't we give this call a purpose. How's Atlanta so far?" she asked, warranting a laugh at her drastic subject change. If there was one thing Santana wasn't, it was subtle.

We chatted for a few minutes and I shared with her the plans I had with Jeremy tomorrow and how excited I was to be working with him in the future. I ended the call once Paul brought my food out some five minutes later. Santana wished me luck on my brunch with Jeremy the next day before saying our obligatory 'I love yous' as we hung up. It was a strange tradition for a man and a woman to share, but since it was Santana and I, I didn't think anything of it.

Once Paul placed the food down, he turned quickly and shuffled back to the kitchen. He'd heard me speaking with Santana and our exchange at the end of the call and probably assumed that she was my girlfriend. It wouldn't have been the first time someone thought I was straight - it was nice at times when I was being blatantly hit on by guys like Paul, but annoying when I practically had to convince some people - primarily women - that no, I wasn't into boobs and unless you had an extra appendage between your legs, I wasn't interested.

I was about to put my phone up when I felt a buzz coming from my locked phone. Curious, I unlocked my phone and the home screen showed that I had an email. Upon tapping it open, I dropped my chopsticks.

From: Kurt Hummel. Well, that answers that question. Subject: RE: Hi Kurt!

I neatly placed the chopsticks at the side of my plate and read Kurt's response carefully.

Hi Blaine! I'm not sure it's a good thing that I'm on NYCDate, but now I think my opinion has changed. ;)

Oh my god. Breathe, Blaine. BUT I CAN NOT BECAUSE HE IS FLIRTING WITH ME. He is flirting, right?

Okay. Internal freak out over. I still have most of his message left to go. No sense in having a conniption fit now.

Working in costume design is a dream and having worked on touring productions in the past, Broadway is such a nice change and certainly a dream come true. That's fantastic that you like Broadway shows as well. Which is your favorite? You'll have to come and see Bring It On! (the show I work on) if you haven't already. I know a guy and I'm sure if you butter him up, he'll hook you up.

And yes, I love fashion and try to keep tabs on trends as much as possible. I used to be much more... devoted (my roommate would say crazy) with my wardrobe before, but I realized you can still be stylish and not have to traipse down to the store season after season. My wallet is thanking me for that realization. But in regards

to your outfit, I thought you looked great the other night - you'll certainly have no complaints from me. Please tell your friend that they're a liar.

Yeah, right. Telling Santana she's a liar is asking for a death sentence... unless you're Brittany. But also... he thought I looked great. Not good, not alright...GREAT!

What about you? What kinds of things do you enjoy? I know you're in the music industry though I still have no idea what you actually do since your job description from the site left much to be desired. You'll just have to explain it to me now.

And I'll be sure to wish New York a hello on your behalf. If you don't mind me asking, where are you spending the evening? Are you on vacation?

Either way, I hope you're enjoying... wherever you are!

Can't wait to hear from you again. :)

-Kurt

"Everything okay?" Paul asked, likely curious about my fixed gaze on my phone and my food untouched. "Do you want another beer?" he questioned, eyeing my empty glass.

"No thanks," I replied. "Actually, can I get the rest of this to go. Something came up."

"Sure," he replied, slight disappointment in his voice.

Screw the common sense in my mind, screw trying to be cautious, screw waiting. I needed to respond to Kurt. Now.

From: Blaine Anderson

Subject: RE: RE: Hi Kurt!

Sent: 3:42pm

Hey Kurt!

I'm still amazed that you work in costume design and on Broadway. You said that you worked on touring shows, right? Which ones? Did you go to any fun places while you were on tour? I bet it was great to see the world that way. In regards to my favorite show, I'd have to say West Side Story. I know it's horribly tragic, but it's a classic and I've been told I would make a remarkable Tony. I really love classic Broadway musicals; Singin' in the Rain, West Side Story, The Pajama Game, South Pacific... I'm pretty sure I was born in the wrong time period. But I haven't seen Bring It On! and I do love the movie, so I'd love to see it sometime if your "guy" can help me out. :)

It sounds like your roommate doesn't understand that fashion required a level of commitment that some mere mortals will not understand! What kinds of stores do you typically shop with? I know if I need any new clothes, I'm coming to you. Hope that's okay! I'm curious about what kinds of things you used to wear before since it seems like it's not to the same level of... epicness (is that a word?) that it was before. You'll have to tell me sometime.

Things I enjoy. Well, as you mentioned, I love music. Music is my life - literally. My job, basically, is to scout for new talent for the record label I work with and work with them through the recording, publishing, publicity and launch of the album. Once they're established artists, they're handed over to their permanent team and I find another group to work with. It's like teaching new kids when you're a teacher or something - it's hard sometimes and they might act like spoiled brats, but you're always excited when they first start and you're endlessly proud when they're done. It's really nice and I love it.

But other than music, I like to eat but I'm not really a foodie. I just like to try new things whenever I can. But other than that, I generally keep pretty quiet. I like to kick back and watch movies, read or hang out with friends. It might seem boring, but it makes me happy. How about you? What kinds of things do you do for fun? And if you could be anyone in the world - dead or alive - who would it be? (Sorry if that's a weird question - I like to ask questions a lot. Helps me get to know people in ways you'd never suspect)

And as for my current location, I'm in Atlanta on a business trip. I was born here and I had family here, but I haven't been here since I was 13. It seems nice so far, but I have only been to the hotel and a restaurant down the street, so I haven't seen much.

Hope New York isn't missing me too much!

-Blaine

From: Kurt Hummel

Subject: RE: RE: RE: Hi Kurt!

Sent: 4:11pm

Hi Blaine,

Your flattery will absolutely get you everywhere - especially whenever you come and see the show. The people I work with are the best and nicest people in the biz and if you'd like to meet them and get the grand tour afterward, I guess I can give you a tour. ;) Those are fantastic choices for favorite shows. Personally, I like the newer stories but primarily because I feel like sometimes I identify with the newer life situations more than the ones from the past. I mean, how much can a story like Cat on a Hot Tin Roof tell me what it's like to be a gay kid from the Midwest who likes Broadway and sings higher than any guys I've ever heard? Not that it's not a lovely show, but there's something more appealing about shows like Rent or Next to Normal for me. But I have to admit, I love Singin' in the Rain; it's probably my favorite movie of all-time and I always watch it when I'm sick. Gene Kelly cures all ails.

My roommate doesn't understand many things, including how brown, black and navy can not all be worn at the same time, but I still think he's alright. If I had all the money in the world, I'd park myself at Barneys and Bergdorf, but I usually just go to Loehmann's or Nordstrom Rack since you can find killer deals that way. I prefer Michael Kors, Calvin Klein and any of the designers with classic cuts in their pieces. It's funny that you want to see what I wore in high school. I got made fun of a lot because I was pretty daring with my choices; kilts, half-sweaters, extra long sweater dress ensembles, really bright colored coats, etc. Looking back I am proud at how I dressed since that was a bold choice, but now I definitely think I look more refined and put together. I would say "more adult" but I think I've technically been an adult for eight years, so I can't really say that.

How you described your job is fantastic. Not only do I have a better idea what you do, but you sound really passionate about it. I guess we both lucked out working our dream jobs so young, huh?

It sounds like you and I spend our free time in a similar fashion. I watch reality TV - too much, if I'm being honest - and love to order any kind of Asian take-out whenever I can. As for what person I would be dead or

alive... that's a tough question. I'd like to think Harvey Milk since he was so inspirational and I'd have loved to have gotten him to wear something other than tweed, but he didn't sing enough for my liking. So I'll have to get back to you on that.

That's cool that you're in Atlanta. Where are you staying? Have you been to any good restaurants yet? I actually lived there for 5 months when we were workshopping Bring It On! If you need any recommendations or anything (I think you're there until Monday, right?), I'd be happy to lend a helping hand.

Is it too soon to say I'm anxiously awaiting your reply? Because I am. :)

-Kurt

From: Blaine Anderson

Subject: RE: RE: RE: RE: Hi Kurt!

Sent: 4:38pm

Kurt,

I'm already on pins and needles to see Bring It On! I loved the movie so I'll obviously love the show. And from what I hear, my tour guide is pretty easy on the eyes, so that's a perk. I wish I had more time to see shows these days, but I'm mostly hanging out at music venues rather than musical venues these days. It's not a bad thing - I love my job, of course - but I don't get to do the things I used to love as much any more. I mean, I haven't seen a musical since Next to Normal closed!

Your roommate sounds like too many guys these days - don't they take any pride in dressing well and - heaven forbid - matching? So many guys I went to high school with were hopeless when it came to wearing clothes outside of our private school uniforms. It sounds like what you wore in high school was better than what we were forced to wear. Although, I can totally rock a blazer.

Feel free to take your time on that question. I love to ask questions (I think I mentioned that already?) so be prepared for inquisitive Blaine! Admittedly, I don't even know how I'd answer that question so that's probably not fair that I asked you something I don't know myself, huh? Awesome that you lived in Atlanta! I'm staying at the Georgian Terrace - which I was told is "very swanky" even though I assure you I'm not paying for it - and I went to a good restaurant for lunch. Tomorrow, I'm planning on going to some tea room

that's around the corner from my hotel. Mary Mac's, I think? I was told that it has the best Southern food in town so I figured it was worth a shot. Unfortunately I won't have time to sight see much or go anywhere aside from my previously planned itinerary, but I'll probably be back here a few times over the next few months so I'd love to hear any suggestions you might have for the next time I visit. And don't just tell me touristy places - I love to go off the beaten path and live like a local whenever possible. It's also why I don't usually go the whole tourist route when I have friends come and visit from out of town; gotta show them what NYC is all about!

And I'm always excited to get an email from you. I hope to get another one soon.

-Blaine

From: Kurt Hummel

Subject: RE: RE: RE: RE: RE: Hi Kurt!

Sent: 5:01pm

B,

Sorry so short. I lost track of time so I had to head to the theater hence my delayed and curt reply. But I'll give you a full, detailed email later tonight if that's okay with you. Just wanted to let you know that I haven't forgotten about you. Then again, how could I? ;)

-K

- Sent from my iPhone

KURT

I placed the phone in my pocket upon arriving at the theater with a slight blush flushing my cheeks. It was a mixture of the chilly summer air and the fact that I had been exchanging flirty emails with Blaine for the better part of the afternoon. I was on cloud nine; it felt thrilling to email with Blaine already and I couldn't imagine what it'd be like if - no, when - we were to meet in person.

But the cloud came crashing down when I saw Lauren making a beeline in my general direction as I entered the side stage area to get into position for tonight. She looked... down. Something wasn't right, like she was disappointed or...

"Hey," she said with a slight slouch. She pushed up the glasses on her nose with a huff.

"What's going on?" I asked, trying to sound tender with my question.

"I'm confused," she stated. "Blaine was beyond eager to get my phone number the other night but he hasn't called or texted or anything." I flinched and hoped she didn't notice my reaction as she continued. "I really hope he isn't doing the whole waiting-three-days-to-call thing because Zizes does not play games."

"Uh... well," I fumbled. Should I be the one to tell her that Blaine is gay? Is that outing him in some strange way? I don't think Blaine even has any idea that Lauren a) knows that he has her phone number, and b) thinks he's straight. But what if I was her pining after some straight guy who I thought was gay? Would I want her to tell me?

"Lauren, I have to tell you something," I said, slight nervousness coming from my voice, but deciding I'd definitely want to know if I was in her shoes. "I got a message from Blaine last night."

"Oh? Did he want to know more about me? Was he using you to get the inside-"

"I-"

"I bet he was wanting to-"

"Lauren, don't-"

"Do you think he-"

"ZIZES!" I screamed. She looked at me in total shock and snapped her mouth shut. "Thank you," I continued. "Blaine messaged me. On NYCDate."

Perplexion plagued her face. "On NYCDate? How did he..." she trailed off for a moment and I could practically see the cogs in her head formulating what I was getting at. Once her eyes were as big as saucers, I realized the point had come through. "Oh," she said quietly.

"I'm really sorry," I replied, gently placing my hand on her shoulder. She flinched slightly but not ending the contact.

"It's okay, I guess," she said, disappointment echoing from every syllable. "I just... I wanted it to work out for me for once. And Blaine was always so nice to me at The Bell House and he's really attractive and everything, I just wanted someone to notice me. And having someone like him notice me... it made me think I was worth it, you know?"

I rubbed her shoulder gently. "You are worth it, Lauren. If I was straight, I'd snap you right up," to that she gave a slight chuckle. "But someone's out there for you. Don't give up yet. I haven't."

She nodded slowly before turning her gaze back to me. "And look where that got you," she said with a wink. I rolled my eyes as her suggestion before she started chortling. "Oh god, I'm totally realizing that he was gay and I never realized it." I looked at her, puzzled. Sensing my confusion, she continued. "One night when a particularly horrific band was playing, I was telling him about my celebrity boyfriends - many of whom were Broadway actors like Aaron Tveit and Skylar Astin - and he asked why I wouldn't include Jonathan Groff. I said it wouldn't work since he was gay and he said something like 'I don't see how that's a problem.' Then he seemed a little too enthusiastic when I mentioned that I had seen Magic Mike and he and I did watch the scene with Channing Tatum dancing to "Pony" at least twice; laughing the whole time. God, it's really all coming together now and I just didn't realize. He just never came out and told me he was gay."

With that realization, I hardened and removed my hand from her shoulder. My previous fear about him being gay yet closeted might hold water since he never felt the need to come out to Lauren - a girl that he communicated with on a regular basis. He certainly didn't hold back in the flirtation department via email, but I only could hope the same would ring true if we were out in public. What if I had another William/James situation? This shit is really getting old.

"Kurt!" Roselyn yelled over the barrier backstage - effectively removing me from my thoughts of Blaine. "I need you back here!"

"Coming!" I replied, giving Lauren an apologetic shrug as I moved back toward the fitting area.

"Don't think you're getting off that easy," Lauren said as I scurried away. "I want to hear all about this message from Blaine when you have the time."

...

Hours later, I found myself back at my apartment - Wes was gone...again - with my Freemail account sitting open and the most recent chain of emails with Blaine staring at me. Throughout the show, I thought about the situation with Blaine and how I really hoped he wasn't another closet case. It was the curse of my love life for... well, my entire dating life... I just couldn't deal with it yet again. Having James be that way was bad enough; I can't have Blaine - gorgeous, sweet, goofy Blaine - be another one on my list of regrets.

My mind clouded over with thoughts of him before I saw a blinking tab at the bottom of my screen in my Freechat box.

Blaine: I saw that you were online and figured I'd try to IM you. I hope that's okay...

I still wasn't quite sure what to make of Blaine at this point - my thoughts bubbling with our flirty conversations from earlier along with the niggling feeling in the back of my mind that he was like every other guy that I dated - and decided to reply noncommittally.

Kurt: It's fine. Immediately, he replied.

Blaine: Awesome! I hope I'm not bothering you. I'm lonely here and figured I could chat with you and save you from writing another email. :)

I smiled briefly before snapping my face back to its indifferent state. Even if Blaine couldn't see me, I can't give him the satisfaction of making me feel happy when he could only disappoint me again.

Blaine: I had an idea while you were at work. What if we played 20 questions? It'll be easier to break the ice that way (not that the emails weren't beginnings) but it'll help us get to know each other a little better in a quicker manner.

I grinned.

Kurt: Perfect. Me first.

Blaine: Fire away.

Oh, that I will.

Kurt: What's your favorite color?

No sense in busting out the big guns yet. I should probably ease him into the Big Question of the night.

Blaine: Navy blue. What's your favorite season?

Kurt: Autumn. How many siblings do you have?

Blaine: One annoying older brother. You?

Kurt: One step-brother. Probably just as annoying as your brother.

I laughed a bit as I thought of Finn. He really was an annoying oaf most of the time - though he was less annoying now than he was in high school and our first year out of school.

But I came back to the quest at hand when I realized I couldn't dawdle anymore.

Kurt: How old were you when you came out?

I waited with bated breath as I saw that he was typing his response.

Blaine: Wow, not waiting before dropping some serious questions.

I froze. Please tell me he's not avoiding the question. Annoyed and slightly pissed off, I typed back.

Kurt: That wasn't an answer, Blaine.

Blaine: Hold your horses, I'm getting there! I waited again as the box signaled that he was typing again; this response taking longer than any of his previous ones.

Blaine: I was 14 when I came out to my parents and my brother. They were surprised at first and weren't sure how to take it, but they've always loved and supported me even if they don't always understand me.

"Thank god!" I yelled, immediately realizing that I was thankful that Wes wasn't there to hear me yelling at my laptop.

Kurt: And how did your friends take it?

Blaine: Tsk tsk. Not following procedure with two questions in a row.

I rolled my eyes at his response.

Kurt: Fiiiiiine. Ask me another question and put that in your queue to answer next.

Blaine: Deal. ;) What was your most romantic date?

I laughed at his question.

Kurt: Now who's asking deep questions?

Blaine: I don't believe that was an answer, Kurt.

Kurt: Geez, what a stickler. ;)

I couldn't help but giggle at our playful banter. If we were anything like this in person, he and I were destined for something awesome. I thoughtfully pondered on his question before clacking away at the answer.

Kurt: I'd have to say a picnic in Central Park. It was simple, but the gesture was incredibly thoughtful.

Blaine: To answer your question, my friends took my coming out well. In fact, probably too well since they've been unsuccessfully trying to set me up with guys since high school. But they're wonderful people and they care about me.

I sighed relief. It seems like I had over analyzed the whole thing; such typical Kurt Hummel behavior. Blaine was out, seemed to have a good relationship with his family and had good friends on his side. All signs point toward go.

Blaine: If you could live anywhere else in the world, where would it be?

Kurt: Paris, of course. What about you?

Blaine: San Francisco maybe? I haven't really thought about moving - I love New York too much to cheat on it.

I giggled. He was so goofy and endearing; I loved it. After a slight lull in our conversation, I prompted him to continue.

Kurt: Keep those questions coming, Blaine! You have a lot to learn. ;)

After that nudge, the conversation continued to flow. We chatted back and forth for nearly four hours and I could hardly believe he and I talked for that long about everything and nothing at the same time. It was nice and relaxing to get to know little things about him before meeting him in person. We mostly talked about things we liked, music we loved, funny quotes from movies we enjoyed. We never delved back into the deeper conversations about growing up or life experiences or - god forbid - exes, but keeping the conversation light was... perfect.

By the time 2am rolled around, Blaine admitted that although he wanted to continue chatting all night, he had a meeting in the morning that he needed to prepare for and decided he should call it a night.

Just as I was about to bid him adieu, one thing stayed in the forefront of my brain.

Kurt: Blaine?

Blaine: Yeah?

Kurt: Why did you ask me about my most romantic date?

Blaine: I wanted to see what I had to compete with. ;) Goodnight Kurt.

The grin on my face from that one simple comment with an unspoken promise of a first date - and a romantic one at that - kept a smile on my face until sleep took me that night.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Sunday, October 21

BLAINE

The air seemed to have chilled slightly overnight as the cooler wind blew dried leaves on the path below my feet as I walked through the park Sunday afternoon. I'd spent much of the day Saturday cooped up in my hotel room (not that I minded since some of that was spent emailing Kurt), but I needed to experience some of the city before I headed home. Sure, we had parks and outdoor space in New York, but something about being in Atlanta felt different and oddly freer. While I traipsed around the park, I couldn't hear the sounds of car horns or street vendors eager to make a sale like I would in New York. Things here were quieter, though I could still hear the murmurs of people chatting as they ran through the park or the faintest sound of dogs barking from the dog park nearby.

The walk through the park had given me time to truly reflect on things - away from the city, my friends, my family and even my phone. I decided to leave my phone in the hotel today in order to focus on my brunch with Jeremy and give myself time to take a break from the technology that I'd become reliant on.

Not having my phone was slightly problematic when I realized Jeremy didn't have a way to contact me should he be late, but it ended up not being an issue since this place was a fairly established stop on the Atlanta culture train and Jeremy was prompt. Though I wish someone had warned me about the post-church crowd since the place was packed with women in their finest dresses and largest hats waiting with their husbands in equally dapper suits and me feeling like a scrub in dark wash jeans and a oxford with a cardigan.

Jeremy ended up being dressed similarly - instantly putting me at ease since I wanted to blend in to unfamiliar environments as much as possible - and our brunch had gone exceedingly well. We didn't use the time to talk about work stuff too much, but instead focused on bands that inspired us and shared horror stories of what happened behind the booth from our various recording sessions. We ended up chatting and laughing long after we had finished our food and upon realizing that he was needed elsewhere, we set up a plan for me to meet him at his studio for a few hours the next day before my flight back to New York to talk more about plans for the Atticus Finch album.

I decided that I had eaten far too much fried chicken and needed a walk which led to me to my walk around Piedmont Park. The walk wasn't far - probably the same as three avenues - and the slight chill to the air made the walk seem more bearable than it would be in the summer months.

Once I crossed the street to enter the park's gates, the sight I'd seen was stunning - leaves on the trees were slightly orange and yellowed from the season with the city's collection of skyscrapers peppering the background; creating the perfect scene for the beauty of the city's modern dwellings with the simplicity and natural state of the park. I grumbled when I groped for my phone in my pocket only to remember that I'd left my phone in the room, but resigned myself to take a photo next time I visited when I wasn't imposing a technology break on myself.

Admittedly, leaving my phone in my room also meant I was taking this break to force myself to think about whatever could be brewing with Kurt. It was the first thing to pop into my mind when I left my phone in the room - noting that I wouldn't be able to get emails from him - but the second I realized it, I knew that I probably should for my emotional health.

My whole life I had been prone to wear my heart (and emotions) on my sleeve. My face betrayed my brain since it so easily could show my feelings without me having to articulate them. Often I found it annoying - especially when getting horrific Christmas presents or trying to hide surprise when playing poker - but it truly was a problem when it came to relationships.

The thing I was always so concerned about in relationships was that I always ended up hurt in the end. I suppose that's what happens to anyone after a particularly bad break-up, but for me I was always the one who left heartbroken where the other guy left scot-free. I'm a passionate guy and sometimes my passion can be a little... intense. It has worked in the past few years for me to throw my passion and dedication into my work and hide behind my career, but it was a lonely path; one that I was hoping to shift and allow someone to join in my life, but to be honest I was terrified.

When starting to date someone new, I tend to get overly excited from the start and would happily lay down my own happiness in order to make someone else feel good. This led to two possible results - one, that I would be walked over like a doormat, and two, that my willingness to appease and excitement would come off as clingy. It resulted in many strong friendships - Santana being one of the beneficiaries of my nature - but rarely had it worked out in the love department.

I was thankful that Santana wasn't around for my last boyfriend - Jared. Jared was a guy who I met at an open night mic my senior year of college and I was instantly drawn to him. He was a law student at Columbia and barely a year older than me, but he had something about him that was alluring and mysterious that I couldn't keep myself away. He was taller than me, not that it was hard to be in the first place, with piercing hazel eyes and chocolate brown hair with a deep tan and dimples that only showed when his smile was genuine.

We had exchanged numbers the first night we met and I couldn't wait long enough for us to talk again. I called him the next day to arrange for a proper date and he gladly accepted. I skipped class that day to try to plan the perfect date - dinner at a four-star restaurant, a ride in a pedicab near Central Park concluding with a visit to one of my favorite jazz clubs in the Upper West Side. Jared was impressed by my efforts and quickly agreed to date number two when I dropped him off at home that evening. We ended up going on 8 dates in 11 days and I was on cloud nine.

About a month into our relationship, it dawned on me that Jared hadn't ever taken the initiative to plan any of our dates and I never ended up meeting any of his friends. I was the one who asked him out every night, the one who paid for the dinners and shows, and I was never the recipient of the showering of praises and affections that I had doted on him. I figured it was my duty as a gentleman to be chivalrous in a relationship but sometimes I would try to ask him about how he felt about me or what he was thinking. The minute I did, he would change the topic to something about music or class or would press his lips against mine and I'd get lost in his mouth. I wasn't complaining at the time since I assumed he just wasn't as open as I was emotionally - we were in our early 20s after all - so I gave him some time.

Our issues bubbled to a head on Valentine's Day. He and I had been together two months and though I thought it unnecessary to celebrate monthly anniversaries, ours happened to fall on February 14th so I wanted to make the night extra special. I bought roses, kicked my roommate out of our apartment and ordered take out from his favorite restaurant. I also bought him an engraved business card holder from Tiffanys since he would likely need it when he was a hotshot lawyer. When he came to the apartment - 45 minutes after the time we had agreed on - he immediately started assaulting my lips with his own. I was taken back in the moment but soon brought myself back to reality when I presented him with his flowers and Valentine's gift. He gasped at the sight of the Tiffany-blue box and immediately forgot about anything else. I was happy that he enjoyed his gift, but the fact that he hadn't noticed the other things I'd done hurt a little.

Later, over the intimate dinner I had scrounged up, I had admitted that I thought I was falling in love with him. He looked at me sheepishly as I glanced at him expectantly, hoping for his own declaration of love, but his response was to take a crumpled envelope from his pocket and present it to me. I smiled, touched with the hope that this would be the sweeping, romantic gesture I was hoping for, and opened it - finding a generic card signed "Best, Jared" with no personal note. It didn't even have my name on it.

I wanted to think that he had just forgotten or that he just wasn't into Valentine's Day, but from that day on I was skeptical of his intentions. I stopped planning dates and asked that he come up with something for us to do, but when I placed the planning on him, he replied that he was too busy with school to think of something and that I should just do it. One night after I begrudgingly planned for us to go to dinner at some hole in the wall in Chinatown, I sat at the table when the check was presented without removing my wallet from my pocket to see if the inkling I'd been feeling since Valentine's Day was true. And, unfortunately, I had received my confirmation; after we sat and chatted idly for 15 minutes, he asked "Aren't you going to handle that?" he said as he nodded toward the check still perched at the edge of the table.

At that moment, my emotions came crashing down and the rage spilled onto my face as I stormed out of the restaurant leaving Jared to manage with the bill. I was so blinded by him and my first real relationship that I failed to notice how he was walking all over me and how I'd let him do it. I romanced him and cared for him and in return, I received nothing but a warm body to stand next to and a smattering of kisses that had no depth. I had denied all of the red flags with the hope that I was just seeing things but now it couldn't be denied.

Jared kept trying to call and text me that night but I never answered. I was seething and to speak with him would only cause my emotions to rage even more. But I realized it was truly over when he didn't call me after that night. Jared didn't want to fight for me and I was done having feelings for someone who seemed to only care about how he could be taken care of by a man who he, apparently, didn't have feelings for.

I was crushed and wanted to just call someone - anyone - and talk to them about it. Instead, I found myself alone in my shared apartment beating the crap out of the pillows on my bed. Instead of beating the down feathers to oblivion, I left the apartment and started to run. And I ran for two and a half hours.

I pushed through the pain of the run, something I hadn't done since I ran track at Dalton, but it didn't matter. The pain shooting through my legs had been better than the one aching in my heart. The best

benefit of the run, aside from realizing that I still had the stamina to run a half marathon, was the clarity that the endorphins had created.

I realized that I had let the last two-ish months with Jared dictate my entire life. I had let the things I had aspired to slip through the cracks; my grades were slipping, I hadn't talked to my friends in ages, I hadn't visited my parents or spoken with Cooper nearly the entire duration of our relationship. I realized that I had gone all in and came out of it broke and broken.

From that point on, I decided to abandon dating and go full-force into school and really figuring out what I wanted to do with my life. Thankfully I applied for my internship with Rialto not too long after our breakup and the rest - as they say - is history. But ever since Jared, I hadn't dated anyone for fear of having my heart crushed by a man who only took advantage of me.

But now that Kurt was in the picture, I was intentionally trying to be guarded and not become overwhelmed with the potential of a new boyfriend, but as they say "old habits die hard" and I still found myself yearning to talk to him as much as possible and learn everything about him. It was terrifying; what if Kurt was like Jared? What if he only saw me as someone who would take care of him? What if I was the perpetual "sugar daddy?"

The romantic within myself wanted to hope for the best, but part of me was still riddled with doubt. I knew that no two people were the same and the likelihood that Kurt would be like Jared might be slight, but my neurosis still managed to peek through my rose colored glasses.

I was shaken from my thoughts when the breeze soon became too much for me to handle in my cardigan and I headed back toward the hotel. The long walk back provided no relief to the doubt clouding my mind and I must have looked either deep in thought or intense since the doorman at the hotel asked if I was alright.

I nodded with a slight smile as I entered the hotel and headed toward the elevator and toward my room. I looked at my reflection in the mirrored door of the elevator and realized I really did look super intense and almost angry.

Why am I even analyzing this thing with Kurt so much right now? I thought to myself. It's not like Kurt and I were getting married or anything - it was literally **one** date that we hadn't even scheduled. Why am I already thinking of how this will ruin me rather than how much fun it could be?

I laughed to myself as I emerged from the elevator - slightly more at ease and internally telling myself to take a chill pill. Once in the room, I threw myself onto the bed and laid on my stomach while I flipped open my laptop that was perched on the side table. Once the screen illuminated, I logged into my email. I pushed aside my memories of Jared and my qualms about being too forward with Kurt as a message from Kurt popped up.

Kurt: Hey!

Blaine: Howdy!

Kurt: Really? Howdy? I know you're in the South, but you're not in Texas you know.

Blaine: I can't help it. It at least adds a little more flair than the traditional "hey"

Kurt: I suppose. How did your meeting go this morning?

Blaine: It went great, thanks for asking. Did I tell you where we were going to eat?

Kurt: I think you said Mary Macs, right?

Blaine: Yeppers!

Kurt: You really need to work on those weird phrases you keep saying. ;)

Blaine: Ha. Well, yes. It was really good.

Kurt: I only went once, but it was pretty delicious.

Blaine: It was so good. Too good, actually, since I ended up taking a walk around the park to try and work off some of the fried chicken.

Kurt: I know how that feels. Glad you enjoyed it.

Blaine: Of course. When does a guy not like fried chicken? But enough about me, how are you? What are you up to this morning?

Kurt: Spent a good portion of the morning at the gym then went to work for the matinee. I haven't been to the gym much since I moved back permanently so I figured I needed to have someone kick my ass into shape.

Blaine: Geez, now I feel like a slacker. Do you enjoy torturing yourself on a Sunday?

Kurt: I figure the gym is like my version of church, I guess.

Blaine: I get that. I run to do the same thing, though rarely on a Sunday. That's when you're supposed to sleep like normal people.

Kurt: I'm not normal, so I guess it's okay then. :)

Blaine: No, you're not normal. But that's what I like best about you. ;)

Kurt: Sorry to cut this short, I just wanted to see how your meeting went. But I actually am meeting up with a friend... Lauren, actually... so I have to run. Have a safe flight back tomorrow and we'll chat again soon.

Blaine: Okay. Have a great evening. And yes, we will talk soon. :)

KURT

I smiled as I closed my laptop. Even though Blaine and I hadn't been exchanging messages for more than a few days, it already felt different. In a way, I think I was glad that he and I at least met in person before we exchanged emails because I knew he wouldn't be sketchy or something. But he made me feel at ease in a way I wasn't expecting. Even if this whole thing didn't turn into a romantic relationship, I knew he and I could be friends. Besides, I always could use another friend to join me when I try for lottery at some of the more popular (and expensive) Broadway shows.

I placed my laptop on my nightstand and walked into the kitchen to see Wes hunched over a bowl of cereal at the table. "My, what a gourmet feast!" I joked as I grabbed my keys from the key hook next to the

fridge. Wes replied with an eye roll and another spoonful of Cheerios into his mouth. "I'll be back later," I replied as I grabbed my keys off the key ring by the fridge.

"Mewh bot a gates?" he said, milk spilling out the side of his mouth.

"Don't be a barbarian, Wes," I retorted. He swallowed and continued.

"I said, you got a date?"

I grinned mischievously. *God, he's nosy.* "Bye Wes," I replied.

"Wait! So you do?!" he exclaimed as my hand brushed the front doorknob.

"I'll never tell," I added as I twisted the knob and headed down the hall and out the door. I descended the six flights of stairs, the one disadvantage to living in a building without an elevator, and was greeted by the blistery cold October day. I hiked my scarf up tighter on my neck and buttoned the top button of my peacoat and made my way down 23rd Street toward the east side. Living on West 23rd put Wes and I at the heart of Chelsea and convenient to the 1. Thankfully, Lauren and I had agreed to eat at Dos Caminos near Madison Square Park which meant that it was only a few avenues east and a couple blocks north from our apartment at 23rd and 7th and wouldn't require a subway ride.

As I crossed over 5th and cut through the park, I realized that I probably should have at least taken the bus since my hands were freezing and a slight drizzle was dusting the shoulders of my jacket. If this gross weather kept up, I was definitely going to cab it back to the apartment. Thank god taxis finally started taking credit cards; those times when they only took cash were incredibly inconvenient.

I rounded the corner and was thankful for the warmth emulating from the inside of the restaurant. I was about to put in my name for a table when I spotted Lauren in the corner checking out the menu. My boots squeaked a bit on the slicked concrete floor as I walked back to greet her.

"I'm not late, am I?" I asked as I unbuttoned my coat and unfurled my scarf before placing both items on the back of my chair.

"Not at all," Lauren said as she peered over the top of the menu with a smile. She clapped the menu closed and dropped it on the table before clasping her hands together and placing them daintily on the table. "So, how was your day post-show?"

"Eh, nothing really. Just ended up watching reruns of Flipping Out and tidying up a bit. My roommate is kind of a mess sometimes so I tend to take on more cleaning than he does," I replied as I looked over the menu.

"Sounds like an exciting Sunday," she droned sarcastically just before the waitress came and took our order. Once our orders were placed and waters placed in front of us, we slipped into a comfortable silence before Lauren piped up. "So, have you talked to Blaine lately?"

I nearly choked on my water as I looked at her, an eyebrow quirked in curiosity as I guiltily avoided eye contact.

"I...uh..." I stammered.

"Kurt," she said softly, my eyes still not meeting hers. "Kurt, come on." With her insistence I looked at her as a soft smile graced her face. "So?"

I sighed. "We talked a lot last night and chatted a bit before I came here."

She grinned. "I'm glad to hear it. You know you can tell me these things, right?"

I nodded. "It's just... the way that I told you about Blaine... Lauren, you were so excited about Blaine and how he wanted your number. I hated telling you that afternoon, but thought that you should know about him. It wasn't really my business to share, but... I... I don't know how to explain, really."

She giggled lightly. "It's okay, Kurt. It wouldn't be the first time I fell for a gay guy. But I know you had it rough in high school and, based on the small details you've told me about your dating life since then, you needed a good thing to happen in the romance department."

"But you do too!" I exclaimed. "You're so confident and you've done so much with your life over these past few years. I hated knowing that this was... I don't know... something that you weren't expecting. You deserve so much more," I said as I lightly touched her hand that lay on the table. She turned her palm up and squeezed my hand when our palms met on top of the table.

"It's okay," she stated. "I think I was more excited about the attention rather than Blaine. Don't get me wrong, he's a great guy, but he's not tall enough for me," she said, wrinkling her nose at the thought of Blaine's height.

I laughed. "Sorry that he's not like 6'4" and a complete babe."

"I never said he wasn't a complete babe," she added with a wink.

I rolled my eyes and laughed. I didn't think dinner would be awkward, but she and I hadn't talked much about how the whole Blaine situation transpired, but little did I know the whole situation would practically be as if it never happened.

"Just know I'm happy for you, okay?" she said before sipping through her straw. I nodded. "You've dealt with more than a lot of people have. High school blew, people were so shitty to you, you were dealt a bad hand when it came to your mom and dad," the recollection made me wince as she continued. "But now, things are looking up. You're working in your dream job, you have a guy interested in you who is a gem from what I can tell, and your family life is good. Kurt... now could be your time."

I beamed. "Thanks, Zizes." I gave pause when the waitress dropped off our food at our table before dismissing herself once she realized we were set for the time. "You sure know how to give a lady a pep talk," I said before taking a bite of my fajita.

Lauren chuckled between bites of her rice. "Please, you're no lady. And I bet that's one of the things that Blaine loves best about you."

Now it was my turn to laugh. Lauren excused herself to the restroom leaving me to giggle away at the table all alone. But I was jilted from my laughter when I saw a notification pop up on my phone.

A new email?

From: Blaine Anderson Subject: 25554160-B

I blinked at the email on my phone. What the hell is this?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Monday, October 22

KURT

I had spent a good portion of the morning running errands and another hour at the gym with my personal trainer, but now it was nearly four in the afternoon and the cryptic email from Blaine was still bothering me.

From: Blaine Anderson Subject: 25554160-B

This message contains no content.

Why would Blaine send me something without anything in the body of the email? And what exactly did he send me anyway? I would have asked him, but I was afraid that either he sent whatever it was to me on accident or it was some type of weird test. I was never very good at puzzles, so this particular one was incredibly annoying because my curiosity was starting to get the best of me but I was too proud to ask and too frustrated to figure it out myself.

Plus Blaine was coming back from Atlanta today. I wanted to email him again once he got back to try and figure out when we can go on our date. Sure, it might be a little presumptuous of me to assume that he wanted to go out with me, but he did allude to the fact that he wanted to plan a romantic date and who was I to turn the man down?

Normally I would ask Wes, but that guy really was driving me insane with this whole dating business. I get that he was just trying to help, but he knows to just let me do my own thing and I'll let him know the details if and when I'm ready. But coming home to the Spanish Inquisition every time I go out was really grating on my last nerve. Must be a straight guy thing.

But if I didn't figure out what was going on with this email soon, I was going to lose it.

Maybe...

I flipped my laptop open - avoiding the email tab that I'd left open the night before - and logged into Skype. With any luck...

Success!

I clicked on her name twice and a call window popped open.

"KURT!" I heard through my speakers as the picture came into view.

"You look lovely today, Mercedes," I replied when I could see one of my closest friends come through on her webcam. "I love the waves and ombre thing you have going on."

She ruffled her hair. "Thanks sweetie. How are you? It has been too long since we last spoke, Mr. Hummel."

"I know, I know! This is me remedying the situation and apologizing profusely for not calling you sooner. I've been good... busy. How are you?"

She smiled. "Doing great, Kurt. Loving Chicago. You'll have to come and visit me soon. I just have to take you to Boys Town."

I laughed. "If you insist." I looked away for a moment, still unsure if I should ask Mercedes for her help in figuring out this email. Mercedes was one of the most intelligent people I'd ever known and she had a knack with puzzles so I figured she could help. But soliciting her help may require me to tell her what was going on with Blaine. It wouldn't be so bad, but after shutting people out of my romantic life for so long, it's not like I was eager to divulge information about this guy who I hadn't even been on a date with to one of my closest friends. "I have to admit, I'm calling you for selfish reasons," I said, finally looking at her through my computer screen again.

She quirked an eyebrow in interest. "I'd hardly say calling to talk to one of your friends is selfish, Kurt."

"No, no. I mean, I am calling to chat with you of course, but I also need your help with something."

"Is everything okay?" she said, voice full of concern.

I shrugged her off. "Of course, it's nothing like that. I just... I have a conundrum that I need help with."

"A conundrum! Ooh, do tell! And snaps on the \$2 word," she exclaimed as she cupped her chin in her hands, eager for me to continue.

I laughed. "Well, I got a really weird email but I don't know what it means."

"Who's the email from?"

I blushed. "Uh..." Dammit for having really pale skin with a blush always making me look like a bright red tomato; gave me away every time. And Mercedes knew me too well to just let it go.

"KURT! Is this email from a GUY?! A guy who might LIKE you? What's his name?" she practically yelled at me through the computer. I chuckled when I saw the picture had frozen a bit during her outcry and an image of her looking slightly crazy with her mouth wide open in surprise.

"Yes, it's from a guy" I replied. "His name is Blaine, but that's all I'm telling you right now. But his email... I don't know if it's some kind of code or something and it's driving me nuts."

She was clapping her hands giddily at the thought of me getting an email from a guy. "Kurt, why didn't you just ask him what the email means? You could have replied and asked what it meant!"

I rolled my eyes. "That would mean admitting I didn't understand and you know I just can't have that," I groaned. "I want to seem like I'm intelligent and witty and... I didn't want him to think I'd missed out on the joke or whatever it is."

"But Kurt, you are all of those things. Asking him what it meant wouldn't mean admitting defeat or anything like that," she cooed kindly.

"I mean, I know that. But..."

"You totally want the upper hand," Mercedes added with a wink. "It's okay, Kurt. You don't fool me. I've known you long enough. Alright, why don't you forward his email to me?"

I shook my head. "I've also known *you* a long time and I know if I did that, you would Google him for hours to try to get the deets. No way. I'll read it to you."

She giggled. "Alright, alright, you caught me. But I won't be able to write it down fast enough I'm sure."

I shook my head. "Not true. It's a very short email."

"Okay, shoot," she said as she grabbed a pen and paper from somewhere off-screen.

"Ready?" She nodded. "25554160 hyphen B."

She scribbled away on the paper before looking back up into the camera. "Got it, what's next?"

"That's it."

"That's it?"

"I'm dyin' if I'm lyin'" I added with a laugh. "And that's not even the body of the email. That's the subject line. But it's all that he sent."

She stared at the paper for a minute and scribbled some more things on the paper. I took the time that she spent scribbling investigating my nail bits until I heard her gasp over the call.

"You said his name is Blaine, right?"

I looked at her quizzically. "Yes...?"

She was beaming now with a smug grin and a glint in her eyes. "I think I know what it is, but first, I need you to tell me more about Blaine."

"Mercedes that's not fair! You know I don't want to talk about it!"

"I don't know, I think it's a pretty fair trade considering how much you wanted to figure out what this means."

I groaned. "Ugh, you better have it figured out."

She laughed. "Oh, I do. But I'm holding out until you dish."

"Fiiiine," I replied, feigning annoyance. "So, Blaine is this guy I met... well, met at a show in Brooklyn a few weeks ago."

"What theater is in Brooklyn?" she asked.

"No, not that kind of show. A concert, really," I corrected.

"Oh. What kind of music?"

"Rock, I guess," I continued. "Anyway, he works in the music industry signing bands and stuff and he actually found me on this online dating site and we kept email..."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Back it up. Online dating site?"

I blushed. "Oh. Uh. I forgot I didn't tell you that. Now that I'm in New York full-time, I wanted to try dating again now that..." I took a breath, "I'm done being alone, Mercedes. And this was one way to remedy it that didn't involve going to gay bars and getting picked up by sweaty guys in poly-blend shirts."

She laughed. "I'm sorry that you felt lonely, Kurt. But I'm glad you took the initiative to try to change that for yourself. I wish I had that courage."

I tucked away her response before continuing. "Well, it seems to have paid off with Blaine. Although I went on a date with another guy before I met Blaine and though he was a total dreamboat, he was too much like William and we know that wasn't going to happen two times."

"Thank god for that!" she exclaimed. She had been there for my heartbreak post-William and had a vendetta against the guy that she had met only once when she had visited me the summer he and I were together. "So things are going okay with Blaine?"

"I guess. We haven't been on an official date yet, but we've been talking over email and Freechat for a couple of days. But he's really... great," I said with a smile.

"You must really like him," she said as my attention snapped back to the warm smile on her face.

"I think I do. Or I will whenever I figure out what his email means!" I said, diverting her attention back to the matter at hand. Or, at least, the matter at hand in my head.

"I guess a deal is a deal, but I don't want to outright tell you what I think it is," she suggested with a wink.

"Mercedes! That's not fair!"

"Oh hush. Think of it as me giving you guidance so you can figure it out for yourself."

I rolled my eyes. "Okayyy, just help a brotha out!"

She giggled as she wrote something on a fresh sheet of paper. With one last flourish of the pen she flipped over the paper and held it up to the camera. "What does this mean to you?"

The paper in her hand read 5) 555 5171

"It's a phone number. An Ohio phone number, to be exact."

She nodded. "Right. And how did you know what the 5 meant?"

"Well, most of us either have 419 or 567 area codes, so that 5) denotes the area..." I sat with my mouth gaping as Mercedes lit up with excitement; knowing that something had clicked. "Oh my god."

"Oh my god is right!" she yelled.

"It's his phone number! The 2 is for 212 and the rest are the seven digits of making up a phone number! And the B is his sign off for his name! Oh my GOD! He gave me his phone number! Mercedes, Blaine Anderson gave me his phone number!"

She laughed heartily as I continued my giddy dance in my chair. "I'm glad to have helped you out sir."

"Oh my god, thank you thank you thank you so much! Sorry about my manners, I'm just overwhelmed with ...this!" I was shaking my cell phone with excitement. But as quickly as the excitement came, it escaped my face when I realized that now that I had his number, I had to figure out what to do with it. "What do I do?" I muttered to Mercedes.

"Uh, you call him? Actually, I take that back. Why don't you text him first? I know that you're probably a little... shy with this whole actually-calling-him thing, but we live in the 21st century and I'm sure the guy has text messaging. That way you'll acknowledge that you have his number and you'll still get to talk to him, but you won't have to worry about the potential awkwardness that would result with trying to come up with conversation for a few minutes," Mercedes contended.

I grinned. "I can definitely get into that." I thought for a minute. "But I still don't know what to say!"

She rolled her eyes. "Just say 'hi! I have your number! Text me back!'"

"That's not flirty enough Mercedes," I snorted.

"Well now, that response is a far cry from what you would have said in high school," she said with a chuckle. "I can't be the one to flirt for you but just don't over think it. Just say hi and see how he is and let it go from there. That's what I'd do." She glanced to the side of the screen before speaking again. "Sorry but I have to go. Can we not let so long come between our chats?"

"Of course," I replied with a giggle. "Why don't you call me next time?"

"Deal. Bye honey."

"Bye!" I waved as she exited out of the conversation. I clicked the laptop closed and grabbed my phone sitting on the table.

Keep it simple, I kept telling myself over and over again in my head as I typed out a text to Blaine. I grinned as I completed the simple but loaded text and clicked send, hoping the recipient on the other end was as thrilled as I was to have each others digits in our possession.

BLAINE

"We're now beginning our descent into New York's JFK airport. Please stow all tray tables and bring all seats to their full upright position."

I groaned as I brought my seat up. Today had been awful. Well, not really. The time spent with Jeremy and his staff at his studio was great and Jeremy and I had fallen into a quick friendship-esque bond, but the whole thing with Kurt had left a looming cloud of doubt over my head. The emotionally invested-ness I was experiencing was already kicking in and he and I hadn't been on a date yet. Thank god I wasn't telling Santana about Kurt yet; she'd be giving me hell.

When the flight attendant passed by, I chucked my empty cup in the bag, the last remaining remnants of the Bloody Mary I'd ordered on the flight. Normally I wasn't one to drink on flights - especially such a short one - but I felt like I needed to take the edge off a little and since you can't smoke on a plane, this would have to do. I only smoked when I was stressed out and I was stressed in leaps and bounds.

I was afraid that I was in the stage where I had freaked Kurt out and he and I hadn't even met. Perhaps giving him my phone number was too forward and I was already coming on too strong. I audibly groaned again, earning a flicker of annoyance from the older lady sitting in the seat on the window, but I didn't care.

Today had been frustrating as hell and I was dangerously close to forgetting all about it by sinking into some greasy Chinese food and watching Harry Potter and forgetting about the world.

I didn't even notice that we had landed and were taxiing into the gate until the woman next to me looked at me expectantly as the plane went to a stop. Startled, I stumbled up from my seat and jumped into the aisle as the fasten seat belt sign dinged off. The formerly silent plane was now filled with murmurs of people on their phones; telling friends or family that they'd arrived or discussing connecting flights.

Without thinking about it, I pulled my phone out of my pocket and turned it on. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em I guess. Once the home screen pulled up, I shoved my phone back in my pocket and smiled bleakly at the woman who had occupied the aisle seat as I opened the overhead compartment and pulled out my bag.

Somehow, I had made my way from the plane, through the terminal, all the way to the taxi stand and found myself in a cab that, apparently, was headed towards my apartment. After staring out the window for what felt like an eternity, I went to check the time on the TV screen that was adhered to the seat in front of me, only to realize that it was out of order. I dug into my pocket and unlocked the screen and saw the time.

6:02pm

But directly under that was a notification.

917 555 9131

Text Message

Curiously, I swiped my thumb to the side of the touchscreen, opening the message.

Hi Blaine! It's Kurt. That was quite a puzzle you left me. ;) Hope to learn more puzzling things about you soon.

The breath was sucked out of my chest. The thoughts I had about coming off too strong were washed away. I had been too cryptic with my email that Kurt hadn't initially figured out what it meant! Oh thank god. That's so much better than the alternative.

I readied my fingers under his text as I typed away.

Hi Kurt! Sorry about that. I wasn't sure if you wanted my number or if you wanted to keep chatting via email. How was your Monday? -B

I quickly added him to my contacts and before I could even save his information into my phone, another text came through. Damn, this kid was fast with his fingers.

My brain stuttered at the thought. God, I'm a pervert.

Trust me, if I didn't want your number, you wouldn't hear from me again. So since you did, I must have wanted it. ;) Monday was good, nice to have a day off. How did everything go today? How was your flight? -K

I smiled. It was nice that he remembered my itinerary. I bet Cooper didn't even realize I had returned and I'm sure Santana was probably only partially aware of what I was up to while I was in Atlanta anyway. I had told her a billion times, but her retention of details and dates was horrific.

Things went well, will probably head back to Atlanta post-recording in January. The flight was good, although I spent a lot of it wondering if a certain Mr. Hummel would contact me. -B

I hit send and immediately regretted saying that. My text basically suggested that I had spent the time waiting to hear from him; like I was pining after him. I mean, I was. But it's not like he needed to know that right now.

Before I could over think, another text hit my screen.

Well next time, just tell me what it is. If I'd known, you would have heard from me last night. I don't like to keep a good man waiting. -K

Dear lord, Kurt was going to be the end of me. He was a professional flirt or something. Not that I minded because Jesus, it was hot. Having that kind of attention from a man as attractive as Kurt was definitely a good thing.

I felt things... rousing... at the thought of Kurt before another buzz from my phone pulled me away from a potentially embarrassing moment. Clearly my lack of physical intimacy was making me act like a schoolboy and that was not what I wanted to happen.

So Blaine, how does it feel to be back in Yankee territory? What was your impression of Atlanta? -K

Him turning off the flirting helped pull the blood back to my head as I replied.

It was great. Midtown was perfect and the park nearby was gorgeous in the fall. I bet there are a ton of festivals there. I'm glad I'll be going back at some point; I'd like to see more of the city. -B

Kurt replied almost instantly.

It really was great when I lived there. And surprisingly tolerant, too. I hope you get to see more of it soon. It's no New York, but it's alright I guess. -K

Is it too forward to want Kurt to be my personal Atlanta tour guide? I shook away the thought of Kurt and I traipsing around Atlanta hand-in-hand and replied.

I hope to see more of it soon, but there's something... rather someONE that I'd rather see first. -B

God, I'm horribly cheesy right now. I hope he would appreciate...

Oh, gee. And who would that be? Your crazy cat lady neighbor? I bet she's missed you. -K

I laughed, earning a grunt from the driver who had remained silent until this point. Kurt was quick on his feet and I bet he could really give Santana a run for her money with his quips. God, when they meet each other, it's going to be crazy.

Before replying to Kurt, I checked my calendar for the next few days. Tomorrow we had our big meeting but that didn't start until 10:30. I wonder...

No, although I'm sure Mrs. Lewis did miss me. No, you actually. I know it's short notice, but what are you doing tomorrow morning at 8:30? -B

Those moments between my text and his response felt like torture. Since he and I, apparently, both had iPhones, I could see him typing a reply, then erasing it, then typing again. My constant fear of coming on too strong emerged again but was silenced with Kurt's reply.

Nothing. What did you have in mind? -K

I beamed. Yes!

Coffee? At the Starbucks at 49th and 7th? -B

I saw him typing a reply and squealed at the response.

It's a date. :) -K

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Tuesday, October 23

KURT

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz. Buzz. Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

I opened my eye blearily and peeked at the alarm clock next to my bed that was buzzing with reckless abandon.

7:30am

At first, I groaned and took the extra pillow laying next to me on the bed and plopped it onto my face in an effort to drone out the sound of the alarm and the brightness of the sun that was creeping in through the curtains in my room. But before I could roll over and hit snooze, I practically flew out of bed when I remembered why I was waking up so early on a Tuesday. I had a coffee date with Blaine!

I kicked the covers back and peeked out my door to see if Wes was in the shower. Thankfully, he had already moved into his room and I rushed to collect my towel and robe and flew into the shower; doing my best to remain quiet.

My hygiene routine had changed a lot since high school; gone were the hours spent in front of a vanity slathering creams and lotions on my face. Instead I relied on regular appointments with a dermatologist and a balanced diet with occasional facials administered by an esthetician. High school Kurt would be in awe at my less-than-10-minute showers but I had found that the longer ones just weren't necessary. Besides, I looked good without all that extra stuff.

Post-shower, I shuffled back into my room and threw on the outfit I had picked out last night to wear to my coffee date. I wanted to ensure that I looked fresh but approachable when I met with Blaine and I couldn't wear what I'd worn the first time we met (that's just a no-no). I opted for a baby blue button up with a white v-neck sweater over top and fitted dark indigo jeans and simple cognac dress shoes. The labels all bore designer names, but they weren't important. What was important was that I wanted to make an impression and I had hoped this would work.

After perusing my outfit one last time, I practically skipped into the kitchen to have some toast and hopefully fight off some of the nerves that were in the pit of my stomach when I thought of the date I was going to go on in just over half an hour from now. I didn't want to be late and since I would have to take the train to get to the correct Starbucks, I wanted to brave the train before the rush hour traffic started to get out of hand.

Unfortunately, when I crossed the threshold of the kitchen, Wes was sitting at the table reading something on his phone. He practically spit out his coffee when he saw me standing in our kitchen at 8 in the morning on a day that I would have to work. Since I normally didn't wake up until about 10, this was certainly out of the norm.

"Uh, what are you doing up?" he asked, perplexed.

I shrugged and willing my voice to seem indifferent rather than portray the excitement I felt inside. "Just getting a head start on the day."

He laughed. "Right. A head start, on a Tuesday; wearing real clothes before noon."

I glared at him as I popped two pieces of bread into the toaster. "Just because I take pride in my appearance and don't lounge about all day in grody prep school sweatpants doesn't mean I'm not comfortable." I paused as I grabbed the jam from the fridge. "And besides, why do you care what I'm going anyway?"

Wes grimaced. "Dude, calm down."

"You know how I hate to be called..."

"Kurt! Jesus. Let me talk for a second before you get all defensive." I rolled my eyes and turned back to the toaster, willing it to pop the bread up any second now to avoid this conversation. Wes cleared his throat. "I'm being nosy because you're being so secretive these days. I'm sure it has something to do with this dating thing since the minute I bring it up, you go all hermit crab on me. I've known you for years, Kurt. Stop trying to shut me out all the time. I just... I care."

The toast popped up as I turned around to look at my roommate who looked deeply concerned, eyes pleading for either an explanation or a chance for me not to be mad at him. "Wes, I know, okay. I'm just... nervous. And you know nervous isn't a normal feeling for me."

"Why are you nervous?" he asked.

"Because, there is a reason that I'm up early." I took a deep breath before I gave Wes the satisfaction of knowing what I was up to. "I'm meeting someone for coffee."

I could tell my roommate was trying to hold back his excitement and that one question was nibbling away in his mind, so I waited patiently as he tried to contort his face to one of disinterest rather than curiosity before he asked his question. "Does this 'someone' happen to be a gentleman suitor?"

I laughed. Only Wes and his prep-school persona would ask such a normal question in a ridiculous way. "Who even calls them suitors anymore? But if you must know, yes. It's a guy and it's a date."

Wes emitted a slight squeal before coughing to contain his glee. "Well, that's great."

I rolled my eyes as I turned back to my toast. "You can be excited for me, I won't be mad at you for that." I was spreading the raspberry preserves onto my toast when I felt two arms wrapping me tightly around the shoulders. I started laughing uncontrollably as my roommate continued to squeeze the life out of me before I tried to pry his arms from my shoulders. "No need to be that excited, Wes."

He chuckled as he backed away. "When am I going to meet this guy that makes you, the ever amazing Kurt Hummel, nervous?"

I shook my head. "No sir. I want to be sure that this guy is going to stick around before I introduce him to you crazies." I placed my toast on a paper towel and went to sit on the table, Wes joining me at his seat across from me.

"How will you know if the guy is going to stick around? Six months? Four weeks? Eighteen years? What you're suggesting seems like a rather indeterminate amount of time. Besides, I feel like as your roommate I'm obliged to give any gentleman callers a good talking to about their intentions with you before they try to get all up in your business," Wes stated pointedly.

I burst into a deep laughter; my roommate was an idiot. "First of all, I'm not a girl or.. whatever. And you have no claim over me aside from the fact that we've known each other for years. No guy needs to have *your* approval to date me. And as for a timeline, how about I introduce you to Bl- this *guy*, if he works out, after ten dates?"

Wes' eyes bulged. "Ten dates! That could take months!" I laughed with a slight shrug as I took a bite of my toast. "How about three?"

"This isn't a barter," I retorted.

"Come on Kurt! Ten dates could take awhile. Let's say you go out every weekend on one date per week. I wouldn't meet him until..." he looked at the calendar on the wall, doing quick mental math, "Around New Years. And with your schedule - and I don't even know about this other guy's - it could be until January. That seems like too long to go before you introduce him to your friends."

I smiled a bit. I knew part of the reason Wes was pushing this was because he was curious and, apparently, living vicariously through my dating life. But I knew more than that he was just making sure that I was being open with this guy and trying not to bog myself down with the fact that he could be like William - even though thus far he was the farthest thing from my ex. "Okay, how about... if he's still around in three weeks, I'll introduce you to him then. By that point, we'll have been seeing each other - or whatever you want to call it - for a month. That seems acceptable, right?"

He beamed. "Deal. Shake on it?" he asked as he extended his hand. I shook it firmly with a nod. The moment I let go, Wes let out a suspiciously evil laugh, causing me to practically choke on my last bite of toast.

"Uh, what was that for?" I asked as I cleared the crumbs from my face.

"This guy has no idea what he's in for," he stated with a gleam of mischief in his eyes.

I threw my paper towel into the trash and grabbed my keys from the key hook. "Please don't make me regret this," I said facetiously.

"No promises, Hummel."

I chuckled as I pulled on my pea coat and shoved my keys and wallet into my pocket and headed out the door. I looked at my watch to check the date. October 23. *If Blaine was still around by November 18 - the Saturday before Thanksgiving - he would have the 'privilege' of meeting Wes, I told myself. Lord help him.*

.....

The train had taken hardly any time at all and I was greeted with the smell of pumpkin spice and the general goodness of coffee at 8:28 on the dot. I looked around the coffee shop to see if Blaine was already there but to no avail. The Starbucks was packed - one of the pitfalls of being located near Times Square - so I got in line and kept one eye on the door to see Blaine and the other on the tables around the register to see if any would be cleared out by the time I'd ordered my coffee.

By the time I made it to the counter, it was 8:36 and Blaine still wasn't there. I was a little irritated - partially because Blaine was late and I hated when people weren't prompt and partially because it took nearly ten minutes to make it to the counter - but quickly placed my order with the barista and settled into waiting... again.

The moment my coffee was in hand and I had found a seat at a table by the window, it was 8:42. Blaine was nearly 15 minutes late and I started to think that Wes might not get to meet this guy who had me intrigued from the moment I first saw him.

I glanced out the window at the people passing by with their scarves flowing in the wind, hats covering their heads and noses slightly pink with the chill of the wind before one figure across the street caught my eye. A guy in a gray pea coat and billowing red scarf was running at full-force practically running into people on the sidewalk. He nearly trampled a woman with a stroller as he stopped for the crosswalk and I took a better look at the guy.

It was Blaine, looking exasperated and incredibly stressed.

I chuckled a little in my mind, glad that Blaine was feeling flustered for being late and keeping me waiting, although I also felt a little bad for the guy. Clearly his morning was not going as planned.

BLAINE

I was thankful that I had asked Kurt to come up to my neck of the woods for coffee because so far, this morning had been hell. The power had gone out in the night and my alarm clock hadn't gone off, the hot water heater in our building wasn't working properly and I had left my toothbrush at the hotel and didn't have a spare one at my apartment and with the power going out last night, my phone hadn't charged and was currently dead and useless on my nightstand. That and I hadn't done laundry so my favorite sweater

was dirty and I couldn't find my lucky Warbler pin anywhere. Once I managed to pull myself together, I realized it was already 8:30 and I was going to have to run the whole way to make sure I wasn't later than I already was.

The run to the Starbucks had been a rough one; I had run into at least a dozen people and nearly killed a child in a stroller once I was across the street from the Starbucks Kurt was meeting me at. I waited impatiently for the light to change and debated darting across traffic when I was rescued from thoughts of my potential - and accidental - vehicular homicide when the light changed and I darted across the street. I managed to peer into the window and saw Kurt stationed at a table by the window and groaned when I saw that he already had a coffee in his hands. I wanted to buy him coffee as an apology for my tardiness, but I guess that wasn't going to happen now.

I violently shoved the door open, nearly making a display of coffee cups take a tumble. I grabbed the table tightly and cautiously adjusted the cups on the display before turning back toward Kurt, who had a slight smile on his face. *Okay, he's not totally pissed,* I thought to myself. But the moment he and I made eye contact, his face drooped and gone was his sweet smile and in its place was a somewhat icy glare.

Shit, he was scary when he was mad.

"Hi," I hesitated as I placed my bag on the floor next to the table, smiling hopefully - willing Kurt to forgive me until I had a chance to explain.

"Hello," he said, stony expression fading slightly. I hoped my smile had something to do with that, but I would take whatever I could if it meant he wasn't irritated with me anymore.

"First of all, I wanted to apologize for my tardiness. It is very unlike me to be late and this morning has been rather horrible," *until I saw you*, I added in my mind, "but I assure you, I would never want to keep you waiting."

He smiled back ever so slightly and nodded in understanding. "You could have called, you know," he replied.

"I would have if my phone hadn't died and if my power hadn't gone out last night."

His eyes bugged. "That's bad luck."

"You could say that," I replied. "But that's in the past now and I apologize for being late. I do hope you'll forgive me."

He chuckled a little and waved nonchalantly. "Don't worry about it. At first I thought you were standing me up, but then when I saw you practicing for the New York Marathon on your way over here, I figured that something had to have happened."

I grinned. "It's certainly been one hell of a morning." I checked my watch and saw that I only had about half an hour before I had to leave to go to work and I wanted to make the most of my time with Kurt, but after my morning I desperately needed coffee. "And due to said-morning, I am in dire need of some coffee. I see you have your own coffee, but can I get you something? A refill? Please consider this a small form of an apology."

"You remind me a lot of my roommate in some ways - such formality in the way you speak... not that I'm complaining. I think I'm good in terms of coffee levels, but I wouldn't mind if you brought something back in the form of a baked good," Kurt said. "And you're lucky, the line seems to have died down since I first got here."

"I certainly am thankful for that. I need luck in any form I can get at this point," I said with a wink and immediately regretted being such a dork until I heard Kurt's musical laughter resulting from my gesture. "I'll be back." I turned toward the counter before turning back to Kurt. "Oh, what would you want from the bakery?"

He took a sip from his coffee and placed it down on the table before replying; glint of... something in his eye. "I like surprises," he replied in a flirty tone and added a wink of his own.

I felt a lump in my throat and I gulped as I turned around and headed back toward the counter. God, he was just as flirty in person as he was over text messages. I certainly was not complaining but damn, I was going to need to up my game or something. I was horrible at flirting and incredibly out of practice but Kurt - as expected - is a pro. Is there *anything* Kurt wasn't good at?

One thing that he was exceptionally good at was looking amazing in his clothes. I knew he was into clothing and made his living from dressing others, but the guy clearly knew how to dress himself. He looked impeccable - as he had the other two times I'd seen him - and I could tell that his clothes were tailored. I looked down at myself - feeling frumpy in my hurried ensemble - though compared to most

guys my age, I still looked put together. But I had to figure that Kurt would probably consistently outshine me in the wardrobe department and as a potential benefactor of getting to see him in his various outfits, I couldn't complain too much.

Thankfully the line had dwindled significantly by the time I was ready to place my order and I asked for a raspberry cream cheese coffee cake along with a croissant - in case Kurt didn't like sweet - and brought both baked goods and the coffee back to the table to join Kurt in just a few minutes. I sat down and placed napkins down on the table between the two of us, enabling them to act as a plate, and pulled out the croissant first. I gauged Kurt's reaction - he didn't seem too interested in the croissant - before pulling out the raspberry cream cheese confection. That seemed to please Kurt much more as he unknowingly licked his lips and practically consumed the treat with his eyes.

"I'm guessing you like what you see," I said with a joking tone, causing Kurt's gaze to snap up from the cake into my eyes.

"Who said I didn't already?" he asked, flirtation oozing from his insinuation.

Dear sweet baby Jesus. I'm pretty sure my heart was beating loud enough for the whole coffee shop to hear and I could feel a blush rising on my cheeks.

"You okay Blaine?" he questioned as he reached forward to break off a piece of the coffee cake.

I coughed and hoped that I could calm down a bit before responding. No need to come off like a crazed teenager when he and I were both adults. "I'm fine. Sorry, my mind was elsewhere."

I took a sip of my coffee, thankful for the warmth it brought to my throat, and looked back at Kurt who looked effortlessly cute as a piece of crumb cake dangled from the corner of his mouth. Even though I'm sure he was really working his flirting angle, he still managed to seem slightly innocent and sweet; the man never failed to surprise me. "Uh, you have a little... right there," I said, motioning to the corner of my mouth.

"What?" he asked as he dusted his fingers across his lips and cheek. He managed to brush off most of the crumbs, but the slightest bit of raspberry remained at the corner of his mouth. I smiled and grabbed a napkin from the table and motioned toward it, silently asking if I could clean off the offending remnants myself. With a slight nod, he leaned forward toward my extended arm. I felt my heartbeat quicken and my

eyes fluttered nervously between Kurt's eyes - which I finally had noticed were a stunning icy blue - and his mouth where his perfectly pursed lips were waiting.

I lightly wiped the napkin on his cheek and pulled back. I hadn't pulled hard enough on the napkin and, much to my amusement, the napkin had remained stuck on the raspberry filling, leaving the napkin stuck in an awkward wad on the side of his face. I tried to hold back the chortle escaping my mouth, but I couldn't and, thankfully, neither could Kurt. He reached up quickly and pulled off the napkin and threw it at me from across the table. I dodged the napkin and he rolled his eyes as he grasped his coffee cup off the table and took a gulp.

"Well, now that you've sufficiently embarrassed me in public," he said with jest, "why don't you tell me about your morning?" He settled back in his chair and kept his arms extended on the table, unknowingly offering openness in his stance.

I rambled on for five minutes about the dreadful morning I'd had, leaving Kurt laughing in places when I mimicked my reaction to realizing that the hot water was out when I had attempted to shave this morning and thought I was being hit with ice first thing in the morning. Soon we found ourselves in a healthy and comfortable flow and every few minutes, one of us was keeled over in laughter.

Before long, I looked at my watch and saw that it was already 9:25. I had resigned myself to be late this morning since I wanted to optimize my time with Kurt, but I couldn't push it too much past 9:30 without making waves with Clark. Sure, the guy liked me, but he didn't put up with his direct reports being late to work on a regular basis. I groaned when I saw the time, earning a quirked eyebrow from Kurt.

"Looking to get away from me already?" he asked.

"Far from it," I mumbled.

"What?"

"Oh, uh, nothing," I replied. "I'm sorry to cut and run, but I have to head to work now. I can only be late for one thing in any given day."

Kurt giggled. God, his laugh was infectious. "Not a problem. Where are you headed?"

"53rd and Broadway. Just up a few blocks."

He grabbed his keys from off the table and went to stand up. "I'll walk with you. I need to catch the E back to my place. And, lucky for you, that's the station I need to head toward anyway."

I beamed as I grabbed my bag from the ground and clutched the coffee in my hand. "Let's roll," I said, motioning toward the door.

Kurt walked a few paces ahead of me, leaving me to enjoy the...view, and he held the door open for me as we exited the coffee shop. "Thank you, kind sir," I said with a slight bow. This caused Kurt to laugh and brush past me as I maintained my bow. I quickly picked up the pace and caught up with him.

We walked side by side, our shoulder brushing occasionally from being forced into close proximity as commuters rushed past the tourists littering the sidewalks. We didn't talk for the three blocks we walked, but the silence felt... soothing in a way. We didn't need to fill the air with idle chatter. We were just being... Kurt and Blaine. And it was nice.

When we approached the corner where our paths were going to veer off, I turned to Kurt and lightly placed my hand on his shoulder. "Kurt."

"Blaine," he said and mimicked my action by placing his own hand on my shoulder.

"We look like we're doing some weird ritual right now," I noted, realizing that he and I were at an arm's length from each other and each clutching the opposite shoulder of the other; as if we were in some sort of circle or something. Kurt laughed at my interjection and I shook it off before continuing. "Kurt."

"Yes, Blaine."

"I really enjoyed coffee with you this morning," I said, lowering my hand from his shoulder and taking a half step closer to him. He, in turn, lowered his arm after our closeness forced his arm to a weird angle.

He smiled. "I enjoyed it too."

I breathed a sigh of relief. "I wasn't too sure at first."

He looked at me quizzically. "What do you mean? You weren't sure you were enjoying it?"

"No, no. Not at all," I said, quickly backpedaling "I wasn't sure you were having a good time since I was late."

"I'm pretty sure that raspberry cream cheese crumb cake eliminated any lingering thoughts of me being mad at you."

"Well that's a relief!" I said, feigning relief as I dramatically wiped my brow. Kurt giggled again and looked at me expectantly. "So, uh. Kurt."

"Blaine, I'm pretty sure I know my own name now that you've said it like five times," he joked.

"Sorry, sorry. Okay, Ku- okay." I took a breath. "What are you doing this Thursday night?"

His smile met his eyes, causing a smile to erupt on my own face, as he replied. "Whatever you have in mind."

Internally, my mind was having a house party. Externally, I managed to keep the smile plastered on my face - hoping my grin wasn't creepy - as I pulled Kurt in for a hug. Closing the gap between us was already the best decision I'd made today. As I wrapped my arms securely around his waist, I noticed how warm he was and how he smelled vaguely of coffee, cinnamon, and CK One and - damn, if he wasn't one of the best smelling men in all of Manhattan. I hoped that my own scent was equally as good, but he didn't seem to mind as he latched his arms around my shoulders and placed his cheek next to mine; feeling his breath tickle my ear in a way that made my heart flutter and my insides flip flop.

I pulled away first, realizing that though I wanted to stay here for awhile longer, I was already late enough. I looked at Kurt - who looked pleased with our hug - and I was still doing my best not to leap into another hug. "Well I'll see you Thursday, then," I said.

"That you will, good sir," he retorted.

"Now who's formal?" I chortled.

He rolled his eyes and backed away, walking backwards toward the train station. "Bye, Blaine."

I offered a small wave as he made his way down the sidewalk. "Bye."

With a wink, he turned around and I stood transfixed at the spot where he and I had just hugged. I intended to watch Kurt until he went missing in the sea of people but was startled with the feeling of someone poking me in the back after Kurt had crossed Broadway.

I yelped and turned around to come face-to-face with Santana. "Dammit, San. You scared me!"

She grinned as she pulled her purse up on her shoulder. "It's not hard to do when you're looking off into the distance like a total dweeb." I rolled my eyes as she motioned toward the direction of our office building. "What were you looking at anyway?"

Santana looked at me, expecting some kind of answer, but my morning with Kurt was not up for conversation; not today. The only sure way to not rush into things with Kurt was to keep things quiet for a little while - at least until I knew we were both interested in pursuing something further. Being able to discuss everything with Santana was only going to perpetuate my previous behavior and I wanted to get things started off on the right foot with Kurt. I needed to do this for his sake... and for my own. He was going to be the secret behind my smile for a little while before Hurricane Santana got involved. No need to scare the man off so soon.

I smiled, Kurt's scent lingering in my nose and his warm hug present in my mind, and swiftly walked past Santana toward our building. "Oh, nothing."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Thursday, October 25

KURT

I was so thankful that my boss was flexible when I approached Roselyn Tuesday afternoon to ask for Thursday evening off. Sure, I normally didn't have any weeknights off but I could really use the break and I wasn't about to turn Blaine down for a second date. She had agreed - especially since I was putting in extra time here and there to repair and reorganize the costumes - so she reminded me after our show Wednesday night that I better not be anywhere near the theater come Thursday night.

Blaine and I had talked a lot during the past few days; funny, flirty texts back and forth, a few emails containing ridiculous Tumblr links and gifs, songs and playlists to listen to (sent by Blaine) and YouTube videos of adorable animals (sent by me). We quickly fell into a friendly banter but with a slight hint of suggestion and attraction that helped me remember that we were more than friends. But I was so thankful that we seemed to be friends first. It was something I always strove for in my relationships but I was so glad that it seemed to come naturally for Blaine and I.

I wasn't even nervous when I called Blaine for the first time. Okay, that was a lie; I was still *totally* nervous because, apparently, I was a teenage boy calling his high school crush on the phone for the first time. But thankfully the conversation had gone well and though it hadn't lasted longer than 25 minutes, it was during that call that Blaine had laid down the plans for our date tonight.

He suggested we go to L'Artusi, a restaurant he had heard rave reviews about, for dinner around 8:00. Initially he had asked if he could pick me up from my apartment since I was on the way from Blaine's place to mine, but I resisted. Not because I didn't appreciate the gesture - Lord knows I would always appreciate such chivalry - but because I didn't want Blaine to think he had to go above and beyond just for me or just because he thought he *had* to.

So rather than have him pick me up, I was happy to take the train down to L'Artusi. Besides, I was one of the few people who lived in New York who actually enjoyed taking the train. I realize it's probably crazy, but I couldn't help it. It was one of the little things Ohio didn't have and I always loved it.

Knowing that L'Artusi was a nicer restaurant, I had to be more thoughtful in my wardrobe selections for this evening. Blaine had a certain look to him that always managed to look effortless but consistently put

together. I realized this was probably because he seemed to wear a good portion of the Ralph Lauren catalog (or at least it looked like it based on the few times I'd seen him). And if anyone can pull off any of Ralph Lauren's lines - Polo, Rugby, or otherwise - it was Blaine Anderson.

In the end, I had opted for grey dress pants with a black button up and skinny white tie. Normally I cuffed my sleeves at my elbows, but with the cold night, I left them rolled down. I was about to select a scarf to go with my ensemble when I heard a light knock on the door.

"Come in," I bellowed from the inside of my closet.

After finding the red scarf I was looking for, I turned to see Wes and David in my room.

"Uh, hi guys," I said as I moved over toward the full length mirror that was adhered to the wall next to my closet.

"Whatcha up to?" Wes asked as he casually leaned into the doorway. David just rolled his eyes at his high school buddy, clearly used to Wes being totally annoying on a regular basis.

"I have plans tonight," I replied nonchalantly. Wes and I had briefly debriefed about coffee the night after my coffee date with Blaine but I still made him promise me that no more inquisitions about my dating life were to come up again. At least not until our agreed upon time-frame when I'd introduce him to Wes and the rest of my friends.

"Man, does everyone have plans tonight? I asked one of our old Dalton buddies to come hang out with us tonight for a movie night, but he said he couldn't," David sighed. He turned to Wes. "Are we getting boring?" he asked.

Wes laughed. "Nah. We just aren't party animals like ol' Kurt here."

I glared at him. "Don't call me old."

He scoffed. "Please. Both David and I are older than you. If anyone would be old, it'd be us." Wes fiddled with the door frame a bit before asking the one question I'd hoped he wouldn't ask. "So, what date number is this?"

I rolled my eyes. David's eyes grew at the realization. "Date! Kurt, who's the lucky man?"

I laughed and Wes groaned. "Trust me, man. I've been trying to get Kurt to tell me about the man that makes Kurt quote 'go weak in the knees' for a few days and I'm getting nothing. Considering he just met you, he certainly won't tell you."

"I don't know Wes," I said as I finished fluffing my scarf and pulled a black belt out of my closet. "David is a lot less annoying than you. Maybe I'll just tell him about Mystery Man."

David chortled as Wes glared at me stonily. "That's just wrong." I looped the belt through my slacks as I felt Wes' gaze remain constant on my face and David was clearly fighting back laughter at Wes' clear irritation at the fact that I would tell David something over him.

"Jesus Wes, chill out. I'm kidding," I said, finally making eye contact with my roommate through the mirror. He replied with a nod and a smile, the annoyance melting from his face. "I will introduce him to you guys at our previously agreed upon timeline."

I grabbed my pea coat and made my way out of my bedroom, where Wes and David had parted to let me through. I went to the key hook to grab my keys and shoved them in my coat pocket along with my wallet that sat on the table next to the front door. I grabbed the knob and went to walk out the door when I turned back to Wes and his friend who were now making their way into our living room area. "Oh, and it's technically date number two, but we're well on our way to securing number three," I said with a wink as I closed the door.

Now he'll be dying with curiosity and he knows I won't appease him with any information. That'll teach him to mess with me.

...

L'Artusi was only a block or two away from the subway but it felt like more. The whole ride on the train had been full of me double checking my reflection in the windows of the car and thinking about this date and, more importantly, about Blaine. Unlike the one date I'd been on with James, I actually felt nervous. Sure, I felt nervous on our coffee date too, but now it was really butterflies. Every time I saw a message come in from Blaine - whether it was a text or email - it made me smile. And talking with him still felt very natural. But I couldn't help but feel nervous and excited all at the same time. It felt... right.

I rounded the corner to the restaurant and saw Blaine's profile leaning against the side of the building, looking very James Dean in the best way possible. He had gotten a haircut since I'd seen him last - a thought that made me think Blaine might have gotten it specifically for our date, but realize he was probably just due for a trim - and his gray coat had been buttoned over a green scarf and dark wash jeans and his black wingtips tapping against the sidewalk.

"Blaine," I called out as I crossed the street.

At the sound of his name, he turned to me with a large smile before it turned to a look that I couldn't quite place. "Kurt," he said softly, walking in my direction with his hands behind his back.

I knew I was smiling brighter than I had all day. Tonight was going to be great; I could feel it.

BLAINE

In order to avoid being tardy to another date with the ever-prompt Kurt, I aimed to make it to the restaurant at least 10 minutes early just to make sure I was on time. I even took a cab instead of braving the subway since I wanted to be sure that I wasn't late. Thankfully traffic hadn't been too bad and after a quick drive on the west side highway, I made it to L'Artusi 15 minutes early.

My early arrival allowed me to pop into a newsstand and get flowers for Kurt. I knew that it might be weird to give a guy flowers on a first date - well, second, but it was our first real dinner date - but I had a feeling Kurt would appreciate the gesture. Besides, I was a gentleman and my mom would be proud of my attempts at sweeping a guy off his feet. Just because I was gay didn't mean I didn't think romance existed in some small form.

Rather than pick a bulky selection of flowers that he'd have to carry around all night, I bought him a single yellow rose. Yes, I could have gone with the red rose, but that seemed somewhat overdone. And besides, yellow was such a cheerful color. I'm sure he'd like it no matter what color it was.

Rose in hand, I perched myself at the entrance to L'Artusi and waited for Kurt. I fiddled with my phone a bit and was tempted to text Kurt to ask when he was arriving - even though it wasn't even 8:00 yet - but I was just so excited for our date to start that I wanted to begin early.

"Blaine," I heard a voice say off to my left. I looked up and saw Kurt crossing the street.

"Kurt," I said quietly as I turned toward him. He looked amazing and I was fairly certain the look I was giving him right now exuded sheer joy and endless attraction for the guy with the gorgeous grin crossing the street. I hoped my facial expression didn't come off as too creepy as I moved to meet him with my hands - and the rose - tucked behind my back, but the smile on his face seemed to show that he wasn't phased and he seemed just as thrilled as I was about tonight.

When we were within an arm's distance of each other, I whipped the rose out from behind my back, a stunned grin coming across Kurt's face. "For you," I stated as I extended the flower to him.

"Wow," he said quietly. He took a moment to smell the rose before looking up at me, smile still in tact. "Thank you so much Blaine."

He pulled me in for a hug and I was brought back to our previous hug the other morning. This one felt similar to that one, but less rushed; I wasn't running late for work and he hadn't spent the morning frantically worrying if I had stood him up. Instead this hug felt tighter and somehow warmer and I got another whiff of his wonderful scent. "This is so sweet," he whispered in my ear before pulling away from our hug, the closeness of his voice and his light breath giving me goosebumps that were thankfully concealed by my coat.

"Of course. Shall we go in?" I asked, gesturing toward the door.

"Yes please. It's freezing out here!" he exclaimed. I laughed as I motioned for him to walk in front of me. Once at the door, Kurt held the door open for me and practically pushed me through when I seemed unsure of what to do at the simple gesture. I wasn't used to any amount of chivalry - or kindness, since we did like in New York - being directed in my direction, so Kurt's simple ability to hold the door open for me made me blush slightly.

"My, it's packed in here," Kurt said as he removed his coat from his shoulders.

"That's what reservations are for, Mr. Hummel," I joked and made my way to the maître d'. I gave her my name and she immediately grabbed two menus and led us to our table, Kurt following my lead.

We had a two-top in a cozy corner of the restaurant away from the busy kitchen and the front door, providing an ideal environment to talk with Kurt. I always harped on how environment played such a big

part in the success of anything in life and dates certainly weren't excluded. It was doubtful that the date would be good if you were at a busy bar where you could hardly hear the person across from you or if the ambiance was less than desirable.

Before I had realized, the waitress came over to our table and asked for our drink orders. I robotically replied with a water with lime and Kurt asked for an iced tea. A minute later, the drinks had arrived and our silent perusal of the menus had come to a close. I looked up just as Kurt had taken a sip from his tea and saw his face sour.

"Is everything okay?" I said, stifling back a laugh. His face looked equal parts disgusted and surprised, resulting in an adorable factor I that was really growing on me.

He shuddered as he placed the glass back on the table. "I always forget that if you order tea here, it's not sweet tea. It's the one thing about living in the South that spoiled me; their sweet tea is so delicious."

"Next time I'm in Atlanta, I'll be sure to order some," I concluded. "Since you didn't want the tea, how about some wine? I don't know if that's your thing, but I hear their sommelier is fantastic."

"Oh, uh, yeah. Sounds good," Kurt replied somewhat sheepishly before burying his nose in his menu.

I looked at him inquisitively. "Is everything okay?" I didn't know Kurt very well - yet - but even someone as oblivious as me could pick up on the fact that Kurt was a little... off.

He sighed and relaxed a little. "Don't judge me, okay?" I nodded and he continued. "I may be up on fashion and have a level of sophistication beyond comprehension most times," he chuckled. "But you just seem so... fancy. This is all so nice and wonderful and you're so... you and... I-have-no-idea-what-a-sommelier-is."

I laughed a little and Kurt's face went to one edged with anger. "I told you not to judge me," he said, hiding behind his menu again.

"No, no. It's not that Kurt," I said, grasping for his hands on either side of his menu. The menu dropped slightly and I could see his eyes were full of astonishment, surprised at my touch. He looked from my hands lightly grazing over his into my eyes and his anger already subsided slightly. I smiled before explaining. "I wanted to bring you here to this nice restaurant because I wanted to take you on a great, memorable first dinner date. And I wanted it to be better than some picnic in Central Park."

His shoulders eased as the tension seemed to lift. "You didn't have to try this hard, Blaine." I frowned a bit. Did he not appreciate my efforts? Was I really trying too hard? Was I scaring him away already? Kurt's voice pulled me away from my own self-doubt. "You don't have to try this hard because even if we had gotten a hot dog from a dodgy street vendor, I would have enjoyed tonight. You're a great person to talk to and I just like spending time with you, or talking with you. Hell, I even like our email conversations and you know those can get rocky at times."

I was practically a damn beacon in the night at this point and I was sure that if I had smiled any bigger, you'd be able to see my gums from space. "I hope it wasn't weird that I said that," he added softly.

I shook my head. "No, not at all. I'm just... glad that you would have liked whatever we would have done." I sighed. "I just wanted to make a good, lasting impression with you."

He beamed. "You already have, Blaine. I think tonight is going to be fantastic, but just know that when I plan our next date it may not be as swanky as this, but you'll have fun."

Yup, gums were visible from satellites now. "So, there's a next time?" I said as I pulled my hands back from his.

"I certainly hope so," he said.

....

Dinner that night had continued without a hitch. We spent a good portion of the time waiting for our food - Kurt had ordered the potato gnocchi and I ordered braised short rib - playing an altered version of 20 questions in order to learn more about each other. I had learned that Kurt sang in a Capella choir in college, that he wasn't into sports, how seriously he took Black Friday, and how his dad was his personal hero. I shared that my older brother was an idiot - him concurring about his own step-brother, that I still performed for open mic nights on occasion, how I always wanted a pet dog, and the many different places I wanted to travel to.

He and I had gone back and forth about dream travel locations and potential agendas for said vacation destinations and before we realized it, we had finished our dinners and our wine - which the sommelier had explained thoroughly and I could tell Kurt was trying to soak up all of the information he had provided - and the waiter had come to ask about dessert.

"I'm not sure I can make it out of the restaurant at this rate. Kurt, you'll have to roll me out of here," I said, earning a laugh from Kurt. He shook his head at the waiter, who left to ring up the bill.

I looked at my watch as the waiter brought back the check. It wasn't even 9:30 yet and I wasn't quite ready to end my date with Kurt. Once the waiter had placed the check on the table, I quickly grabbed my wallet out of my back pocket and slipped my credit card in the holder without looking at the price. Mental math told me how much it would be, but date conversations about money tended to get awkward so by not looking too intently at the bill I hoped to avoid that talk entirely.

"Thank you for dinner," Kurt said as he finished the last of his wine.

"Of course. It was my pleasure."

Kurt giggled. The wine might have left him a little giggly, but I found it endearing. The waiter was quick with the bill and once I'd signed the slip, I turned back toward Kurt who was dreamily looking into the restaurant.

"Kurt?" He turned toward me, same afterglow on his face. "How would you feel about making one more stop tonight?"

He nodded emphatically as I rose to my feet and pulled on my coat. I looped my arm out and Kurt linked his in mine when he had pulled his own coat on and I led us to the door. As we walked out the restaurant's door, another couple had just gotten out of a cab.

I hastily pulled a slightly confused Kurt into the cab's back seat and rattled off the address of our next destination. "Washington and 14th, please." The cab driver nodded and soon we were headed toward our destination.

"Are you going to tell me where we're going, Mr. Anderson?"

"I thought you liked surprises," I said cheekily. I looked over to gauge Kurt's reaction and he just smiled back at me. Our arms were still interlinked and the space between us in the cab's back seat was practically nonexistent. The closeness to Kurt was euphoric; feeling the warmth of his leg on mine, the tight grip he had on my arm.

I wanted more but had a rule that I'd made with myself in order to pace any future relationships I would be in post-Jared - no kissing for the first few dates. And with Kurt's wine-tinted lips in a small smile so close to my own grin, I was really struggling to keep up with my own rule. But I needed to do this - I couldn't let emotions or feeling claustrophobic get in the way of something that was already proving to be wonderful with Kurt. Besides, once I crossed the kissing threshold, it was going to be hard to reel myself in.

Thankfully I didn't have to dwell on it too long, because we had pulled up to our destination shortly after I found myself daydreaming about Kurt and his lips. I swiped my card in the credit card machine that was adhered to the back seat and thanked the cab driver as Kurt and I got out, having to relinquish our grasp on each other's arms in order to get out.

"A hotel?" he asked, staring up at The Standard Hotel and looking horrified at the realization that I would potentially take him to a hotel on our date.

"Oh god no!" I said quickly. "Not that I wouldn't... I just... Dammit. I am so not coming off smooth am I?"

Kurt giggled. "It's okay Romeo. Just glad we're on the same page. But why are we here?"

"We're not stopping here, we're going there," I stated as I pointed toward a staircase at the end of the block. "Let's go. It closes soon."

"Closes?"

I chuckled. "I'm starting to think you liking surprises is all a farce."

"Oh please," he said as he rolled his eyes. "I'm just trying to figure you out."

"Try all you might, I can't be contained in a box." He laughed in response as we ascended the stairs. Once we reached the top, Kurt looked at the walkway in amazement.

"Is this the High Line?" he asked excitedly.

I nodded. "It is. I remember you said you hadn't been and it's exceptionally gorgeous at night."

He looked at me with wonder in his eyes. "Yeah, it is."

I blushed a little at the thought that Kurt might have meant that about me, but led him down the walkway further. He pulled out his phone to take a picture of the view of New Jersey on the other side of the river from where we stood as I looked at the people on the street and cars passing by on the west side highway.

The wind starting whipping and soon Kurt and I found ourselves walking nearly huddled against each other as we continued our walk. Our close proximity made our shoulders brush, our hands flutter past each others and the smell of Kurt's cologne whip through the air.

I closed my eyes and breathed in as the crisp air filled my nose and soon I found a warmth in my hand I hadn't expected. I looked down into my hand and saw that Kurt had added his own in between my fingers. My shock must have been evident since Kurt went to slightly pull away until I took a firmer grip of his hand and gave it a slight squeeze before looking at him with a smile. He replied with his own smile and squeezed his hand with mine in response.

God, this felt good.

We walked hand-in-hand until we reached an amphitheater area along the walkway that provided a small reprieve from the cold winds. We sat next to each other, hands still tightly grasped, and I was thankful that both of us had forgone gloves because the feel of his hand on mine was more wonderful than I could have imagined.

Kurt and I sat quietly on the steps, looking onto the street below with the sounds of a street performer who had set up his acoustic guitar somewhere near where we were sitting. We sat for a few minutes but before too long, Kurt had gently laid his head on my shoulder and my heart fluttered at the contact as his hair tickled my neck. I grinned before leaning my head onto his, hoping that it wasn't too much too soon.

"What's the thing you love best about living in New York?" he asked, breaking the silence.

I thought for a moment. Since I had left Ohio, I had learned to love so much about this city. The sites, sometimes the smells (New York in the summer was not a smell I liked), the music, the people I'd met. But none of those were my favorite. "I think the thing I like best is how it's a city full of opportunities for... anything; you can change jobs, meet new people, try new things practically anytime you want. It's something I've never experienced before anywhere else." I felt him nod on my shoulder. "What about you?"

He sighed and pulled his head off of my shoulder and looked into my eyes. "The unexpected memories it makes," he said quietly. "When I first moved here, I expected so much to happen for me. But it exceeded my expectations in ways I never imagined. It brought me to people I'd never thought I'd meet, experiences I never thought I'd have. It's incredible and each day is a total surprise."

I chuckled. "I guess you do like surprises then, huh?"

"Obviously," he replied as he squeezed my hand. We sat facing each other for what felt like minutes, our faces getting closer with each passing second. Soon I could feel his breath on my cheeks and I didn't care that we were about to break my rule of no kissing so early into dating.

He inched closer and I met him halfway-

"Sorry gentlemen, but we're about to close up for the night," said a security guard who stood three feet from us.

We backed away from each other, my insides practically rioting in protest at the fact that we were so close to closing the gap to Kurt's lips. But the logical part of my mind - the one that rarely made an appearance in my romantic life - conceded that the right thing had happened with the security guard breaking up our almost kiss.

"I suppose we should head back," I said, looking toward the entrance that we had come in. I stood up and pulled Kurt up from his seat with our joined hand and walked back toward the staircase near the hotel.

Silence fell upon us again, but this time it seemed less like a still silence and more like one that was full of unspoken hopes and a tinge of frustration. It was clear that Kurt and I wanted something more to happen on the bench of that amphitheater, but it was not meant to be.

We descended the staircase and made our way to the taxi stand that was conveniently stationed outside of the hotel entrance. The cab drivers all practically darted to their cars with the hopes of picking us up as fares for the evening, so I knew my time to talk to Kurt was dwindling down.

I turned toward him, but before I could speak, his words had been uttered. "I had a really good time tonight, Blaine. Thank you for... everything. It was wonderful."

I grinned. "I'm so glad you liked it. I had fun too," I replied.

"I'll call you?" he asked, looking into my eyes hoping for a yes.

"I hope so," I chuckled.

He smiled and leaned in, tugging my hand that was intertwined with his ever so slightly, and he placed his lips gingerly onto my cheek. The light pressure of his lips on my cheek made my eyes flutter shut as I was taken away to another place. The noise of him letting go of his kiss brought me back to reality as he gave one last squeeze before pulling away and letting go of my hand; my own aching to feel the warmth of his in mine again.

He looked at me hesitantly before breaking out into a full smile at the (likely) obvious enjoyment plastered on my face. He looked over his shoulder at the cab drivers and when one wordlessly asked if he needed a ride, he nodded and turned back to me. "I'd better go," he said turning and making his way toward the first available cab. As he was about to enter the cab he looked at me, still stuck in the same place on the sidewalk, and said "Bye Blaine."

The most I could manage was a small dumbfounded wave as I watched Kurt get into the taxi and drive away. I brought the hand that had held Kurt's up to the spot on my cheek where his lips had landed; feeling my cheeks full with my grin.

Best. Second. Date. Ever.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Friday Morning, October 26

BLAINE

Thwack.

"Ow!" I exclaimed as I rubbed the spot on my face that had just been hit with a pencil. I looked in the direction that the pencil had come from to find Santana smirking at me. "What do you want?"

"I have been trying to get your attention – unsuccessfully – for like five minutes, B. You just keep staring into space with some weird look on your face. I get the appeal of a wake and bake, but Blaine..."

I slapped her arm when she tried to reach out to rub my arm, false sincerity dripping from her every word. "Puh-lease. You know that I don't do drugs."

In reality, I had been daydreaming about my date with Kurt, holding hands with Kurt, Kurt's lips on my cheek... just about Kurt in general. In fact, I had been thinking about him since we parted way last night. I wasn't entirely sure how I had made it home since I was still in a trance when I had left him, but somehow I woke up in my bed this morning with a huge smile on my face. And for once, I wasn't smiling just because it was Friday.

"Whatever," she said, rolling her eyes and inspecting her cuticles as she sat on the corner of my desk. "I tried to call you last night, but you didn't answer me. Please tell me you weren't having date night with your right hand."

I blushed. I appreciated Santana's bluntness, but she still knew how to make me feel uncomfortable from time to time. Plus I can't help that one time, *ONE TIME*, she had caught me with my pants down – literally – when she had come to my place on a whim and used the spare key I had taped to the top of the light next to my door to let herself in. It was a moment I would never live down, much to my chagrin.

"I was busy," I replied, shoving the thought of Santana catching me ever again into the recesses of my mind.

Her brow arched with curiosity. "Busy."

"Yes." I was suddenly enthralled with the email that had just come through from Clark in order to avoid looking at Santana. Girl knew how to get information out of me about what I was up to, but I was resolved to try to keep this close to the vest for the time being.

"You know you can't hide from me," she snared as she grabbed my chin and forced my eyes to meet hers. "Why are you being so secretive all the sudden?"

"Let go, San," I snapped, forcing my face from her hand and sitting back in my chair. "You don't have to know *everything* about me or what I do all the time." My tone had emitted more anger than I wanted it to, but I hated when people grabbed my face like that and she knew it.

"I'm pretty sure my *job* as your *best friend* is to understand why you're acting like a dope right now," she retorted, a slight edge in her tone.

"It's not like I'm trying to hide from you. I just need... space right now," I resolved quietly. Santana was my best friend, but I needed to try and emotionally pace myself. Divulging information to her like we were having a slumber party with the girls was not going to help me not blurt out everything that I was thinking about Kurt. I hoped Santana would understand that.

Apparently not.

"Space!" she exclaimed. "Since when, in the entire time we've been friends, have you not talked to me? When did you 'need space' from me?"

My eyes bulged at her tone and the fact that she was practically yelling at me, bringing the attention of everyone in the room toward my cubicle. I slouched in my chair slightly as Santana tapped her heel expectantly, waiting for me to reply. I looked away, causing her to turn and head back toward her cube on the other side of the office.

"San," I said quietly, hoping to calm Santana down a bit and bring the conversation back to a calmer place.

"No, I'm giving you 'space' like you wanted," she said, using air quotes to emphasize her point. I watched her storm off in large strides and looked around to see that the attention that was previously on our very public conversation was now diverted back to their paperwork or computer screens.

What the hell was wrong with Santana?

I pulled up my IM and saw that Santana was still signed online.

Blaine: I promise I'm not trying to lie to you or anything.

*** Santana Lopez has signed off. ***

I stared at the abandoned chat, befuddled. Sure, Santana was a bitch sometimes and was known to be curt with people but it was very unlike her to yell, especially at me, over something so small.

Something must have been off. I wasn't used to dealing with the emotions of women – thank god for being gay – but I knew my best friend pretty well and something wasn't right.

But she was one of those people who needed time to cool off when they're mad. It was a harsh juxtaposition to the way I handled anger, which was to blurt out what I was feeling and not think twice. I figured I could give her until lunchtime and try to talk to her then. Hopefully the promise of some comfort food on my dime would make her feel a bit better.

As I pulled up the website for OpenTable to try and get a reservation for myself and Santana at her favorite Thai restaurant, I heard a buzzing sound coming from my phone that had been laid on my desktop.

What are you up to Sunday night? –K

I smirked when I saw the message from Kurt, and was thankful to the scheduling gods that I had no plans this weekend as I texted him back.

Hopefully seeing you. ;) –B

If Kurt was allowed to be flirty in text messages, I supposed I was allowed to as well.

You will if you put me on your schedule for 6:30pm Sunday night. I'll send you full details at 6 on Sunday. –K

I glanced at the text confused.

I can't know any sooner? I don't like surprises like you do. –K

Kurt reply came seconds later.

I promise, I'll make it worth your while. ;) –K

KURT

I smirked as I sent Blaine the last text. High School Kurt would be so taken back by Grown Up Kurt and his flirting abilities. Gone were the awkward exchanges with my high school crushes and in its place was a more confident and forward Kurt Hummel; he was sexy and he knew it. So sexy, in fact, that I had just referred to myself in the third person in my head and had used one of the songs I found super annoying as well. Great. I hated that song more than anything, but when I was in full on flirtation mode, it was the attitude I had adopted. And so far, the attitude hadn't done me wrong.

I may not have had a boyfriend since William, but I had gotten my fair share of drinks as a result of my more forward persona. Deep down I was still a total romantic, but the early stages of dating always thrilled me and more so with Blaine since he was so... Blaine; dreamy, sweet, a smile that could brighten the darkest day, and had amazing taste.

I thought I had broken him when I didn't receive a text back right away, but before long my phone dinged with the familiar message tone.

I have no doubts of your abilities, Kurt. See you Sunday. –B

I snickered at his response. Normally our exchanges had been sort of one-sided in the flirtation department - I realized on our date that Blaine was sort of uncomfortable with the attention and it gave me opportunity to make him blush – but now things were becoming almost a two-way, shared dialogue. And I loved it.

I happily tossed my phone to the side as I brought my laptop to its resting place on my thighs as I leaned against my headboard. We had gotten paid today which meant two things; paying bills and online shopping.

I opened up my browser and went to type in my cell phone provider's website when a Skype notification popped up.

Mercedes Jones calling

I gladly clicked accept and waited for my friend's face to fill the screen.

"Kurt!"

"Mercedes!"

"I said I'd call you this time. So this is me calling you."

I laughed. "That you are. How are you?"

"Oh I'm fine, nothing new to report. I have a gig tonight but that's really it. The more important question is what new things do *you* have to report?" I knew she was talking about Blaine. I could feel myself clamming up and about to reject her unspoken request before she interrupted my thoughts. "Kurt, come on. I helped you figure out his phone number. The least you can do is keep me somewhat informed."

I rolled my eyes, but acquiesced. Besides, it'd be nice to talk to someone about Blaine and even though Lauren knew, I didn't exactly want to rub the whole situation in her face. It'd be weird. Plus, Lauren was no Mercedes Jones; she and I were always gossip whores and Lauren probably couldn't care less.

"Well, I took your advice about texting him first and he and I texted back and forth for awhile that day you and I figured out his phone number. He asked me out for coffee the next day," this statement earning a squeal from Mercedes, "which didn't exactly go as planned."

"What do you mean?" she said, gleeful smile drifting into a facial expression conveying equal parts annoyed and confusion.

"He was late. But it was a total SNAFU situation; he was having a bad morning."

"I guess that's acceptable," she snorted. "I know how much you hate people being late."

"Trust me, I was not thrilled when he was late. But he looked so adorable practically sprinting to meet me that I couldn't help but forgive him," I replied. "But after that coffee date, where I walked him to work, we talked for a couple of days over email and even chatting on the phone once. When I called him he and I scheduled a date for last night."

She gasped. "How did you not start with the date last night!"

"I thought you wanted to hear the whole story!"

"Well duh! But that's exciting!" she exclaimed.

"It was exciting. We went out to this really, really nice Italian restaurant – the food was too good to believe – and we went to the High Line. It was great."

"Really, really nice meaning expensive?" she questioned.

I nodded. "It was really overwhelming because of just how nice the place was. I mean, it wasn't like fifty bucks a person, but it was certainly more expensive than most of the dates I've been on before."

"Well he must have known that you were worth it. He's already far better in my book than anyone else you've told me about."

"He does seem to have that effect on people," I conceded. "Anyway, it went well, we totally held hands," another squeal emitting from my friend's mouth, "and I kissed him on the cheek before I took a cab back to my place."

"Why didn't you go home with him? Or even kiss him on the lips!" she sputtered incredulously.

"Please, Mercedes. You know I'm not that type. I'm very intentional with physical affection. It took me months before I was... intimate in any way with William. But trust me, he's so gorgeous I don't know if I'd last that long if I was still dating Blaine a few months from now. But the kissing, I just... want it to be special."

Mercedes giggled. "You are smitten, Hummel."

I shrugged. "I can't help it. He's a babe."

"That he is," she replied.

I snapped back to look at her through the screen and saw a somewhat astonished Mercedes looking back at me. "What do you mean?" I asked.

"I...uh..." she stuttered.

"Mercedes!"

"Okay, okay. So, the other day you might have said his full name." I groaned, afraid of where this was leading. "And I might have Googled him a bit."

"Mercedes! I can't believe..." I cried.

"I know, I know Kurt! And I'm sorry that I'm nosey but I just wanted to see more about this guy who managed to catch your attention. I think he's the first guy you've talked about other than William. And the way you talk about him is already so different than the way you spoke about William." She paused, sheepish gaze cast down knowing how much she had upset me with her actions.

It wasn't that I faulted the girl for being curious. I just wanted her to be on the same playing field of knowing about Blaine that I was. I had withheld looking Blaine up for awhile just because I didn't want to be creepy and know things about me that he hadn't shared. But the fact that Mercedes might know more about Blaine than I did right now hurt a bit.

"I get it, you were curious. I am too. But you should have asked or something."

"You would have said no."

I chuckled. "You're right. I would have said no. But there's a reason that I haven't talked to people about him yet."

"You mean you haven't told Wes?"

I shook my head. "Not really. I mean, he knows that I went out on a date with a guy – the same guy – for coffee and dinner last night. But I don't want to introduce him to Wes until he's willing to put up with Wes' level of insanity."

"I can understand that," Mercedes agreed.

"So, back to the matter at hand. I can't let your P.I. work go to waste I suppose," I said, mischievous glint in my eye. "What exactly did you find out?"

Mercedes gave a hearty laugh. "I knew you were curious, Hummel! But leave it to me to do all of your dirty work for you."

"Spill, Jones."

"Okay, okay. The first place I looked, obviously, was Facebook but no results for the correct Blaine Anderson. He did, however, have a Twitter account." She had piqued my interest with that note. "He doesn't follow many people, mostly bands and a few other people who live in Ohio."

"Ohio?" I questioned.

She shrugged. "Yeah. I don't know why. Maybe they're in bands he has signed?"

"That could be it. So what kinds of stuff does he say?"

"Why don't you just look for yourself?"

I sighed. "Because then it'd be like cheating or something."

She snorted. "How is it cheating? It's not like it's another guy or something."

"Not like that," I said, shaking my head. "Like, I want to get to know him based on what he says to me. Not by scouting for information online."

"I see what you mean. But his Twitter is public. So, if he is willing to share his tweets with the world, why wouldn't he be willing to share those things with you?"

I laughed. "You just want to see me crack, Mercedes."

"You caught me!" she replied, feigning surprise. "Not really, I just think you're being sort of unrealistic about looking him up. He found you by being online. Why not reciprocate a little bit?"

"I guess." I paused to think about the potential repercussions of looking up information about Blaine. I wanted to give him privacy in what he did online, but I was curious. "Okay, I think I'll just look at his Twitter account and nothing else. If you find anything else about him online... or if you have already," I

said, correcting my previous statement when I saw the guilty face pinned on my friend. "Just keep those extra things you Googled to yourself, deal?"

"I'd shake on it if we were there," she agreed.

"So, what's his Twitter name?"

"Here, I'll send it to you over chat." She copied something from her browser with the click of the mouse, and soon a chat bubble within Skype popped up with Blaine's Twitter account.

"I want to know what his obsession is with warblers. It's his email address too," I noted when I read his Twitter handle; warbler_blaine.

"Maybe he's a bird watcher?" she suggested.

I snorted. "That's the lamest thing I've ever heard, Mercedes."

"But if Blaine liked it, I bet you'd think it was adorable," she retorted, causing me to blush slightly. She noticed the shift in my skin tone and started laughing riotously.

"Shut up," I murmured as I clicked on the link Mercedes had supplied. His background image was a black and white photograph of the Brooklyn Bridge and his profile picture was one of him (obviously taken on his computer's webcam) in black and white looking off-screen with giant headphones on. It was a contrast to the more buttoned-up appearance I had seen him in – the hint of a band t-shirt's collar just barely visible at the bottom of the image – but there was so much I didn't know about Blaine that I didn't know, perhaps this was just another thing.

After a few seconds of staring at Blaine's photo, I heard Mercedes clearing her throat through my laptop speakers. "Oh, uh, sorry Mercedes. I forgot you were still on with me."

"Obviously. Please don't let me distract you," she said. I clicked back to the video screen and saw her smiling face greeting me. "I should probably go anyway. But I'll call you again soon and we'll have to have a full-on recap okay?"

"Fine, fine," I said, pretending to be annoyed with my best friend but secretly thankful I could confide in her about Blaine. "We'll chat later."

"Ciao!" she replied with a wave.

"Mwah!" I said, blowing her a kiss through the screen.

As soon as Mercedes closed out of our chat, I resumed perusing Blaine's Twitter page. He had a total of 42 tweets, which made me believe that he either had just started his Twitter account or he rarely went on there. He was only following 37 people and mentally reminded myself to check through his friends later and see who he'd be friends with from Ohio.

But I really wanted to get to the meat of what I was there for; what Blaine had written.

His last tweet was from last night and the three words it contained made my heart swoon.

warbler_blaine : Best night ever.

Based on the timestamp, it had been tweeted around the time I had gotten home last night. The only reason I knew is because I had checked the clock last night to be sure that Wes would be deep in his REM cycle before I had let out an excited yelp and done a happy dance the second I was in the privacy of my own room. To know that Blaine was as happy as I was post-date was exhilarating.

With the satisfaction that he had enjoyed our second date and had tweeted about it, it made me get to work planning our own date night for Sunday. I opened up my email tab, found the contact I was looking for, and typed the email I'd been thinking about since I asked Blaine about his Sunday plans.

If he thought Thursday was good, I hoped he would think Sunday was even better.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Friday Afternoon, October 26

BLAINE

My attempts to pacify my best friend had not exactly gone as I had hoped and Santana skipped out around lunchtime, leaving me with a reservation for two for 1:30 and no best friend to join me. Her bag was gone and her computer was turned off; she must have headed out for the day already. The fact that she had likely taken personal time off to decompress from whatever was going on only made me more worried, but there wasn't much to do if she wouldn't reply to my emails, texts or phone calls.

I had thought about asking Kurt to join me for an impromptu lunch date, but I knew that it would be too much too soon and that was the type of behavior I was trying to avoid. Besides, he and I had already established a plan for Sunday evening, which was soon enough I guess. I mean, it wasn't *really* soon enough since I'd love to see him practically every day, but I needed to pace myself otherwise I might lose out on the first guy I really had gravitated toward since Jared.

Instead, I found myself calling David, who had declined since he was in the Bronx and couldn't make it down to the restaurant in time. Instead of resigning myself to eat a soggy sandwich from the café on the bottom floor of our office building, I thought of one last person who might want to join.

I clicked on the contact and held the phone to my ear, hearing the ringing on the other end.

"Hello?"

"Hey Wes, it's Blaine."

"B! What's up man?"

"Not much. Are you busy right now? I know you're probably at work hustling out some paperwork at your fancy law firm."

Wes chuckled. During our mini-reunion at Blockheads, Wes mentioned that he was an associate at the firm of Alston & McCoy that had an office over by Grand Central Station and had groaned over how he was little more than a paperwork filer in his current role. He hoped it would change soon since the partners were

finally allowing associates who'd been with the firm for eighteen months – an anniversary that was quickly approaching – that they could take on independent cases rather than assist the partners. "Well, as busy as I am with checking boxes on paperwork that makes my mind explode, I'd rather be sitting in your fancy office listening to music all day."

Now it was my turn to laugh. Wes had serious delusions about my job and thought I spent an inordinate amount of time at music venues and listening to music all day and did nothing else. I had corrected him a handful of times since he and I had reconnected, but he relented and I gave up once I realized Wes was just poking fun. "I was calling to see if you wanted to grab a bite to eat at around 1:30."

He paused for a moment, probably checking his calendar. "Looks like I'm all yours. Where we headed?"

"I made reservations at Fusia Asian off 56th and Lex. Is that okay with you?"

I could practically hear Wes' smirk. "A reservation? Is this a date?"

I chuckled. "No, I had already made the reservation and my friend cancelled on me. Oh, Santana, you remember her."

"Oh, so I'm second fiddle to a *girl*? Blaine, have you had such a bleak dating life that you had to turn to the ladies?"

I smiled to myself, the thought of Kurt reminding me that as long as some guys would be as attractive as he was, I would never ever find girls appealing sexually. "Hardly. She... cancelled... so I didn't want to let the reservation go to waste. Plus, if you play your cards right, I might even pay."

"Well I'm considering this a date since you made a reservation and you're paying," he said with a laugh.

"Fine," I retorted as I rolled my eyes. "But you better let me get lucky."

"I'm not that easy, B. I don't put out until at *least* date number four."

...

When I arrived at the restaurant, Wes was already standing outside waiting for me to arrive. The cold air seemed to have no effect on my friend, as he was fiddling with his phone with his jacket unbuttoned and no scarf at his neck.

"Shall we dine, fine sir?" I mocked as I approached him. He grinned.

"Why, of course," he replied, going to the restaurant's door and holding it open for me.

"What a gentleman," I chuckled as I went through the door, Wes following at my heels. We really were idiots but well mannered ones thanks to Dalton and the required etiquette classes we had to take during prime cotillion years.

Once we were seated and our drink and food orders taken, I realized it was easy to fall back into sync with Wes even after all of these years with us not maintaining contact.

"Why haven't we talked for all of these years?" I asked aloud, not really expecting an answer.

He shrugged. "I guess that stuff happens when you move away, ya know? We weren't best friends in high school, but we were certainly close enough that I thought we'd avoid the whole not-talking-for-years thing. But apparently even we fabulous Warblers aren't immune."

I chuckled. "I'm glad that you maintained contact with David and that both of you guys managed to walk back into my life again. It's a nice change. Santana is great and all, but there's really only so much I can tell her without feeling like I'm crossing some weird guy-girl boundary." I took a sip of the water in front of me, before continuing. "Besides, she was acting really weird today."

"I can't believe she turned you down for such a delicious lunch," he noted.

"I didn't even get the chance to ask her to come before she just... disappeared. I guess I upset her too much this morning," I replied with a sigh.

"What did you do to piss her off?"

"She said I was acting... distant this morning and I told her I didn't want to get into why I was spacing out and she just freaked."

"So why were you being distant?" Wes asked, intrigue playing on his features.

"I – uh – Wes, if I didn't tell Santana, what makes you think I'll tell you?"

"Because I'm so dashing?"

I laughed. "That won't work on me now just like it didn't in high school. Without going into too many details, I'm just trying to be guarded about a certain area of my life because I don't want the past to repeat itself. In order to do that, I just need to keep it close to the vest for the time being. I tried to tell Santana that but she just got... offended or something."

Wes sighed. "Blaine, it's totally okay that you want to keep things private or... whatever is going on in that head of yours, to yourself. I'm guessing something bigger is going on with her for some reason."

"Yet another reason I'm glad I like men."

He laughed. "I don't think it's a purely female issue, B. But it just seems like something else might be at hand here. I mean, I met Santana once and she seemed like she could get angry at the drop of a hat, but she also cares about you more than she might be willing to admit aloud."

"Santana is just like that; she may come off as a control freak, but deep down she cares so much that she's defensive of the people she cares about most. So far, Brittany and I are the primary recipients of her care."

"Lucky you," he said just before the waiter placed our food at our table. "I don't know her – or you anymore, really – super well, but just wait it out for a bit. Maybe try to talk to her at the end of the day?"

"Sounds like a plan," I replied, grabbing the chopsticks next to my place setting. "And since when did you become so insightful?"

He shrugged. "I think my roommate has a lot to do with that. He's a really considerate guy. Total pain in my ass, but he really makes me think sometimes." Wes took a bite of his Pad Thai before speaking again.

"Too bad he's seeing someone; you could probably date a guy like him."

I smiled to myself before delving into my sushi. "Oh. Well. That won't be necessary," I replied coolly, hoping my blush at the thought of Kurt wouldn't give me away.

At that moment, Wes looked up at me and I averted my gaze but resigned myself to the fact that – once again – my emotions were on display on my face and as obvious as the sun on a summer's day. I'd been caught and Wes was now privy to something I hadn't quite wanted to share yet. He grinned mischievously in response to my actions. "Something you want to share, Blaine?"

I rolled my eyes. "In your dreams, Wes."

KURT

I had spent a good portion of the morning planning a few things for my date with Blaine for Sunday and all that work had left me starving. I left the confines of my room and ventured out into the kitchen to find something to eat only to remember that I hadn't been grocery shopping in far too long and had more Chinese takeout boxes in my fridge than I knew what to do with.

Since I didn't have to report to work until 5, I figured I could do some grocery shopping at Whole Foods and still make it back to the apartment with plenty of time to get to work after dropping off my groceries. I grabbed the reusable bags from the hook on the pantry door, grabbed my keys and made my way to the Whole Foods at Columbus Circle.

There were plenty of grocery stores that were closer – and more affordable ones at that – but I always enjoyed shopping at this location more than anywhere else. It probably had something to do with the fact that it shared a building with some of my favorite shops so it often ended up being a two-for-one trip when I'd window shop before descending down the escalator to the basement where the Whole Foods was located.

I hailed a cab – not wanting to walk the nearly thirty blocks all the way to the grocery store – and gave the driver my desired location before settling back and watching the buildings pass by as we drove up 8th Avenue.

As we passed Penn Station, my thoughts started to drift to Blaine. It had become a common occurrence in recent days, especially after our date. He and I really had hit it off spectacularly, but I knew there was so much I had to learn about him. Where was he from? What was his family like? Who did he consider to be

his best friends? What did he want to do in five years? What movies made him smile? What was his favorite food?

It was a drastic change from anything I'd felt before. Even when I had been on that one date with James – who I needed to schedule some time to go shopping with soon – I found myself not feeling fully into the date. Obviously, James had been exceedingly attractive and was a sweet guy, but I think that inkling I felt after our date was just the first sign that he wasn't it for me. The date hadn't felt right and somewhere in the depths of my mind, I knew it.

But Blaine, he was a different story. I don't think I'd ever been so nervous to go on a first date before, even though he and I had already met and had been talking for a while before embarking on our first and second dates. But as soon as Blaine was in front of me, it was as if the nerves subsided and things fell into an easy conversation. We laughed together and seemed to just... click. It was something I hadn't experienced with anyone else before. It was like I could probably tell him anything that was on my mind and I knew he wouldn't judge me for it.

The thought terrified me since this had never happened – not even with William. But it was something I didn't want to question at this point. Whatever it was with Blaine right now was wonderful and I didn't want it to end any time soon.

"Sir?" the cabbie barked from the front seat.

I was pulled from my thoughts when I realized we were already at Columbus Circle. I swiped my card into the reader on the back seat and thanked him after inputting the tip to be allocated to my card and scooted out of the backseat. The cab driver mumbled something as I got out of the car and drove off. I shrugged; he was probably getting ready to get off shift since it was nearly three and the cab drivers usually switched out around this time of the day.

I started walking toward the glass doors to the building when I realized I'd left my reusable bags in the backseat of the cab. I quickly turned around to see if the cab was anywhere in sight, but if it was still nearby it was lost in the sea of yellow that circled around the fountain in the middle of the street.

I threw up my hands and started to make my way back toward the doors. It wasn't a big deal since the bags weren't really expensive in the first place, but I really hoped it wasn't a sign of more bad things to come; you know what they say about bad things coming in threes and all.

At that moment, I felt something wrong with my stride. I looked down at my shoes and noticed a long string of chewed bubble gum coming from the bottom of my shoe and connected to a spot on the sidewalk a few paces back. I groaned and tried to scrape the sticky residue from the bottom of my shoes – which I had just bought last week – but not having much success.

I started mumbling to myself but kept walking into the building, praying to the deities or mother earth or *something* to spare me from having anything else bad happen to me this afternoon only to be hit sharply in the arm with one of the doors that had swung open in front of someone carrying a lot of shopping bags. I rubbed my arm gingerly with a resounding "ow!" escaping my mouth and mentally resigned myself that bad things – or at least annoying things – really had come in threes today.

"Watch where you're go-" said a voice. "Kurt?"

Shocked to hear my name said with such familiarity and calm, I flicked my eyes up to encounter the face of the person who had just yelled at me.

"Santana?"

"Holy shit! What are you doing here?" she asked, eyes full of shock and awe. I hadn't seen Santana in years, probably since we graduated from high school. She and I hadn't really been close then and had eventually lost touch sometime during our freshman year of college.

"I – uh – was going grocery shopping."

She kept looking at me, the harshness that was previously evident in her voice when we had collided now infinitely softer and calmer. "Well," she continued. "What do you say about grabbing something to eat right now? Do you have anywhere you need to be? I'm hungry and we could totally catch up a bit if you can spare the time. I know it's very last minute and unexpected..."

I shook my head. "I'm starving actually, so I'd be glad to. I have to be at work by 5, but that's not for," I peered at my watch and noted that it was just past 2, "nearly three hours. But do you have somewhere to be?"

"Nah. I decided to take a half day from work today – had a rough go last night so I needed to clear my mind."

I laughed. "Glad to see we cope with stress in the same fashion."

She rolled her eyes. "Whatever, Hummel. Let's go, shopping has worked up my appetite and though you look ravishing, I'm strictly opposed to cannibalism."

I snorted and held my arm out for her free arm to take. She smiled as she lightly looped her arm with my own and led the way.

...

We were nestled into a booth toward the front of the restaurant, Landmarc – chosen because it was in Time Warner Center and we wouldn't have to venture out into the chilly afternoon – and Santana and I had quickly caught up on what had happened in our lives. Santana shared how she had transferred from Ohio State after her freshman year to NYU and majored in communications with an emphasis in public relations. She had gotten an internship at a music label in town during her senior year and got a job offer once her internship was over working in their PR department. I updated her on Parsons and how I now worked in the costume department for Bring It On! She laughed realizing that my experience as a Cheerio was now being put to good use. We comfortably fell back into more catching up when the light laughter of our conversation and the slight smile she had felt a bit.

"I can't tell you how glad I am to have run into you today, Kurt."

I peered at her over my nearly empty water goblet and gently placed the receptacle on the table. The Santana that I'd known in high school was a lot harsher than the one that sat in front of me now – though they looked practically the same to me. Santana in high school had been cool and distant but this one seemed a bit warmer, albeit it seemed like something was holding her back. Then again, how could I really be sure? I hadn't seen her in about eight years.

"I'm glad I ran into you too," I softly replied. She smiled a bit before turning to look out at the direction of the restaurant, as if she wasn't really here anymore. I decided that even if she and I weren't besties that I could still ask. "Is everything okay? I mean, I may not know you very well after all these years, but leave it to intuition to think something might be on your mind." Part of me wanted to reach out and gently touch her hand – being a more tactile person in recent years – but I wasn't sure how New Santana would take to the physical contact.

She sighed. "This week has just been ridiculously busy and full of personal drama." She stopped briefly and looked at me, as if she was seeing if it was okay to continue. I nodded lightly and she elaborated. "Work has been go-go-go due to a new band getting signed. I asked to be in charge of this band's publicity now that they're signed. It just takes a lot of fielding calls and stuff when things get launched."

"That sounds like a lot," I conceded.

She agreed with a slight hum. "Yeah, but it's not just that. I had a major fight with my girlfriend on Wednesday and we've both been too busy to really resolve it. I hate being mad at her for so long, especially since we live together, but we haven't seen each other much since she mostly works nights and I work a 9-5."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Santana. Do you think you'll have time to sort things out with her this weekend?"

Santana shrugged. "I don't know. Brittany – that's her name – might have to work so I can't be sure. But god, I just want it to be done – I want she and I to be okay again."

I hesitated once more but decided to just ask the question I'd been curious about since she started talking about her problems. "What happened with you and Brittany?"

"She and I have been together for a few years now and we're getting to the point where our family and friends are asking if we're 'in it for the long haul.' I want to be in it with her for... well, forever... but I don't want to start thinking about that right now. We're both so busy and she just started a new job and adding any pressure of a wedding or whatever it entails. We already live together, so the next step is marriage and I want it with her, but I don't want it right now."

I paused to think for just a moment. "So what did she say when you told her that?"

"Well, that's where the argument kind of started. She thought that by me saying 'I don't want it now' meant 'I don't want it ever' and we haven't been able to really talk about what each other want since then."

"It sounds like it might be a miscommunication between the two of you," I replied. "Perhaps you guys should talk this out tonight. It doesn't seem like it's doing you much good to be fighting with each other if you bought out the entire selection at True Religion and bebe," I said, nodding toward the mountain of bags that had been set to the side of our table.

She chuckled. "I suppose you're right." The lull in our conversation felt comfortable, as Santana seemed to debate what to say to her girlfriend as I just looked at the people around us in the somewhat empty restaurant. "Thanks, Kurt," she said, interrupting the silence that had remained for a few minutes. "But onto lighter and somewhat relevant subjects, what's going on in your love life?"

I blushed slightly, noting that Santana's bluntness hadn't escaped after all these years. "Not too much in the past few years, an odd date here and there. I was pretty busy traveling with the tour that I didn't have much time to date."

"Is there anyone currently vying for the role of Kurt Hummel's boyfriend these days?"

I was going to deny anything to Santana since she didn't really know me anymore, but what harm could it have? It's not like she knew Blaine or anything. "There is someone. Or, at least I think so."

Her eyes gleamed with intrigue. "Do tell, Hummel. What man has tickled your fancy?"

I laughed. "I don't want to jinx it or anything, but he and I have been on two dates and they were both wonderful. He's just..." I stopped and let my thoughts race with images and memories of Blaine.

She cleared her throat, immediately pulling my attention back to the woman in front of me. "Wow. He's got your panties all in a twist. What's his name? Do I need to stalk him?"

I rolled my eyes. "You're no better than Mercedes. But just to keep him from the prying eyes of the two of you, I'm keeping my mouth shut on the details."

"Fine, fine, have it your way Hummel. But when you think of him you look as distracted as..." she stopped talking but her eyes bulged.

"What? Is everything okay?" I sputtered as she stared at me, blankly.

"I don't know how I didn't realize," she replied.

"Realize what?" I asked, curious as to what rabbit hole her brain had gone down.

"My friend. Why he was acting so weird this morning. It was another reason I was having such a rough day this morning." Rather than speak, I just let Santana think it out loud. "He was acting all distracted this morning like he was in another world or something. But he was making the same face you just made."

"What face did I just make?"

"One where I could tell you have feelings for this guy that you went on two dates with. That has to be why he's acting weird and all gushy and love-struck. I'd know that face anywhere; he went on a date!"

"Why were you mad at him for going on a date?" She was not making sense. Shouldn't she be happy for her friend?

She shook her head. "No, I didn't realize that he had. He said he needed his space from me and now I know why. He tends to get easily excitable about things - especially if he's interested in someone - and he probably is just trying to figure out his emotions or whatever before talking about it. But I thought he was trying to push me away and since things are so up in the air with Britt right now, I didn't want to lose yet another person in my life. One is bad enough."

She looked somber and the happier mood established because of my thoughts of Blaine cleared as I thought of the girl in front of me. I remembered the abandonment she felt when her grandmother disapproved of her lesbianism and the scuffle it had caused in her family because of it.

"I'm sure your friend is still there for you, San." She smiled a bit as I kept talking. "Just talk to him. Maybe he doesn't want to talk to you about the date for some reason. I get it - I'm the same way. But if he's your best friend, I'm sure he still cares a lot about you."

She was beaming now. I forgot how amazing it was when Santana smiled. She had smiled so infrequently in high school that seeing her face full of smiles and teeth only made her radiate more than she already had. "Thanks Kurt."

I shrugged. "No big deal."

She laughed. "Too bad you're dating Mr. Fabulous. Otherwise I'd set you up with my best friend."

I chuckled. "Any man that can put up with *you* must be a saint."

"He really is," she said, small smile still at her lips.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Friday Night, October 26

Can't I have one hint about Sunday? –B

That would spoil all the fun. –K

I warned you, I'm not a huge fan of surprises. –B

So I guess the surprise party I had planned for your birthday is out, huh? –K

Speaking of, when is your birthday? –K

God, no surprise parties. My brother threw me one once and I didn't speak to him for a week. It's September 23. Why do you want to know my birthday? –B

For my psychic reading obviously. ;) Just curious really and it was something I hadn't asked you yet. Figured it might be good to know. –K

Well, when is yours? Turn about is fair play. –B

October 1. And as you know, I love surprises. –K

Noted. And happy very belated birthday to you. –B

I guess it's better late than never, huh? And happy belated birthday to you too. –K

My birthday was almost a month ago! –B

Well then happy early birthday! –K

You're so weird. –B

Oh whatever. You like it. –K

That I do. ;) –B

I'm sorry. -S

Why are you apologizing? I'm so sorry that I made you feel like I was lying to you. -B

I know you weren't. I just overreacted and I shouldn't have yelled at you like that. -S

Not gonna lie, it scared the shit out of me. -B

I have that effect on people when I'm mad. Beware. -S

What are you up to tonight? -S

Nothing planned. -B

Want to get dinner? -S

Anything for my best friend in the whole wide world! -B

Your compliments will only take you so far, Anderson. -S

I see Lady Snixx has come out. Meoww! -B

You're an idiot. -S

But you love this idiot! -B

Whatever. Meet me at 5 Napkin at 45th and 9th at 6. -S

Burgers? That's so unlike you. -B

Well, my week has called for it and I swear burgers cure all ails. So I figured I could talk it over with my BFF and eat some meat and share fries. -S

Sharing fries? No offense, but it sounds like we might need two orders of fries – you know how I feel about sharing those babies. –B

Fine, fine. But dinner is on me, I insist. –S

You don't have to do that. –B

It's the least I can do after that scene at the office this morning. And besides, I won't take no for an answer and you know I'll fight you until the end if you argue with me over this. –S

Alright, alright. See you at 6? –B

Yup. –S

Also, you have some explaining to do. –S

What are you talking about? –B

Oh, we will discuss it at dinner. Don't you fret. –S

Oh god, I'm afraid. –B

You should be. –S

Do you have to work tonight? –W

Yes Wesley. It's Friday night and I work in a theater. I always work weekends. –K

I feel like I never see you anymore. –W

I just saw you the other morning! –K

Doesn't count. It was for like five minutes and then you left me for another guy! –W

Are you sure you're straight? –K

Incredibly straight. If I weren't, you'd be my boy by now. –W

Why do I live with you? –K

Because I'm the best? –W

So modest. –K

Well, I really would like to have some roommate time soon. I know you don't work Sunday nights, let's do something then! –W

I can't. I have plans already. –K

Laaaaaaame. –W

How about Monday night? I don't work Monday so we can hang out then. –K

I was supposed to go to a networking event at the firm, but I guess my roommate time is more important. See what I am willing to do for you? –W

Also, what time do you get off work tomorrow? –W

Whatever. Like you really want to go to a networking event. Uh, probably 11? Why? –K

David and I are going to a Halloween party if you wanted to tag along, assuming you didn't have plans or anything. –W

David? –K

Yeah, that guy I went to Dalton with. –W

OH. Sorry. You know I'm horrible with remembering people. Perhaps? –K

Come ON Kurt, get out some. Or just get some. ;) –W

Perv. Fine, fine - I'll go. Where's the party? -K

I don't have the exact address, David does. It's somewhere in Chelsea so close to home. -W

I suppose. Can I bring someone? -K

Is it a certain gentleman caller? -W

No. Lauren, my friend from work. -K

Sure. Although you could bring Mystery Man if you wanted to. -W

We had an agreement, Wes. -K

Fine, fine. Just a thought. Anyway, pull something together with you and Lauren and we'll do it big. -W

As if I could expect anything else from you. -K

BLAINE

By the time I had arrived at 5 Napkin Burger, Santana was already there. I had expected her to be since she had taken half of the day off and didn't have to come straight from the office like I did. Plus the restaurant was only a few streets south of where we lived so it wasn't like she was trekking across town or anything.

"If I had to wait any longer, I was going to have to order and eat without you," she said once I was seated.

"Geez San. Are you that hungry?"

"Not really, I had a late lunch but I need some comfort food so I'm just eager to get my greasy on."

I sighed as she delved into the menu. Santana was normally a fairly health-conscious eater, primarily because Brittany was due to her work as a dancer, but sometimes she and I would pig out on some burgers, fries and pizza if the moment called for it. Typically the moments that required such food was a

bad day at the office or some sort of heartbreak so the fact that she wanted to come here already had me worried.

"I do hope you're going to explain why we're eating here," I said pointedly.

Santana just waved over the top of the menu as if to dismiss the topic as she continued to peruse the many burgers they had available. "I will. But can we please just order first?"

I rolled my eyes. "Sure."

Within minutes, orders were placed and drinks were at our table and Santana couldn't avoid me anymore. I just glared at her expectantly until she resigned herself to spill what was going on.

"Britt and I had a really big fight on Wednesday."

The look of annoyance on my face due to Santana's hesitance to share immediately changed to one of concern and care. In the few years I had known the two of them, they had rarely fought and when they did, they were generally over really big things. Their last fight had taken place over a year ago and it had been over how they were planning on splitting their holidays between families. With Santana's family primarily in Ohio and Brittany's in New York, it made spending time with both families on Christmas Day nearly impossible and neither wanted to budge on giving up family Christmas time since both were so close with their immediate family. In the end they had agreed to fly between locales on Christmas Day – giving each family half of Christmas Day – and spending two days on the front and back end with the respective families. The argument had only lasted two days, but seeing how torn apart Santana was after two nights of them fighting, I realized exactly why they fought so rarely; they were in love and were so attuned with each other that fighting just wasn't part of their relationship.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?" I said incredulously. Santana could be guarded from time to time, but whenever she fought with Brittany, she needed to be coddled stat; girl hated to fight with her best friend and love of her life.

"You had a lot going on and so did I. I didn't want to bother you. Plus it was something I thought she and I would have talked about sooner but our schedules just haven't aligned."

"San, you're never bothering me by talking about what's going on in your life. I promise you. But we can talk about that part later. What happened that made you and Britt fight?"

"Well, Britt and I have been together for awhile now and we've been feeling pressure from our families and friends to tie the knot."

"But I thought you-"

"Blaine, please. Just let me speak," she coarsely interjected. I nodded silently. "Thanks. It's not that I don't appreciate your comments and notes, but I need to just get it out." Another silent nod. "Okay, so. Both of our families have been asking about us getting married. And it's not like I don't want to spend the rest of my life with her; in my mind, that's going to happen. She and I will be wrinkly and in adult diapers together but still managing to look sexy as hell at the nursing home we get put into when we're old. But we're both so busy right now, it doesn't make sense to get married right now."

She sat in silence for a minute, which I took as an opportunity to speak. "Why do you think now isn't a good time?"

"She just started her new job and with the launch of Atticus Finch it'll be pretty busy over the next few months. I don't want for us to get married when we're in such a whirlwind in our careers that we don't get to enjoy it."

"Enjoy what?"

"Enjoy being engaged, enjoy a wedding. It's hard enough to see each other as it is and we live together!"

Santana was practically red at this point. I could tell that this had been eating her up for a while longer than she was letting on. Anyone who knew Brittany or Santana couldn't deny the unconditional love between those two – they were some of my best examples of how "unconventional" love can be pure, true and everlasting. I could see plain as day that those two women were going to get married.

But I was all too familiar with the pressures to get married when you get to a certain age and more so when you've been with someone for five years like they had. It was an annoying side effect of our parent's generation; they had gotten married well before 30, so waiting just didn't make sense to them – even if we were a bunch of gay kids.

"Santana, look. I know that you're going to end up with Brittany. Shit, everyone that knows you knows that."

"Then why did Brittany think I wouldn't want her? God, I dream of the day I can call her my wife," she replied quietly.

I shrugged. "I don't know why Brittany would think that. But I think this whole situation can be remedied by just talking with Brittany." I paused to give her a moment to think before going on about one point that I knew to be true. "But at the same time, I don't think now is a bad time to get engaged – if you really want it that is."

She looked up at me, slightly baffled by my response. "Blaine, I just told you I don't think now is a good time."

"You misunderstand me. I see why now might not be a good time to prepare for having a wedding. But who's to say that you can't get engaged now and just have a long term engagement, especially if it means you'd end this fight with Brittany."

She sighed. "Won't that seem slightly insincere? I mean it'll seem like I am caving to some sort of ultimatum."

God, Santana really didn't give me any credit. "San, how long have you had Brittany's engagement ring hidden in the drawer in the kitchen?"

Her eyes bugged at my comment. "How did you..? But I thought I..."

I scoffed. "Please San, I found that thing awhile ago, which I was *trying* to mention earlier before you cut me off." She shrunk in her seat a bit before I continued. "I thought it was a rather unconventional hiding place, but I realized that Brittany never uses kitchen utensils so it made more sense to hide it there than in your underwear drawer or something. So clearly you've been wanting to do this for awhile. Why have you had it for so long and haven't proposed?"

"I wanted it to be *perfect* and every time I tried to plan anything, it came up feeling inadequate. And then when work ramped up, I spent too much time preparing for work that working on the perfect proposal for Brittany fell behind. I just... want everything for her."

"San," I breathed. "Why didn't you tell me about this sooner? You know I would have helped you."

"I just wanted to try to do something for her myself. B, I know you're like some sort of uber-romantic freak," she stated, earning a heart-roaring laugh from me, "but I really wanted to try to think of something incredible and thoughtful myself. It's not necessarily my forte, but I wanted to try."

"I don't think you get it, San. I wasn't saying I was going to help you plan what you wanted for Britt. I meant that I would have helped you calm down and realize that no matter what you do, it'll be perfect. You could propose next to a Port-o-Potty and she'd still say yes."

She laughed heartily. "I hope that I would come up with something better than *that*." With her pause as she drifted off to thinking about how to propose to her honey, I grabbed her hand from across the table. Her eyes flickered down to our hands for a moment before looking at me. "Thanks, B."

"Of course," I replied. "It's what best friends do."

"I'm going to do it tomorrow," she beamed.

I mirrored her smile. "Sounds perfect. Although now I think dinner needs to be on me."

Her eyebrow shot up with curiosity. "Why's that?"

I grinned. "Early engagement present."

"Please. If you think dinner will suffice as an early engagement present, I'm starting to question our friendship."

I laughed heartily as Santana rolled her eyes playfully before explaining how she was hoping to propose this weekend.

Yeah, I thought to myself. She'll be okay.

KURT

"Lauren!" I exclaimed as I shuffled backstage once the show was over for the night. The show had gone as well as they normally had, no mishaps or anything, but I hadn't yet spoken to my friend about her plans for Halloween.

I was irritated with Wes for not bringing up his Halloween plans earlier since he knew Halloween was one of my favorite holidays. And I had resigned myself to not go all out for Halloween this year since I had only been back in the city for a few weeks and had no time to really pull together a costume. It was so unlike me to not have a fabulously handcrafted costume, but I hadn't had the time and my roommate was an idiot.

But if I was going to have a last minute Halloween look, I wanted Lauren to be my +1. Besides, I had the feeling that she wasn't super into the partying scene either – meaning she and I could escape if we thought the party went too out of control – but she also could use some exposure to the Manhattanites that dwelled on the island. Sure, she was in Brooklyn, but Manhattan parties are another animal all in themselves. Plus I bet she could meet a guy with that confidence she exuded and that new body she was rocking and I happen to be an amazing wingman.

"I'm back here," I heard her yell from the make-up area. I opened the door to find Lauren carefully placing the many products and containers back into position for the Saturday afternoon show. If I thought the costume area was controlled chaos, the make-up area was even more so. There were tiny bottles and packets everywhere and a slight dust from all of the powders used for stage make-up; it was my worst nightmare. Picking up a spilled container of straight pins seemed like a cakewalk when you had to contain this type of mess.

I leaned into the doorframe as Lauren continued to hustle around the room, picking up brushes and wiping off the surface of everything. "What can I do for you, Hummel?" she asked.

"Do you have any plans after the show tomorrow?"

She laughed. "The only plans I had were with my DVR and Downton Abbey. So, no."

"How would you feel about joining me for a Halloween party?"

She peered up at me through the mirror. "Uh sure?"

"Why do you seem so unsure about it?"

Lauren sighed then scooted back to sit in the chair. She practically flopped into the chair and let her arms and legs lag over the sides of it. "I'm not a big partier."

"Neither am I, dear," I stated pointedly.

"I've just never felt comfortable, you know? You remember high school; I wasn't exactly invited to a lot of stuff unless I was pitied upon by someone."

"Hey!" I sneered. "I invited you to things!"

"I know you did, but you were far nicer than anyone else at McKinley and that's because you knew what I was like to be an outsider," she said solemnly.

I stepped up behind her and rubbed her shoulders. She immediately relaxed more in the beauty chair she sat in. "And New York is supposed to be a new start, right? It's been a few years since McKinley. And besides, you need to take this hot little body out on the town."

She slapped my hands away from her shoulders with a grin as she sat up in the chair. "Fine. Count me in. And I already have a Halloween costume in mind."

"Lucky you," I groaned. "I don't have a costume and normally I spend weeks planning and creating the perfect costume. I guess I'll have to just find something sub-par at the last minute."

She smirked. "No you don't."

"Huh?"

She grabbed my hand and led me back out toward my workspace in the costume area. "You forget, dear sir, you work in a theater in the costume department. And I know just what you can wear."

"Dear god, I'm afraid." I prayed to the deities I didn't truly believe in as she shoved me into the costume room and firmly closed the door behind us.

"You should be," she replied with a wink.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Saturday Night, October 27

KURT

"Why is it always freezing on Halloween?" Lauren mumbled as we ascended the stairway of the Subway. The show had ended about an hour ago and Lauren and I had decided to get ready for the Halloween party at the theater where we'd have a slew of products and costume items at our disposal. It was not entirely kosher to do what we were doing, but I had at least informed Roselyn of our actions and she said she'd turn a blind eye as long as we didn't ruin any of the costume pieces or use all of the make-up.

"It's like you're not prepared for the cold. You could have worn a warmer costume if you knew it was going to be cold," I replied.

"Have you ever been with girls on Halloween? There are some expectations for Halloween costumes for girls; the shorter and more provocative, the better."

I snorted. "Like you've ever been one to maintain the status quo."

"Whatever, Hummel."

The party was a mere two blocks from the apartment I shared with Wes and he was already at the party and anxious for my arrival. I think Wes was more eager to see me exist in a social capacity since he hadn't really seen me in a party atmosphere since college. Back then, we'd attend the odd mixer together – since we went to different schools it wasn't exactly a common occurrence – but the ones we had gone to were usually involving other a Capella choirs that we had connections with.

We arrived at the building and could hear the party roaring on the fifth floor from the street. I had planned on texting Wes for the exact apartment number upon our arrival, but it wouldn't be necessary based on the decibel level of the music. Thankfully someone had propped the door open and we slipped in and made our way to the fifth floor, music getting louder with each step.

"Jesus Christ, I feel bad for the neighbors," Lauren yelled once we were on the stoop for the fifth floor.

"Doesn't seem to be an issue," I noted, as I pointed out the many doors on the floor that were also open and had partygoers flitting in and out of the different apartments. "I'll just text Wes and let him know we're here."

"Kurt!" I heard someone yell from down the hall as I was pulling out my phone. My eyes turned in the direction of the voice, belonging to my roommate.

"Hey Wes," I replied. "I was about to text you."

"Uh huh," he grunted, not looking at me for once. Instead, I noticed his eyes were fixed on the space next to me. Perplexed I turned toward where he was looking to see him fixated on Lauren. "Oh, uh, how rude of me. This is..."

"Lauren Zizes," she said, extending her hand to my eerily quiet roommate.

"Uh, hi," he stammered. I couldn't help but giggle. There was no way I would have predicted this type of reaction from Wes. The last time he was this quiet was just before they announced that Obama was taking his second term as president, which was years ago. And if I would have predicted that Wes would have been so taken with my former high school friend, I would have introduced the two sooner.

"Uh, can I take your coat," he asked, extending his arm to Lauren. She shrugged and started to untie the belt at her waist that kept her knee length coat fitted against her figure. As she peeled it off, I heard Wes gasp. I turned, amused by my roommate's obvious attraction, to see him openly ogling Lauren in her cat costume.

Lauren had managed to pick a costume that flaunted her slimmer figure while still maintaining some form of warmth. She was wearing a long-sleeved leotard with short sequined black shorts and knee high boots with heels, all topped off with cat ears and flawless eye make-up and a tiny, dainty pink cat nose. She was a good example of cute and sexy and it went so well with her personality, I had been thoroughly impressed at her ability to pull it together so quickly.

I discarded my own coat and held it out to Wes, who was still befuddled by Lauren's existence. Clearly the guy was smitten and I looked forward to relentlessly bugging him about it later. After all, turn about is fair play.

"Mr. Montgomery, please take my coat along with Lauren's," I said in my best English accent. Wes could do no more than stutter a response, maintaining eye contact with Lauren the whole time. He quietly took our coats, muttered something about coming back, and promptly walked backwards into a doorway. I couldn't stifle my laugh and as soon as Wes was out of eyesight, Lauren turned to me with a peculiar look on her face.

"Is there something wrong with me?" she asked, face paled under her painted whiskers.

"Hardly."

"Why was he being that way? It was like there was something wrong with me." I looked at her and finally placed the face she was making; she was terrified.

"Hon, there is absolutely nothing wrong with you; in fact, just the opposite. I think my roommate might have a crush on you."

She gasped. "On me?!"

"Yes, you! Why else did you think that he was acting that way? He certainly doesn't get flabbergasted by my presence," I replied.

"Oh."

Her face still displayed one of uncertainty and fragility despite me revealing that she had taken my dumbfounded roommate by surprise – in a good way. "Why are you so surprised by this?"

She shrugged. "It's just... new."

"I don't understand." I wished that she and I didn't have to have this discussion in the crowded hallway full of people buzzed and in ridiculous costumes, but I guess there's no time like the present.

"I haven't exactly had a lot of... attention... come my way from guys. Sure, there was Puck in high school, but he was more into my power and bitch factor than by the way I looked. I guess it's one of the growing pains of this whole New Lauren thing that I'm still getting used to. I've never really had anyone be so taken with my just by looking at me before. Normally, it's that they wonder how I got to be the way that I was,"

she replied sheepishly. She tugged on the sleeve of her leotard and pulled her shorts down a little longer, trying to cover herself fully.

I softly grabbed her hand and pulled it tightly with mine. "Stop," I commanded gently as she stopped fidgeting. "You were gorgeous before and you're gorgeous now. I can't help that straight guys are idiots." She laughed at my conclusion. "But," I assured her, "I'm glad guys are finally realizing what I've seen."

"You sure know how to flatter a woman," she said with a giggle. "Too bad you're into guys."

"Only bad for you, Zizes," I retorted.

"Well, I'm sure Blaaaaaaaaaaine isn't complaining about you liking guys," she snorted, earning an eye roll from me.

"He doesn't seem to be," I said. I looked up to see Wes returning with two drinks in his hand. I giggled at the thought that Wes was being such a gentleman to Lauren, but snapped back to reality when I realized where our conversation was leading.

"Okay, and remember what I said about mentioning Blaine to Wes?" She nodded. She and I had talked about how I wasn't introducing him to Wes yet and though she understood, she did think that waiting until mid-November seemed unrealistic but she wasn't going to stop me. "Don't say anything now that he's back, okay?"

Another nod and Wes approached, drink in hand extended to Lauren. "For you," he said sweetly.

She quirked her brow and took it reluctantly. "I hope you didn't put anything in this," she said as she peered into the cup in her hand.

"I would never," he replied. "Shall we go inside?" he asked, motioning to the room he had just come from.

She fumbled with her clutch for a moment before pulling out her cell phone. "Yes, but can you first please take a picture of me and Kurt? We both look pretty hot tonight."

Wes nodded his head as she handed him her phone. I could hear him under his breath uttering something about "nice kitty" but I just let it go... for now.

"Alright, ready?" he asked. We both got into position as Wes counted down. "On three. 1, 2, 3!"

He handed back the phone as we checked the picture.

"Not bad," she replied before fidgeting with her phone for a bit then placed it back in her clutch. "Lead the way, Wes," she drawled with a fake Southern accent and he practically tripped over himself to show Lauren into the party.

Tonight will be awesome, I thought to myself.

BLAINE

I hated Halloween.

I think it started with the torture Cooper had initiated when I was a child by insisting that we watch horror movies every Halloween. Every year would start the same – me sitting next to my big brother watching the movie quietly – and would end with me sobbing in my parent's bed later that night when nightmares troubled my dreams. It finally came to an end when Cooper moved away when I was in middle school, but I had been scarred for life.

I hadn't even gone trick or treating much as a kid. I didn't mind going, but I would get plenty of candy from the Halloween soirees at the country club my parents belonged to in Columbus, so I never was short on candy.

All in all, I found Halloween to be an unnecessary holiday – one that I regarded as just another day. A day that, thankfully, fell in the middle of the week this year so big Halloween parties were likely to be scattered.

Wes and David had invited me to a party, but I was thankful that I had just traveled last week and I used being tired from the trip as an excuse to pass on the party. Didn't they remember that I hated Halloween? I never celebrated it in high school; clearly they had to know I wouldn't now. Then again, they were both big dorks so maybe they just didn't remember.

So instead of going out to the Halloween Wes and David had asked if I wanted to go to, I sat around at home and caught up on my DVR'd TV shows and read blogs. Sure, most people would probably sneer at my way that I was spending a Saturday night, but whatever. I was content to just chill at home.

Sometimes I'd spend a Saturday night with Santana and Brittany – either going out to dinner together or having a night in at either my place or theirs, but Santana had surprised Brittany with a trip to Montauk to propose in the off-season where it wouldn't be overly crowded with tourists. Thankfully my family had a timeshare there that I lent to her for the weekend – as a more acceptable early engagement present – and she promised to give me all of the details when she returned from her trip. Seemed fair to me.

I sat staring at another episode of Toddlers and Tiaras – a guilty pleasure of mine – and happily scrolled through some blogs I hadn't read in awhile. I started with Brooklyn Vegan and moved onto Pitchfork and marked my calendar with when some new albums were releasing in the coming months. After I had caught up on my reading and Honey Boo Boo was no longer appealing, I decided to go onto Twitter to see what some of my friends were up to.

I had a Facebook in college but I had immediately deactivated it after my break-up, or whatever you want to call it, with Jared. Besides, it had way too much personal information on there for me to really enjoy it. Plus Jeff and Nick always managed to tag really horrible pictures of me from high school on there and there's only so much of that I could take before I hit my breaking point. So I decided to have some privacy and removed myself from Facebook and I hadn't looked back.

A few months ago, Santana said I should at least have a Twitter account – one that could be highly guarded if I wanted it to be – and people couldn't tag me in embarrassing photos. I joined over the summer and had been on there a bit since I had started the account, but rarely. It had proven to be an effective way to get back in touch with some of my old Dalton friends – some had moved to new states and others had remained in Ohio – but it also helped me keep tabs on some of my all-time favorite bands.

After logging into Twitter, I scrolled through the smattering of posts from my brother – he was just as narcissistic in 140 characters as he was in person – and a few from the official Rialto Twitter account that had been drafted by Santana to send out on Saturday night. It's amazing how you can time things to deliver electronically long after you've written them.

I had also recently started following Lauren, my favorite bartender from The Bell House. Admittedly she had found me first and when I received the notification that she had started following me, I followed her

back. Lauren didn't post very often, but when she did she usually had me busting a gut with her random musings.

Just underneath the five posts from Cooper – most of them of his abs or some YouTube video of him being an idiot – were a two from Lauren.

LzizesNYC: It's amazing what people consider to be Halloween costumes these days.

Along with that tweet was a picture of a girl in a bikini and a sash, the sash reading Ms. New York – notating that she was supposed to be a beauty queen. It was an incredibly ridiculous costume to wear with the temperature at freezing, but girls clearly had a different definition of Halloween costumes these days. I couldn't help but laugh at her commentary because it certainly was true.

Just below that tweet was another one that piqued my interest a bit more than the last.

LzizesNYC: Kurt and I out on the town for our favorite holiday! #manhattanhouseparty

I clicked on the tweet and it expanded.

Sweet mother of Jesus, hell yes.

Lauren looked cute in her cat costume but next to her stood the jaw-droppingly handsome and *hot* Kurt Hummel - in a male cheer leading costume.

I about died.

I knew he must have borrowed it from his work since it had the tell-tale RCHS on the front for Rancho Carne High School, but the costume looked like it had been made specifically for him. The v-neck uniform shirt clung tightly to his chest as he lifted his right arm up as if pretending to cheer. The way his fist formed made his bicep clench, showing off his sculpted arm that had been hidden under the long sleeves shirts I had always seen him in, which I was now sad that I hadn't seen this sooner.

But the best part had to be the pants. He was facing forward with his legs an arms width apart forming an inverted V but the white fabric of the pants hung tightly on his thighs, which I could tell were well sculpted even though they were covered by the pants.

And the way it fit him in the crotch... I had to adjust myself just looking at the way things were very... fitted.

I wanted to reply to Lauren, but given my current state of mind I was afraid it would all come out too forward. Sure, Kurt wasn't tagged in the photo or anything – I didn't even know if he had a Twitter – but I didn't want to say anything that might make me seem like a creeper. It already irked me that I had primarily communicated with Kurt online, I couldn't let one bad tweet about how her friend was incredibly sexy in his borrowed costume jeopardize anything – especially since he and I were supposed to go on our third date the next night.

I went through the rest of my tweets, all of which paled in comparison to the one from Lauren, and made my way back to her tweet.

One little tweet can't hurt, right?

Okay, think Anderson. And don't come off creepy. Just... mention something about how they're having fun... and how you'd like to have fun with Kurt and his...

Lord have mercy, simmer down.

warbler_blaine: *LzizesNYC – Looks like you guys are having fun!*

LzizesNYC: *warbler_blaine – You should come join us!*

warbler_blaine: *LzizesNYC – Maybe next year. ;)*

LzizesNYC: *warbler_blaine – I certainly hope you'll join us next year - Kurt says you have to!*

warbler_blaine: *LzizesNYC I guess I'll have to then!*

I sat back from my computer and read through the tweets that had just come in. Kurt might not have been on Twitter, but he was certainly involved in our conversation and I couldn't be more thrilled. Especially since he *insisted* on me joining them next year. Insisted!

Well, if Kurt liked Halloween, maybe I could too. Especially if his Halloween costumes always looked *that* good.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Sunday, October 28

BLAINE

I have never been more nervous for anything in my entire life.

I wasn't this nervous when I came out to my parents, I wasn't this nervous when I asked a guy out for our first date, I wasn't this nervous for my job interview at Rialto.

Kurt Hummel had turned me into a nervous wreck just by existing and going out on a date that he was planning with me. It also didn't help that I had no idea what we were going to do and I didn't have Santana around to talk me off a ledge. Not that I would mention specifics with her – I was still planning on keeping Kurt to myself for the time being – but she would at least tell me that I needed to 'calm my tits' and relax about whatever was bugging me.

Instead I found myself in a nervous panic at 8 in the morning on a Sunday anxiously fidgeting around my apartment to try and distract myself. I didn't have time to be nervous before the coffee date with Kurt since I had run so late that morning. Even on our second date I wasn't really nervous, but that was probably because I knew what was coming. I truly did hate surprises but if being with someone like Kurt meant being surprised from time to time, I'd manage. I think he'd be worth me being a bit uncomfortable.

I peered at the clock again after what seemed like hours had passed.

8:22am

I groaned. Our date wasn't for another 10 hours and I was already a mess. Rather than stay cooped up inside, I threw on a pair of shorts, a long-sleeved shirt and running shoes and strapped my iPhone to my arm and jetted out the door.

One of the reasons I decided to live in Hell's Kitchen rather than any other neighborhood was its proximity to the park. I could have easily lived in Brooklyn – and had a much larger place – but there was something that kept me tied to Central Park. It meant my place would be smaller, I opted for a small studio, but it meant that I would feel the freedom to go to my Happy Place anytime I wanted.

When I first moved to New York from Ohio, I remember going through Times Square and being totally at awe with the bright lights and the promise of Broadway. But once I went to Central Park, it just felt different; more comfortable, a place I could be at peace.

Music-wise, Central Park was a place where some historic things had taken place. The most notable one in my mind was Simon & Garfunkel's Central Park concert – a record I had listened into oblivion as a child that I still held in high regard to this day. Walking or running in the places where monumental and musical things happened just made me feel connected.

Plus there was never a shortage of musicians in the park and people eager to entertain. Sometimes they might be horrible, but I always gave respect to people who did what they felt their heart was calling.

I crossed the street by Columbus Circle and dodged a few taxis that ran the light and found myself staring up at the gilded statue at the corner of the park. The entrance at Columbus Circle was one of the most popular, but it was the one I had first seen when I first visited New York.

My parents and I had stayed at The Empire during one of the weekends I had come up to visit campus and the drive from the airport to the hotel required a pass through Columbus Circle. I was even more thrilled to learn that the hotel was nearly directly across the park from Marymount so rather than take a cab around the park, I decided to cut through it. It was then that I realized how centering I found the park to be. We had visited in March of my junior year of high school and the air had a slight chill, but the sun had been peeking through the trees as I walked, providing perfect weather.

I had been surrounded by people – runners, cyclists, kids tugging on the hands of their moms or nannies – but I still was able to center myself and think. Walking through the park, I realized I had fallen in love with the city more than I could describe and told myself I would do anything to make it happen here. I wasn't a huge outdoorsy person, but I would always feel a connection with the park. While the park I had visited in Atlanta had been nice, it was nothing compared to the thrill I felt when I went through Central Park.

I cranked up the music in my ear buds – today's soundtrack provided by Walk the Moon – and started trotting down the path. Nothing like a good jog through my favorite place to ease my nerves, I thought to myself as I jetted away.

....

The run had done me some good and I had come back to my apartment sweaty but content. By the time I had showered and nibbled on some toast – I was still too nervous and queasy to eat anything more substantial – it was noon. I had successfully killed a few more hours by cleaning my apartment that had been neglected since Atticus Finch kicked off and even managed to traipse down to the basement to do laundry.

By the time the last load was coming out of the dryer, it was 5:30. I could hardly believe the time was nearly here. I hadn't forgotten about Kurt or our date, that would have been impossible, but I had at least left it to lingering thoughts rather than me being a total and utter mess like I had been earlier that morning.

Oh who am I kidding, I was still a total disaster.

My thoughts flickered to calling someone – ANYONE – to talk to about my date and hash out some last minute nerves, but I decided against it. Besides, I needed to get ready.

I decided to take a second shower – water bill be damned – and took to preening myself carefully. I spent a good 10 minutes making sure my stubble was nonexistent and carefully crafted my hair to ensure that it remained tight to my head but still had some bounce to it. Thank god I no longer used massive amounts of product anymore, it really did nothing for my hair.

By the time I was done with phase one of my preparations, I heard a familiar ping come from my phone that I'd left on the nightstand. I glanced at the clock on my bedside table and flew over to read the message. It was 6, which meant I was finally learning about my plans with Kurt.

6:30. Times Square steps. –K

Here I was thinking that I would learn something more about what we'd actually be doing, not simply getting a rendezvous location. I wanted to be annoyed that the surprise was dragging out longer than I wanted it to, but I couldn't be mad at Kurt.

The fact that he had planned a date for us at all already had him on a pedestal higher than any guy I'd ever dated before. And sure, I hated surprises, but knowing that Kurt was trying to make our date special – or at least it seemed like that was his goal – it gave me chills on the inside and I was sure that if Kurt and I kept this up, I'd be falling for him in no time.

Rather than dwell on the possibility of what could be if I played my cards right, I set to finalizing my outfit for the night. Since I had no idea what we were doing, I opted to wear dark wash jeans and a charcoal gray blazer with a white button up and deep navy tie. I could feel dressy enough but if we ended up going somewhere more casual, I could easily abandon the jacket.

At 6:20, I took one last look at myself in the mirror and was pretty proud of myself for pulling it all together so quickly despite my nerves. I grabbed my necessities and my coat and flew out the door.

I had debated walking to ease some of the nerves, but realized I wouldn't make it on time if I'd done that and I didn't want Kurt to think I made a habit of being late for our dates. I managed to flag down a cab on my block and eagerly told him to head to Times Square. The cabbie looked somewhat surprised that someone who lived in the city would ask to go to the tourist destination, but he didn't push it.

I sat excitedly in the backseat tapping my hands with nervous energy against my thigh. The cab driver looked at me peculiarly from his seat, but muttered something in a language I didn't understand and quietly kept along the drive.

Five minutes later, I had paid the cab driver and found myself meandering around the pedestrian area of Times Square near the steps beneath the most expensive Olive Garden on the planet. The landscape of Times Square had changed a lot in the past twenty years – or so my parents told me – but the one thing I was thankful for was the addition of the pedestrian area in the tourist-riddled landmark. That way people could gape at all the lights without potentially being pummeled by a rogue taxi or something.

"You're early," I heard a voice utter in front of me when I had pulled out my phone to check the time again. I snapped up to see a smiling Kurt walking toward me. He took my breath away; fitted gray slacks with a long black coat and a blue scarf around his neck that seemed to match his eyes perfectly. But the best thing of all on Kurt was his smile. It was sweet and somewhat tentative, but the way it radiated from his entire face was the best part about him. He had a truly wonderful, stunning smile.

"I hate to keep a good man waiting," I replied cheekily. Kurt's eyes rolled slightly but stepped closer and pulled me into a hug. With his arms wrapped around my neck, it pulled our faces closer than our last hug and I decided to be bold and kissed him lightly on the cheek. The touch emitted a slight gasp from Kurt and as I pulled my arms from around his waist, I looked at his face to make sure I hadn't stepped over some sort of unspoken boundary. Instead, the smile on his face had seemed to somehow glow brighter, so I figured it was okay.

We stood there standing and looking at each other at an arm's length – my hands still loosely wrapped around his waist and his arms at my shoulders – and I realized this was probably a fairly intimate way to be engaging with someone on a third date. Everything in me was screaming that I was rushing things in my head, but the looks I was receiving from Kurt told me that maybe for once I was on the same page as the guy I was romantically interested in.

"Shall we go?" Kurt asked, pulling us from the comfortable silence that had taken place as the world bustled around us.

"Oh, I get to know where we're going now?" I retorted.

"I mean, I could keep you guessing but since you are not a fan of surprises, I guess I can put you out of your misery."

"I'm pretty sure anything with you is the furthest thing from misery," I replied, internally impressed at my flirting skills. Kurt must have been impressed too; he was blushing pretty profusely. "But please enlighten me."

"Well," Kurt replied smugly. "We have tickets for the 7pm show then we're going to dinner afterward. I hope that's okay."

"Tickets? For what?" Rather than reply verbally, Kurt nodded toward the Marquis Theater – right off Times Square. I looked at it for a moment before my eyes bulged and I looked back to Kurt to confirm where we were headed. He chuckled and nodded in the affirmative. "We're going to see *Evita*!" I finally said aloud.

Kurt laughed again at my sheer excitement. "I did okay?" he asked somewhat tentatively.

I took his hand into mine and he smiled as he looked down to our clasped hands. "You did perfect," I replied. It was the first date someone had ever truly planned for me but Kurt had listened to the many conversations we'd had about how much I missed Broadway and he made it happen. He could have just as easily gotten us tickets for *Bring It On!* but he knew that I preferred the classics and this was the best, most revered option currently playing. I wasn't just blown away by the fact that someone planned a date for me, but that Kurt had planned it and he really had put so much thought into it.

I sighed, hoping my daze and admiration for Kurt wasn't creeping him out in some way. I quickly averted my thoughts from that to the show we were about to see. "Let's go. I want to thoroughly read the Playbill before the show starts."

Kurt chuckled. "Who knew I was dating a giant nerd?"

Dating, I thought to myself. *Not just a date. We're **dating**.* His phrasing didn't surprise me too much, but it was still nice for him to confirm what I was thinking; we were dating and maybe – someday soon – we'd be something more.

"Oh whatever," I joked as I was pulled away from my thoughts of asking Kurt to be mine, officially. It was still too soon for that in my books. "But seriously. Let's go. Besides, I need to gawk at Ricky Martin's picture a bit beforehand too."

Kurt rolled his eyes again and giggled, but let me lead us to the theater. I couldn't help but beam at the warmth between our two hands and our fingers laced together. This just felt so... right.

KURT

If I thought Blaine was a giant theater nerd before the show, he really blossomed into full-on dork mode after the show had concluded. I had clearly underestimated his affinity for musical theater before, but the way he rambled about the show was slightly dizzying... but effortlessly adorable.

And he hadn't been kidding about reading the Playbill. He and I analyzed the education and credentials of everyone in the cast and he even mentioned one or two people that he had run into on the street. His ability to remember a face in a crowd baffled me since I could barely recognize myself most days. The fact that I had remembered Blaine from *Cosi* was nothing short of a miracle.

The show had been amazing – as expected with Ricky Martin at the helm – but what was more amazing was watching Blaine turn into a child before my eyes. The sheer joy that radiated from him was infectious and I eagerly sought to watch the show with fresh eyes like he had. I'd already seen this version of the show a time or three thanks to a connection in the costume department, but watching it with Blaine's occasional commentary and the way he lit up made the experience even better.

But as adorable as he had been, he was also incredibly hot. Not that I hadn't realized this before – he was undeniably attractive – but the man could pull off a blazer and damn, did he look incredible when he smiled. He had been wearing a similar outfit before on our previous date, but we had only spent a few measly hours together. This time, I was lucky enough to spend at least four hours with him since the show was three hours and dinner afterward would hopefully be at least one more. I *might* have planned it that way on purpose.

Besides, staring at him across a dinner table was not going to be a bad thing. Not. At. All.

Once the show was over, Blaine and I had made our way to the lobby of the theater, hands still attached. I hadn't realized that he and I had held hands the entire show until I tried to grab my Playbill part of the way through to see which musical number was up next. I had struggled to pull the program from my pocket only to realize it was nestled in the divider between myself and Blaine and it was too awkward to grab it without letting go of our hands. I opted against reading it - for reasons.

"Where to now?" Blaine had asked, as we were about to foray into the side street next to the theater in order to avoid the pedestrian traffic on Times Square.

"The restaurant where we have reservations is about 10 blocks from here. Would you rather take a cab or walk?"

Blaine had thought for a moment. "Walking would be great. Besides, we've been sitting for a few hours now. Moving could do us some good."

Which is where we were now – walking on the way to the restaurant; Blaine chattering away about the show and me trying to keep up with his train of thought as I internally grinned at Blaine's mannerisms. If it wasn't for him holding my hand, I'm pretty sure I would have been soaring.

Normally I was a fairly stoic guy when it came to my emotions – something that clearly was the opposite with my date tonight as evidenced by his facial expressions – but the way I felt around Blaine was... different. Unlike the few guys I had "dated" since William, I already had opened myself up to Blaine. I could tell we were both being a little cautious when it came to the way we approached and talked to each other, but I knew deep down that something was already different. It was enlightening and beautiful... and terrifying. What if he and I fell in love? God, I could only be so lucky to fall for a guy like Blaine and maybe have him love me back.

"You okay?" Blaine asked as we neared the corner of 50th and 8th. I had been walking and completely immersed in my thoughts that I hadn't realized where we were. We were only three blocks away now and Blaine still had no idea where we were going.

"Yeah, sorry. Thinking," I replied.

"Penny for your thoughts?" he said as he and I crossed the street.

I smiled at him and squeezed his hand. "I'm just... really glad you came tonight. And that you're having a good time."

He looked over and grinned back – that smile nearly making me into a giant puddle in the middle of the street. "I'm really glad I came too. And thanks for planning this, Kurt. It means a lot."

I scrunched my eyebrows. "Of course. It's just a date. I mean, it's more than a date. But... ugh. I am so not smooth," I said, chastising myself.

Blaine chuckled and squeezed my hand reassuringly. "It's okay. I know what you meant. I've just... never been on a date like this before."

"A date like what? To a Broadway show?"

"No," he replied softly. "One where I didn't plan it, one where I wasn't the one paying." He paused and backtracked. "Not that you're paying at dinner or anything. I don't want to assume..."

Now it was my turn to reassure him. "You aren't paying for dinner – I will have the pleasure of paying for you, dear sir. But that's so strange that no one has ever taken you out on the down – wined and dined you."

He shrugged. "I guess." We walked in silence for a bit before he started talking again just as we were rounding the corner of 52nd Street. "Sorry to go on about previous romantic interests, or lack thereof. It probably was crossing some sort of boundary for a third date."

I laughed a little but stopped when I saw the panic-stricken look on his face. "I'm only laughing because... well, I wasn't bothered by it at all. Honestly it kind of freaks me out a bit how I already feel more comfortable with you than I have with anyone in a long time. And I'm glad that I can make you feel special

in a small way because you are. So I'm glad you told me. And I want to learn more about you, Blaine. I want to learn everything." I whispered that last part, afraid that now I was the one being too bold.

Instead Blaine just stopped walking and pulled me in for a tight hug. Blaine gave the best hugs, I had decided. I knew it on the night of our last date but now it really was sinking in that he was a spectacular hugger. His arms were perfect and strong but his touch was soft. And the way he smelled... it was heavenly. He wore some sort of Armani cologne and the detergent he used blended with it well, giving off a clean and spicy scent that I had grown to crave.

"Thank you," he whispered into my ear as he pressed against me one last time. I reluctantly released his shoulders from my arms as he eased out of the hug, but soon I felt another gentle kiss to my cheek before he pulled away. On our last date, I had been the one to kiss him – on the cheek, of course. But this time, he had kissed me on the cheek. Twice. And it made me swoon in a way I didn't think a simple kiss to the cheek would have.

Rather than dwell on his lips and their proximity on my face, I kept my hand in his and stopped once we were in front of the restaurant we had reservations at. "Here we are," I stated, gesturing to the sign out front.

"Totto Ramen. Sounds promising - I do love Asian food," he said.

"I remembered," I replied. With that note, he smiled at me and I did my best to not kiss him right then and there. I wasn't sure this was the time or place for that.

I moved forward and held the door open for him, earning a "thanks" from a blushing Blaine. The hostess led Blaine and I to a table toward the back of the restaurant and I moved quickly to pull his chair out for him. Blaine laughed, clearly a little put off by my chivalry but I could tell that as uncomfortable as it made him to be taken care of like that, he secretly loved it.

We ordered and I couldn't help but take glances at Blaine as often as possible. How was it that a guy like him had been interested in someone like me? Would things have been the same if we hadn't met in person first? Would he have chosen me otherwise?

"You're doing it again," Blaine stated as he brought me back to the conversation I was clearly not participating in.

"Sorry," I muttered as I took a sip of my water.

"It's okay. What's on your mind?" he asked, clearly intrigued to know my answer.

"It's just... okay, this might be weird."

"Kurt, I don't think whatever you have to say will be weird."

"How do you know?" I proposed. "I could be gearing up to ask you about how there could be a viable life force on Mars or something."

He chuckled. "I highly doubt that's what's going on."

"Okay, okay. I was just thinking about how we met."

"Okay. And?"

I sighed. "Well, when we met at C—I mean, The Bell House. And it was pure luck that we happened to both be members of the same dating site which led to us getting in contact. I realize it's a lot of coincidences that just happened to work out in our favor. But what if we hadn't met at The Bell House? What if you had first seen my profile online?"

He looked confused. "I don't get it."

"I guess," I paused to make sure what I was thinking and what I wanted to know matched up as the words sputtered from my mouth. "Do you think if you had just seen my information online that you would have still pursued this?"

He sat back for a moment as I gulped my water nervously. "Look, I'm not going to deny it. The Bell House wasn't the first time I saw you. I first saw you at Cosi – the one near Times Square. I remember seeing you sitting there working on something or other and I was just... drawn to you, I guess." He paused, looking to me as if he needed permission to continue. I smiled, eager to know more. "So, yes. I would have still pursued this – pursued you, rather. I wanted to the night at The Bell House but you had left with Lauren and I didn't know how to get in touch with you. I wish we could have met sooner, but everything happens for a reason. There was a purpose for why we met when we did and I'm just thankful that I get to know you now."

I stared at him for a while and now he looked nervous. I really admired Blaine; he was so bold, so unafraid of how he felt. He was the complete opposite of me and in a way I was jealous. But if he had taken a step like that, I guess I could too.

"I saw you that day at Cosi, too," I said, watching his shoulders ease a bit.

"You did?" he asked.

"How could I not? You and your friends were so loud," I quipped, causing Blaine to laugh. "But your laugh really did reel me in. So I guess I was drawn to you too. But I thought that would be it, you know? It never works out this way in real life - only in movies."

"In what way?"

"The way that the guy gets the... guy, I guess; that it would work out that we met in person another time after seeing each other once in a random café. Seeing each other once and feeling...well, you know. It seems like something straight out of a stereotypical romantic comedy."

Blaine laughed. "Is that a bad thing?"

I shook my head. "No. Not really. It's just... does life really give happy endings like that?"

He looked at me and grabbed for my hand across the table, squeezing it gently. "I want to believe that it does," he replied with a wink.

After that, the conversation flowed easily. We talked more about the music we loved, how work was going, and even a little bit about some things we had exchanged about online and before we knew it, the check had come, had been paid (by me, of course) and we were back on the street.

It was after 11 and I knew Blaine had to work the next morning, but I didn't want to say goodbye yet. "Where do you live?" I asked.

He looked at me, slightly puzzled. "Uh, off 49th between 9th and 10th. Why?"

"Oh, I promise, I'm not a serial killer or anything." He laughed as I thought how to explain what I wanted from Blaine. "I just wanted to know if... never mind."

"If what?" Blaine questioned. He was curious and, if I wasn't mistaken, slightly eager to know what exactly I had in store. Blaine's emotions read on his face pretty easily, so it wasn't hard to know where his train of thought was.

"If – uh – if I could walk you home. I mean, just to the door. I'm not expecting..."

"It's okay," Blaine said, taking my hand again. I instantly calmed at his touch. "I'd love for you to walk me home. And it's not far from here, so we won't have to walk far." He led us down the way toward 9th and turned south, leading us back to his apartment.

"I had a really good time tonight, Blaine," I stated as we continued down the street.

He laughed. "Isn't this something that you say once you drop me off at my door?"

I shrugged. "I don't like to do things the normal way. Besides, I just wanted to let you know."

"I had an amazing time too, Kurt," he replied softly and I looked up to see that mega-watt smile on his face. "You really know how to take care of a guy."

"Same could be said about you," I retorted.

"I guess," he stated.

I gripped his hand a bit more firmly as we rounded onto 49th Street. The walk had flown by but I still wasn't ready to say goodnight. It felt like we were just getting started even though we'd already spent more than four hours together.

"This is me," he said, motioning toward the brick building behind him. We had stopped outside of the glass door leading into his building and I could see our reflections in the window. *Is it weird to think that we look good together?* I thought to myself as I turned back toward Blaine who was wearing another infectious smile.

Blaine took the opportunity to pull me in for a hug, this one tighter than any of the others tonight. I was wrapped up in his scent again and I felt intoxicated. "I had a really good time tonight," I breathed into his ear.

"You already said that," he replied with a low voice. I felt him rub my back lightly through my coat and I wished that I didn't have the extra layer of wool between my back and his hands.

I sighed as I inhaled his scent again. "I just don't want it to end," I admitted. I was shocked at my admission, but only shocked that I had said it aloud. I wasn't surprised that I wanted to spend time with Blaine – that thought had already cemented itself in my mind and had no hope of escaping; I was hooked on him.

He pulled back from my face slightly and I had the privilege of gazing into his eyes – those eyes that were the same color as sweetened coffee. "I don't either," he agreed, effectively taking my breath away.

In that moment, I decided to be bold. I leaned forward and tilted my head slightly inching our faces closer together. I kept my eyes open for a moment to see if there was any hesitation from Blaine only to see him close his eyes and take a deep breath, as if stilling himself for what was about to happen.

My mouth creased into a soft smile as I pushed closer to Blaine. I could soon feel his breath on my face as I closed the gap. I stood there for a moment with our lips practically centimeters apart before closing my eyes and gently placing my lips on his. Though Blaine had known it was coming, he jolted a bit at the contact but I could hear him sigh into my lips. My lips had taken his bottom lip into their possession as I lightly pressed my lips against his. I maintained the gentlest touch for a few seconds but eventually pulled back slowly, making sure that this contact was okay. Instead of letting me get too far, Blaine surged forward and went in for a second kiss – this one a bit more sure than the first but still equally as sweet.

I wrapped my arms around his neck as I pushed harder against his lips, reciprocating his touch and savoring his lips' warmth and touch against mine. I felt him pull me closer to him with his hands wound around my waist and I hummed at the closeness I had been craving since I first saw him at Cosi some weeks ago. Instinctively, I pulled us closer together at the chest and there was little room for anything between us as we pressed up fully against each other. I practically moaned at the contact, but instead pushed slightly harder at his mouth as my hands wound in his hair. My mouth started to pry itself open, eager for air and the hope of something more as I took his bottom lip and sucked lightly, making Blaine push against my mouth even harder.

"Well, well, this is quite interesting," a voice taunted, causing both of us to still in the wake of being interrupted by the person behind Blaine.

Blaine pulled himself from me, and I was afraid to open my eyes and lose this moment – this kiss, this *perfect* kiss - that I had been yearning for. But I was pulled from my bliss when I heard Blaine curse under his breath and nearly turn to address the voice behind him.

The voice I finally figured out whom it had belonged to now that Blaine's mouth was no longer attached to mine.

"Do you have to swing by right now- " Blaine uttered.

"Santana?" I interjected, peeking out from behind Blaine's head to encounter the shocked face of my former high school classmate and the equally befuddled man whose arms were still holding on to me. I flickered between Santana and Blaine – both of us men clearly confused as to how the other would know the alluring Ms. Lopez.

Santana's look changed from shock to intrigue to slightly mischievous as she watched us gape at each other.

"Oh," she stated, shaking her head. "This just got good."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Late Sunday Night, October 28

BLAINE

This wasn't exactly how I saw Kurt ending up in my apartment for the first time. And no, I didn't mean that in a purely sexual way... okay, *maybe* a little bit. But I didn't think the first time I'd see him in my apartment would have been the result of my best friend catching us practically making out outside my apartment building and realizing that there was some need for explanation when I realized Kurt also knew Santana.

I mean, how would *that* happen? Of all the gin joints...

Rather than continue our discussion outside in public, after Santana had practically screamed with glee after finding us, I asked if we wanted to continue this rendezvous in the comfort of my apartment. Kurt looked a little hesitant, but I wondered if that had to do with going into my apartment or the fact that his... friend? had caught us kissing.

Sure, we were both grown men and kissing was not unusual for us to do since we were dating. But I'm pretty sure we were headed toward some potential tongue action before Santana decided to drop a bomb with her presence.

Did I really just say tongue action in my head? Geez. Grow up, Blaine.

And what was she doing there anyway? Couldn't she have waited for tomorrow morning before she had to impose on my date? Not that she knew I was on one, but that was beside the point.

"Your place is nice," Kurt said as he walked around the living space. The elevator ride up to my apartment on the 4th floor had been a quiet one – with Santana eagerly eyeing us as Kurt and I were unsure of how to physically position ourselves after the awkward encounter with our apparently mutual friend.

Upon entering my apartment, Santana had dismissed herself to the restroom for a moment, leaving Kurt and I to awkwardly dance around each other in the living space of my studio. I was thankful that I had managed to clean the place earlier today so it didn't seem like I lived like a caveman. To kill time before

Santana re-emerged, Kurt had taken to looking around my apartment and I had fought to look anywhere but to Kurt – afraid of what he was thinking.

"Thanks," I replied as I sat down on the couch. Kurt was looking through my books at the moment, touching the binding on the volumes of classics I had on the shelf. He still looked nervous, as did I, but soon Santana had burst out of the bathroom.

"So, boys. What's this all about?" she said as she wrung her hands and plopped down in the armchair opposite of the bookshelf Kurt was standing near.

"What's what all about?" I asked casually.

"Why were you making out with my boy Hummel?"

My brows quirked. "Okay, I get that I'm your best friend, but *Kurt* is 'your boy' now?"

Kurt sighed over by the bookshelf and took a seat next to me on the couch. "And also, we were not making out," he retorted.

"Oh, you were well on your way," she snorted, causing both of us to blush. Kurt shifted uncomfortably next to me and I was equally perturbed at Santana's presence... and statement.

"Let's start with you, Santana. How do you know Kurt?"

"We went to high school together," she stated simply.

I turned to Kurt. "Wait, you're from Ohio?" He nodded.

"Really, Blaine? How did that not come up yet? I'm guessing you've been on more than one date by now since you were acting all lovey-dovey the other day at work so I'm assuming Hummel had something to do with it," Santana replied.

I shrugged with a blush. Did she really need to tell Kurt that I was like that after our date? Now I remembered why I hadn't talked to her about it yet. "Obviously it hadn't come up," I uttered.

"So how do you know Blaine?" Kurt asked.

I turned to Kurt; I'd rather answer this one. "Santana and I met during our internship at Rialto my senior year of college. We've been friends ever since."

"Best friends," she interjected. I rolled my eyes.

Kurt sat in silence, as if thinking through things in his head. "So you guys work together still? And you work on stuff now?"

I nodded. "Yes. I just helped sign Atticus Finch, the band you saw at The Bell House – the one I've been telling you about - and Santana is in charge of their PR plan."

"Wait, wait, wait," Santana interrupted. "You were at The Bell House and saw Atticus Finch and *that's* where you met Blaine?"

"Not exactly," Kurt replied.

"Okay, now I'm really confused. Which one of you lover boys would like to explain how my best friend and my high school friend ended up kissing outside of this apartment building?" Santana asked.

Kurt still hadn't looked up from something that looked oh-so interesting on the floor, so I took the lead. "The short of it is, I saw him at Cosi at lunch one day but ran into him at The Bell House but finally contacted him through NYCDate and here we are."

Santana looked flabbergasted. "That makes no sense."

"What do you mean it makes no sense?" Kurt snipped. "That's what happened!"

"Calm down, Kurt," Santana said, trying to sweeten her tone a bit as she caught on to Kurt's discomfort. "It's just... that's kind of crazy. You saw each other at a restaurant and happened to run into each other again and then found each other – again – online. And you've been on... a date?"

"Three, actually," Kurt replied, this time a slight smile at his lips. I wanted to reach out and hold his hand, but I wasn't sure if he wanted that right now. He still looked like he was ready to flee at any moment.

"Okay, so *three* dates." She sat for a few minutes. "Jesus," she replied, disbelief in her tone.

"What?" I asked. I really wanted to know where this was going.

"It's just... really crazy. My best friend going out on dates with the guy I went through puberty with and somehow, miraculously, ending up finding each other in New York City despite the fact that we could have all met each other when we lived in Ohio," she stated.

"We all lived in Ohio?" Kurt questioned. "You're from Ohio too?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I grew up in Columbus."

Kurt looked astonished. "How have we been talking all this time and we never realized we grew up in the same state – let alone that we both knew Santana? That's... strange."

I couldn't help but laugh – Santana and I had always talked about how we wished we could have met up in high school knowing we lived maybe two hours from each other. Now I had another reason to have wanted to meet her sooner; I could have met Kurt by now. "Santana is right, this really is crazy. We grew up close to each other and had a mutual friend but never met until a few weeks ago. If this isn't the plot of a rom-com by now, we should totally sell the rights."

This time my mind and my body didn't have time to agree on my actions and I found myself reaching out for Kurt's hand that lay between us, eager to grab him as physical proof that this was real. When I realized what I had done, I looked up to Kurt – as if questioning if our contact was okay – only to earn a smile as Kurt nudged himself closer to me on the couch. We weren't touching anywhere but our hands, but it was enough for me.

"God, you two are fucking adorable," Santana joked.

"Oh whatever," Kurt replied, sending her an icy glare as he squeezed my hand. "Now aside from Blaine and I having been on three dates, what exactly are *you* doing *here*?"

She rolled her eyes. "Like I need your permission to visit my best friend."

"He wasn't asking for permission, San," I said, defending Kurt. "But I also want to know why you're here at 11 at night and ruining my perfectly good date." The way I spoke about my date with Kurt caused him to squeeze my hand a bit tighter and I smiled in response.

"One I didn't know about—" she interjected.

"—That's beside the point. Why are you here?" I inquired.

"I told you I'd give you all the details once I proposed!" she enthused.

"You proposed to Brittany?!" Kurt squealed. I turned to him, confusion etched on my face. Not only was it the cutest reaction I had seen from Kurt; I wondered how he knew Brittany. I saw out of the corner of my eye that she had nodded but I was still staring at Kurt. "What?" Kurt asked as he realized I was still gaping at him.

I pushed aside the ways in which his brightened eyes were adorable and asked the question rolling around in my head. "How do you know Brittany?"

"I ran into Santana the other day and we got lunch and she told me about Brittany and about—" he stopped, with his mouth now drooping with some realization.

"About what?" I inquired.

"About you," he replied in a hushed tone.

"Why was she talking about me? But... wait; wouldn't you have known it was me? I mean, Blaine isn't exactly a common name."

He shook his head. "She – uh – never said your name. Just that she suspected that her best friend had probably been on a date."

"How would she have known that?" I pondered out loud. "It's not like I said anything to her about it. Not that I'm ashamed or wouldn't want to talk about you or anything," I corrected. "But well, she is how she is. And I'm guessing you didn't say my name otherwise she would have harassed both of us by now. So how would she have figured that?"

"'She' is right here, you know," Santana snarked.

"I don't know," Kurt replied quickly. His response caused Santana to peer at him from her seat, but she didn't say anything. Kurt looked away from Santana's gaze and I gently rubbed circles on the back of his

hand with my thumb. I felt awful that things had gotten awkward so quickly after such a promising date, so I let the silence lull for longer than normal just to be cautious.

Before long, it seemed like Santana had had enough quiet. "Well pretty boys, the moral of this story is that my two friends are hooking up," Santana stated, causing Kurt to glare at her, "and I proposed to Brittany. Now, rather than ramble on about you two, how about I tell you everything about *my* weekend."

We both nodded and Santana went on about how she proposed to her girlfriend turned fiancée – taking her out for a romantic candlelit picnic in the gazebo of the house they had stayed in and proposed as they sat on the swing set as they looked out into the stars and shared memories and kisses. It was so incredibly romantic and I could feel myself getting a little emotional at the thought. I looked over at Kurt who also looked slightly misty eyed at her story, but he tried to snap back to a more composed demeanor when I looked over at him.

But I didn't miss it – Kurt thought it was romantic too.

"That's beautiful," I mused when Santana had concluded her story. "Why didn't you bring Brittany with you tonight? I would have loved to hear her side of the story."

"I wore her out," she said with a wink. I rolled my eyes and Kurt let out a snort. It was clear we were both used to her rather frank quasi-sexual demeanor. "Don't worry, you'll be able to hear her side of the story soon. Her parents want to throw us an engagement party this weekend and naturally you'll be invited. But Blaine, you better find a date – I'm only inviting Kurt," she chortled.

I rolled my eyes again – as if she wasn't going to invite her best friend. But before I could interject with my protest to not being invited, Kurt stated, "I guess Blaine will have to be my date then," squeezing my hand as he spoke. I blushed.

"This ragamuffin?" she said as she gestured to my slightly rumpled appearance. "You could do better than him," Santana joked.

"I don't think so," Kurt whispered, barely loud enough for me to hear but I was thankful that I had. He looked up in shock at his admission, but I just smiled at him and tried to let on that I hadn't heard what he said.

"I'll be sure to send you the details now that I have your number." Her eyes flicked to the clock in the kitchen and her eyes bugged. "Wow, it's really late and I need to get home. We have to work in less than 8 hours."

"I should go too," Kurt said reluctantly. "I know you have to work in the morning."

"Oh. Okay," I replied, slightly bummed that Kurt wasn't staying any later. I mean, I didn't really expect him to since it was 1am, but I did want to talk with him alone about this whole Santana thing. But now was not the time I suppose.

Santana gathered her coat and scarf that had been hung on my coat rack and put them on before turning back to Kurt and I, who had remained seated on the couch. "I'm going to just... step outside for a minute. But I'll help you flag a cab if you'd like."

Kurt nodded and she quietly stepped into the hallway, slight smile adorning her face. I turned back to Kurt, whose nerves had disappeared and were replaced by a slight grin. I was thankful that he wasn't completely turned off by how the night had gone – I doubted it had been a surprise that he planned.

"This was not part of my plan," Kurt quipped causing me to laugh at our accidental ESP.

"I figured. But I hope you had a good time despite this sort of weird conclusion."

He nodded. "I really did have a great time – that hasn't changed in the last hour or so. Even though I still think it's weird that you're friends with Santana and that we could have met awhile ago."

I shrugged. "Like I said before, everything happens for a reason."

"I suppose you're right."

I sat there still rubbing the back of his hand as he leaned forward slowly and I eagerly met him halfway. I felt a puff of air on my face as I closed my eyes and before long I was rewarded with a gentle kiss from Kurt. This kiss felt as soft as the first one we'd shared outside of my apartment a few hours ago but it was reassuring in a way the other one hadn't been. His lips moved lethargically against mine for a moment until he pulled back, giving us room to breathe.

I pulled away from him fully to see Kurt with his eyes still closed and the smile he had worn had grown bigger. I glanced at him and the softness of the smile on his face until he opened his eyes and took me in – a breathless grin gracing my face. "Thank you," I said softly as our gazes held on to one another; faces mere inches apart.

"For what?" he inquired.

I reached up and used the tips of my fingers to grace the surface of his cheek. At the contact, Kurt's eyes fluttered closed as he put the weight of his face into my hands and I continued to map his face. "For being you," I whispered.

Kurt giggled. "It's the least I could do," he said as his eyes flicked open. He used his right hand to grasp my left that was on his face and he lowered it into his lap, his fingers wrapping around mine. I took the opportunity to look down at our hands and I was thrilled to see his long fingers looped around my slightly shorter digits. "I have to go now," he murmured.

"I know," I said, neither one of us moving. "I'll call you."

With that admission, Kurt stood up with a nod and I was disappointed to alleviate my fingers from Kurt's grasp. "I hope so," he said as he walked toward the coat rack to pick up his own coat. I helped him into his coat – as any gentleman would – and smoothed out the back of the jacket before he turned back to face me. He leaned in one last time and placed another feather light kiss on my lips, causing me to lean forward for slightly more pressure and practically swooning when I felt Kurt pushing back harder as well.

"Bye," he whispered against my lips, causing me to smile even though it meant our lips were no longer attached.

"Bye," I breathed as I pulled open the door for him and saw a smirking Santana in the hallway tapping on her phone. Kurt sent me a small wave before Santana put her arm around his back, threw me a wink, and led him toward the elevator at the end of the hall.

I closed the door and plopped down on the couch and kicked my feet onto the coffee table. I still was reeling from the events of the night, but I knew one thing for certain – Kurt Hummel was going to make me fall. Hard.

KURT

"So, I'm guessing you *really* like my friend," Santana quipped as she and I left Blaine's apartment building. I had spent most of the elevator ride trying to avoid Santana's kissy noises that were clearly directed at my previous activities with Blaine. Part of me wanted to roll my eyes at her, part of me wanted to blush at the realization that I had – in fact – kissed Blaine multiple times in one evening.

"You could say that," I replied as we headed toward the corner to find a cab.

I could tell Santana was eager to pry – and I felt bad for the fact that Blaine was going to be harassed and questioned within an inch of his life tomorrow – but she and I had just rekindled our friendship and I wasn't sure I needed to get into feelings and things with her just yet. Besides, I hadn't fully thought through exactly how I felt about Blaine other than that he was a wonderful person and when I was with him, he never ceased to make me smile.

As if sensing what was going on through my head, Santana reached out and grabbed my arm, pulling me to a halt. "You don't have to hide the way you feel about him, Kurt. And I already know that you like him. You might not be willing to admit how much you like him yet since you *clearly* tried to change the subject when he asked how I would have known about your little romantic rendezvouses, but I know better. And you really don't need to be afraid of how you feel - this isn't Lima."

I sighed. "I realize this, but... it's just..."

"What?" she asked, loosening her grip on my arm and looking at me expectantly for an answer.

"This all just seems too good to be true. And come on, the fact that you just happen to be best friends with him? The fact that he grew up in Ohio but I happened to run into him in New York, the city of my dreams, and that he's more amazing than I could have ever expected?" I huffed; nearly out of breath by the time I had finished speaking.

"You think he's amazing," she stated. I looked at her with shock; how was that the main thing that she picked up from my rant? Did she not realize this whole situation was not normal? "But I don't see how those other things are really an issue. Shouldn't it be enough that you like him? At least for now? It's not like you're getting *married* or anything."

"Yeah but you are," I said as I nudged her shoulder.

"Quit deflecting, Hummel," she insisted; damn, she still knew my old tricks to avoid her. "I'm not saying this just because Blaine is my best friend or anything, but if he makes you happy, don't be afraid. And don't think that things are too good to be true."

"But how can you just ignore the fact that this whole situation seems like it really *is* too good to be true?"

She shrugged. "Sometimes, Kurt, we are lucky enough to experience things that truly are too good to be true; real life fairy tales. We get the privilege of loving who and what we are, what we do, and sometimes we even find someone who loves us and who we are as much as we love ourselves. Who's to say that couldn't happen for you?"

Could a happy ending really happen for me? With everything that happened with William and even James, I had somewhat resigned myself to date until I found someone who seemed settled and someone who I could live with on a day-to-day basis. But could I really, truly share my happiness in the world with someone? And could we have potentially met in the most absurd, practically fantasy way that I had met Blaine? This was certainly something to consider. As I thought through this, I realized I had stood there, stunned at her musings for a little longer than socially acceptable. But I couldn't help it. Santana really had changed - and in a good way. "When did you become so prophetic? God, where is that girl I went to high school with."

She chuckled. "She grew up, got an amazing best friend, but really – she fell in love." It was true; Santana was still Santana – as bold and brash as ever – but the softness she had taken on was clearly a result of the presence of Blaine and the allusive Brittany in her life.

Maybe - if I was lucky enough - someone could help transform me, too. And maybe that person could even be Blaine.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Monday, October 29

BLAINE

The second I walked into the office and made my way to my desk, I promptly dropped my head on the smooth surface and groaned. Loudly.

Despite having the best date in... well, ever... the fact that I had gotten little sleep last night was really not what I was hoping for on a Monday morning. Mondays are already rough, coupled with my lack of sleep even after Kurt and Santana had left my apartment; it was a recipe for disaster.

Once Kurt and Santana had left, I might have watched them walk down the street together – having some sort of conversation as they went – and made sure that I saw the two of them round the corner at the end of the street. It was one of the perks of having an apartment that overlooked the street even though most of the time the view was not nearly as good as the one I had encountered when Kurt was outside. Did that make me a creepy guy? Eh, it's not like he knew I was watching.

Now *that* was a creepy statement.

Anyway, I had spent most of the night tossing and turning and reevaluating every piece of our date and the conversations Kurt and I had had during the course of our... relationship? I guess even if we're just friends it's still a relationship. I was trying to see if the signs were there – that he and I just hadn't realized that we were both from Ohio and had lived hours apart growing up. I couldn't remember seeing him state anywhere that he had lived in my... rather, our home state. Then again, I hadn't mentioned anything about it either.

I found myself wondering what he was like in high school and what his friendship had been like with Santana. I had a great group of friends in high school, but I do wish I had met someone like Santana when I was in school. And now I wished I had met someone like Kurt – or even Kurt himself – when I was 16.

There was no sense in dwelling on it since we had met ten years later than I had hoped, but that didn't mean my mind hadn't spent all night thinking through the possibilities; the dates we could have gone on, the inside jokes we could have had, the things we could have experienced for the first time together. I knew it was a fruitless endeavor, but part of me still wondered what if.

Either way, the night hadn't netted me much sleep and by the time my alarm buzzed at 8am, I was not in a good state of existence. I was miserable, tired, and cranky and all I wanted to do was sleep rather than go to work.

And I knew that today at work had the potential to be exhausting. This week, Atticus Finch would be submitting their tracks for review by our legal and production department to make sure they weren't infringing on any rights and the production team wanted to review their songs to make sure they would be ready to make an album.

Albums take a long time to compile and prepare for, but David had noted when we signed them that they had about forty original songs written so they had an extensive catalog to pull from. They'd been a band for years, so it wasn't surprising. But it meant that we could start the recording process sooner rather than later. It wasn't a bad thing – it just meant that I could potentially be spending a lot more time at the office in the coming weeks if legal and production Okayed their tracks to record.

What this meant for me was that I had to be the liason between the band and the label and make sure that both parties were kept in the loop about the status of the other group's progress. Basically it was a lot of exhaustive back-and-forth and often required a lot of waiting around at the office to see if legal had questions for the band or if the band had to submit songs at the last minute. It wasn't bad by any means; it just meant that my time for extra curricular activities would be limited. Which, in turn, meant that I probably wouldn't be able to have another date with Kurt this week.

This realization only made me groan louder.

"Anderson, stop acting like a dying animal," I heard Clark bellow from inside his office. I sat in the cube adjacent to his assistant and I could hear her snort between the partitions as I continued to bemoan my life at the moment.

"Seriously, snap out of it," I heard Clark say, this time his voice coming from much closer than before. I snapped up to see Clark standing just outside my cube, looming over at me from over top of the partition with the hallway. "I thought you'd be happy with the way things are progressing with the band," he added with a smile. Clark might have been a big time executive in the eyes of the recording world, but he still had a way of making things seem relaxed and easy at the office. It was something I was lucky to have in a boss compared to some of the managers in other departments who were held on a very tight leash.

"I am happy," I conceded. "I just know it means I'll be putting in a lot of overtime this week."

"Ah," he replied. "Big plans or something? I know Halloween is Wednesday, so if you want to take time off for that, I don't think..."

"That's not it," I interjected. "I had a long – but good – weekend and I'm currently trying to figure out where to fit sleeping in my schedule this week."

He laughed. "I remember those days. But hey, everyone has to pay their dues and when you're a big time record executive like me, you can make some lowly peon like you do the grunt work some day." The last big earned a sarcastic eyeroll from me, causing Clark's chuckle to take on a louder tone. "I get that it sucks, but just be sure to log any overtime, okay? I'd hate for your extra time to not be worth it in some way."

I laughed. "Sure thing, boss man."

"And hey, when you're done having a case of the Mondays, come by my office and we'll talk logistics for the coming weeks."

"Sounds good."

...

After taking care of a few emails, submitting the first round of lyrics and music for review, and purposefully avoiding Santana all morning so she wouldn't bother me about Kurt, I made my way to Clark's office around 11. I plopped down unceremoniously into the seat across from his executive chair and put my chin in one hand and balanced my notebook and pen on my lap.

The noise I had made from coming in must have caused Clark to shift his attention from the computer in front of him to me because what he said next surprised me. "You still look like shit," he stated.

My eyes met his gaze as I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. "Do I really look awful?"

He nodded. "I didn't want to say anything before since I figured you were just exhausted and trying to shake off the morning, but here you are a few hours later and you look like hell. How will you pick up any guys if you look like death warmed over?"

His comment made me think of Kurt; would he still think I was attractive even if I looked dreadful? I hoped so.

"Anyway," Clark continued, "I know that Atticus Finch is submitting their tracks for review this week. That's a great start and it looks like we might bump up their production schedule a bit from what we had initially anticipated. If we hear back about some of their tracks today, I can't see why we couldn't get them in the studio next week to get a feel for how they want to compile the album. You game for that?" I nodded. "Great. Go ahead and book some time starting next Wednesday and call Jeremy and see if he can come up the week after to get the ball rolling. I'd like for you and the guys to have some sort of game plan before we bring Jeremy up here."

I scribbled frantically on my notepad; noting the dates Clark had mentioned as well as notes to consider when I finally get the guys in the studio.

"Blaine! Earth to Anderson!" Clark snapped.

I looked up at him confused. "What?"

He chuckled. "You were taking so many notes, you missed the last thing I said."

I looked at him incredulously. "And that would be...?"

"I said get out of here for the day. I can't have you looking like hell on a Monday; it makes me depressed. Besides, I'm sure you'll put in enough time later this week to still put in your hours."

I visibly relaxed in the chair. "Thanks, man."

"And get some sleep, would you? You're no good to me on no sleep."

"Fine," I sighed, secretly thankful that he was recommending exactly what I had wanted to do since my alarm went off this morning. With that, Clark shooed me away from his office and I hastily made my way to my desk, only to find a venti coffee perched on my desk along with a bright pink note.

I'll give you 24 hours before I bother the hell out of you about how you're dating Hummel. But I figured you could use this coffee in the meantime. xo -S

As much as I hated Santana's presence last night at the conclusion of my date with Kurt, I was glad she was still being supportive of me in her own way. I gathered my belongings and shot out toward the elevator. I was exhausted and I wanted nothing more than to pass out on my bed. But there was one thing I needed to take care of first.

DM from blaine_warbler: Hey! Random question, do you know what Kurt's address is?

DM from LzizesNYC: I don't – but I'm with Kurt right now. I can ask him if you want.

DM from blaine_warbler: No, actually, this might work out better. Where are you?

DM from LzizesNYC: We're at work – mandatory monthly clean up at the theater.

DM from blaine_warbler: Perfect!

DM from LzizesNYC: What are you up to?

DM from blaine_warbler: You'll find out. ;)

KURT

"I forgot about the monthly clean up," I groaned as Lauren and I worked together to clean up the make-up room. We had left some things out following our Halloween party preparations so it actually worked out that all backstage crew had to come in and help clean up the theater and do the monthly deep clean that kept things running smoothly.

"Eh, you'll survive," Lauren replied as she pocketed her phone that she'd been typing on. "So, how was the rest of your weekend?"

I sighed. "Fantastic."

She laughed as she wiped down the counter top. "It must have been a pretty great Sunday. You came in here looking like you were on another planet and aside from you crying about how we're here cleaning up on a Monday afternoon, you haven't really said much."

"Oh, uh, sorry," I apologized.

"It's okay. But please, do share about your Sunday."

"Okay. But first I want to know what happened with you and my roommate," I suggested. Lauren turned away quickly and I grinned to myself; knowing that she and Wes had to have hit it off since Wes had resorted to singing ridiculously happy songs in the shower again. The last time he'd done that was the time one of the lawyers he despised that worked at his law firm had decided to leave the firm and move to Maui. Shower singing sessions with Wes meant he was elated - and I had to guess that this week's rendition of "I'm Walking on Sunshine" had to do with Ms. Zizes.

She looked at me hoping to get out of explaining, but I motioned for her to tell me first. She sighed, resigned to the fact that I wasn't going to say anything until she dished. "So, you left around 12:30 I guess." I nodded; I had left early because I was exhausted and after awhile the polyester cheerleading uniform made me so sweaty that I felt disgusting and uncomfortable. Plus aside from Lauren, Wes and David, I didn't know anyone else and I hadn't been anxious to make any new friends.

"I think around 1, the party really started to pick up but it started to get a little too crowded for my tastes. I mean, I like a good party every now and then, but it started to get out of control and people were getting wasted and... it was basically like I was back in high school again and I was over it."

I laughed at her conclusion. I had been with Wes to too many of those parties – which I think he only went to because he went to private school and didn't get to live it up in high school like we had – which is precisely why I didn't want to go in the first place.

"So, I said I was going to leave and Wes suggested that he leave as well and we could get some food at this diner nearby." That admission made me grin a bit. Wes never brought people to Our Diner because he said it was "sacred" and I knew that since it had been around the corner from the party that had to be where he'd go. The fact that he brought Lauren to the place we considered our haven in college meant something that Lauren might not have known and Wes might not have been willing to admit just yet.

"I went with him to the diner – which was pretty good – and he and I just ended up talking."

"Just talking?" I asked.

"Yeah, that's it. But it was... nice. And he's a gentleman. He told me a bit about his time at Dalton and how he met you in college and why he decided to become a lawyer. It was nice to just talk to a guy like that."

"Wes is a gentleman," I concurred. "And he's a total doof, so I'm glad he didn't make you feel awkward."

She snorted. "If anything I ended up being the awkward one. I haven't really had that type of connection with any guys before."

"Well he's a great guy to have that with. And I hope you exchanged numbers." She nodded. "Good. I'm glad you guys had a good time. And you'll have to keep me posted on developments."

"Yeah, okay," she sighed dreamily. I laughed internally at the thought of her and Wes dating and realizing that they actually were a well-balanced duo; she was fierce and opinionated and Wes was slightly goofy with a golden heart and fantastic manners. They weren't necessarily opposites, but I think they'd bring out the best in each other. "But enough about me, why are you acting like a cat that got the cream?"

I kept wiping down the surfaces in the make-up room with the hopes that my reply would sound nonchalant rather than the internal mess that was currently running through my head at the thought of my date with Blaine. "I had a date with Blaine last night," I stated, causing Lauren to start whistling. "Oh, shut up."

"Bow-chicka-wow-wow," she said as she wiggled her eyebrows.

"So not like that, Lauren. It was our third date. Please, I'm not some floozy. Anyway," I said, eager to continue the conversation to be about anything other than Blaine and I having sex. I mean, not that I wouldn't; Blaine was attractive and I had to guess that under those clothes... gah, stop it.

"Anyway," I sighed as I forced my thoughts back into the PG world it needed to exist in. "I called in a favor with one of the costume guys at Evita and he hooked us up with tickets for last night's show. Blaine hadn't seen a show in awhile and he said that he liked the classics so I figured he'd like it. Afterward, we went out for ramen at a place in Hell's Kitchen since it's his favorite type of food. And afterward I walked him back to his apartment."

"Oooh, back to his apartment!"

"Still not like that, Lauren," I giggled. "We did kiss though."

"You kissed Blaine! Aaaaaaaaaaack!"

"Calm down!"

"I can't! I'm just so thrilled for you!"

I laughed. "Trust me, I'm thrilled for me too. But that's not where it ends."

"Please tell me it's going to get juicy," she pleaded.

"Not quite in the way you're hoping." This admission caused her face to drip with curiosity. "Santana kind of interrupted our quasi-makeout session."

"Santana?! Santana Lopez from high school?"

I nodded. "The very one. Apparently, she's friends with Blaine."

"Wait, wait. When did she move to New York?"

"She transferred after a year or so and came here. But I hadn't really maintained contact with her after we graduated and we weren't close to start with so I had no idea she was around. But she met Blaine when they interned together at Rialto and they've been best friends ever since."

"Wow," Lauren muttered. "That's kind of crazy that she's here and even crazier that she's friends with Blaine. Small world, I guess."

I shrugged. "I suppose. It was certainly not what I was expecting as our night came to a close."

"What were you expecting?" Lauren asked suggestively.

"God Lauren, get your mind out of the gutter."

"I will once you do," she retorted and I rolled my eyes. Like I was going to admit to her how hot I thought he had looked last night and the way that his pants clung to his...

"Hummel, where are you?" I heard Jason yell from somewhere down the hall.

"In here," I replied loudly. I saw our security guard round the corner with a malicious smile on his face. "Uh, what's up?"

"There's something for you in the security office," he replied and turned on his heel. I looked back at Lauren who was wearing a slight smile on her face.

"What?" I directed to her as Jason walked away.

"I haven't the slightest," she suggested, turning away and leaving toward the side stage to continue our quest of cleaning the side stage areas. "But you should probably go investigate."

I groaned but internally was pretty stumped and curious to see what would be waiting for me. I briskly walked toward the stage door and heard the security office buzzing with activity. Apparently whatever was in there had gathered the attention of some of the crew that had been deep cleaning the dressing rooms and storage areas.

I turned the corner to head into the office and I ran smack into Sara who looked less than thrilled at whatever was going on. "Thank goodness this happened today rather than a night where we actually have a show."

I looked at her confused. What the hell was going on?

"Oh, don't mind her," Roselyn cooed as she pushed me through the few people who had gathered in the security office. "It's cute."

"What's cute?" I inquired.

"This," Jason said as he motioned to the basket in front of me. On Jason's desk was a giant basket full of candy – it had everything from Snickers to Twizzlers to Rollos to M&Ms to Starbursts – and in the middle of that was a potted red orchid that matched perfectly with the bright colors from the candy wrappers.

Fixed to the front of the white wicker basket was a card with "Kurt" written on it in somewhat scratchy scrawl.

"For me?" I asked Jason.

"What do you think?" he replied with a wink as he pushed the basket toward me. I was tempted to take the basket and run back to somewhere a little more private to get to the bottom of this, but realized that would be fruitless since everyone was looking at me with expectant eyes as I began to open the card.

A huge smile plastered itself onto my face once I read it.

I had a great time last night, thanks for being so sweet. -Blaine

"What does it say?" Roselyn prodded.

"Yeah, what does it say?" one of the stagehands asked.

"Alright guys, give Kurt some space," Jason insisted as he started pushing people toward the door. "Give the man some privacy," he concluded as he shooed away the last of the people in his office and closed the door.

I stood there looking over the card and smiling as my fingertips grazed over the words Blaine had written on the card. I had never gotten flowers or anything after a date before – actually I don't think I'd gotten anything like this from any of the guys I'd dated in the past – so I was touched by the gesture. Even though I had been the one to plan our date, he still had gone out of his way to make me feel special after its conclusion.

I was already in deeper than I had been before – which was slightly terrifying – but with a guy like Blaine who would do romantic things like this, did I really have a chance for any other result?

"I'm guessing that the gentleman who dropped this off will be getting some sort of thank you for this," Jason said. I nodded. "He seemed sort of nervous to leave this with me – I'm sure it was the guns," he noted as he flexed his biceps, causing me to laugh. "But he said I was to 'take the utmost care to ensure that you received it'."

I chuckled a bit at the word choice. Blaine was nothing if not courteous even when it came to the way he spoke to other people. "Thanks Jason. And thanks for forcing folks out of here. They're like vultures sometimes. I think Sara was eyeing my Snickers bars."

He shook his head. "I don't think it's the candy they're after – I think it's the back-story for this basket and its delivery man that they're interested in."

"Well they'll just have to remain in the dark. I like to be a man of mystery," I said as I gathered the basket in my arms. The circumference of the basket nearly took up my entire arm length and I wondered how I would ever eat this much candy – let alone bring all of it home. "I'll see you later."

"Sure thing, lover boy," Jason added.

I walked out of his office, closing the door behind me and placing the basket on the table across from the security desk to pull out my phone and send my immediate thanks to the guy who had kept me on cloud 9 all day.

I just got a very sweet package from an even sweeter guy. Thanks, I loved it. –K

Within a minute, Blaine had replied.

If I can make you smile, my day's goals have been met. –B

Then you have succeeded. :) How would you like to see me smile in person? Perhaps for lunch on Thursday?

The reply to that message came even quicker than the last.

I'd love to. –B

With his confirmation, I sighed as I slipped my phone back into my pocket. Blaine Anderson was slowly working his way into my heart, and I wasn't going to stop him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Wednesday, October 31

I need your help with something. –W

Okay... what? –K

Can we talk about this when we're both at home? It's something that warrants a conversation rather than a text exchange. –W

Color me intrigued. Okay. Will you be home tonight? –K

Yes, but I'll be asleep by the time you get home. Lunch today? –W

The diner? Noon? –K

You know it. –W

The party is this Saturday night starting at 5. Will you be able to make it? –S

Should be able to. Already let work know I needed the night off. Are you ladies registered anywhere? –K

Registered? –S

Seriously Santana? How are you going to get gifts from people if they don't know what to buy you? –K

Clearly I'm a little behind. –S

I can definitely help you change that... –K

Does this mean we're going shopping? –S

You bet your ass we're going shopping. –K

When? –S

Can you meet for lunch Friday? –K

If it means we're going shopping, I'll make it happen. –S

Perfect. Crate & Barrel off Madison Avenue, 12 sharp. Be late and I'll register you for things with roosters on them. –K

You would register me for things with cocks on them. ;) –S

So classy, Santana. –K

You know me. –S

Am I really not invited to your engagement party? –B

I don't know. Do I need to invite you? –S

What does that mean? –B

Isn't Kurt going to bring you? –S

We haven't talked about it. –B

Seriously? –S

It's not like we talk every single day. –B

That's a damn lie. You come in with that dopey grin every day so I know something happens with you guys and I'm guessing you're not getting into his pants yet. –S

Santana! Jesus. Does everything have to be about sex? But can I come to your party? –B

Yes you can come. Does Kurt make you come too? –S

Oh god. You're horrible. –B

Yet you love me. –S

Begrudgingly. –B

KURT

"Hello?"

I gulped. "Blaine?"

"Hey Kurt! Sorry, I would have just said hello using your name but I was on my work phone when you called my cell phone."

Damn, I forgot that he would be at work. How could I forget something so miniscule? "Oh. Uh, should I call you back? I'm sorry to bother you while you're working."

"No, no, it's totally fine. I'd rather talk to you than the boring people in our legal department."

I sighed. "So, how are things?"

"Great. Busy at work all week but I'm looking forward to lunch Thursday."

"Me too," I replied with a smile on my face. "Speaking of, where would you want to go?"

"Somewhere by the office would be preferred. I don't mind commuting normally but this week has been pretty hectic so any time I can take will be welcome but short lived, I'm afraid."

"I'll take what I can get," I said with a chuckle.

"Well that's a relief!" he exclaimed. "You pick wherever you'd like to go – I'm not a picky eater."

"That I can do," I replied. I started thinking of restaurants that were nearby when I realized... "Oh, I forgot to mention, so, did you still want to go with me to Santana's engagement party this weekend?"

"Oh. Uh, yeah. Of course," he replied.

"I mean; it's not like a date thing or anything..." I stuttered. I definitely was hoping that it would be sort of a date, but going to someone's engagement party as a...couple...implied something and I wasn't sure if he – or I, if I was being honest – was ready for that step yet. We had only been on three dates and have known each other for less than a month. Calling someone your boyfriend – especially in the realm of gay men – was a huge step. Besides, the last boyfriend I'd had was William and I had been on more dates with other guys in the past and we never called each other boyfriends; not even in retrospect.

"It's okay, Kurt. I wouldn't mind if it was kind of a date..." he said hesitantly. I chuckled internally. We both were clearly a little skittish with this whole thing and I kind of appreciated the fact that he was just as flustered by our situation as I was.

"Okay, then it can be," I determined. Be bold, Kurt. "Santana said it was at Brittany's parent's house in Queens and I know that's not exactly nearby so maybe I could meet at your apartment and we can get a cab together?"

"I could just as easily meet at your apartment..." he started.

"No! I – uh – they're going to register at Crate & Barrel so I can get their present Saturday morning and then come by since your place isn't too far from the store." I was not ready to admit the reason I didn't want him to come to my house was because my roommate was a nosy asshole and would bug Blaine with endless questions that I was not eager to discuss yet. And never mind that I would probably buy their present when I went shopping with Santana on Friday; Blaine didn't need to know that.

"Um, sure, I guess," he said. "We can talk about logistics tomorrow at lunch – I mean, if you're still up for meeting."

"Of course!" I replied enthusiastically. "I'm glad I can squeeze in some time with you – I know you're busy and my schedule is kind of opposite from yours."

"I'm glad we can meet for lunch too. This week and next will be pretty busy, but I will welcome any breaks since overtime is inevitable," he stated.

"Ouch. Well I'll try to think of somewhere extra good for your lunch break tomorrow. I'll swing by your office around noon; is that okay?"

"Perfect," he replied.

"Okay, I have to go – I'm meeting with my roommate right now. But I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Looking forward to it," he said. "Bye!"

"Bye Blaine!" I said as I ended the call. Thankfully I was good at walking and talking and was right around the corner from the diner where I was supposed to meet Wes for lunch. I certainly didn't want to go into the restaurant still on the phone since Wes would wonder endlessly about who it was.

I opened the door and saw Wes sitting at our usual booth with a Coke already laid out in front of him. "You're lucky I could fit you into my schedule on such short notice," I said as I slid into the booth.

"Please, I know you were just going to end up watching Bravo all day."

"Not all day," I retorted. Wes assumed that I watched Bravo all the time because I was a gay man who was into fashion, but I was more inclined to watch TLC than Bravo. Unless there was an America's Next Top Model marathon, then I'd be glued to Bravo. "But I want to know why we're holding this Roommate Meeting in the first place."

Wes sighed. Normally Wes wasn't the type to solicit my advice, mainly because he and I operated on such different wavelengths. But whenever we needed each other's advice, we called them Roommate Meetings. It made the conversation seem more serious than the times where we'd normally just banter back-and-forth about how dumb the partners at his office were or the hijinks I'd be up to backstage during shows. "I need your help. With Lauren."

I grinned. "Ah."

"Kurt, come on," he said, slightly exasperated. "You know I never ask for advice about things – especially women since, well, you know – but I feel like since you know Lauren I might have an inside edge. Wouldn't you want the same if you were dating one of my friends?"

I could understand the man's plight. Lauren, though sweet, was a hard nut to crack and I'm sure my help would be used. Plus Wes was a stand-up guy and he was asking not just because he wanted a chance with Lauren, but also because he wanted to do it right. "What do you want to know?" I conceded after I looking at Wes' pretty pathetic puppy dog face.

He sighed in relief. "Oh thank god. I don't know – what should I know?"

"Lauren is a feisty girl, but I'm sure you already knew that." He nodded. "She was... different in high school; she was the one girl everyone was afraid of but secretly revered because she was so strong and opinionated." I didn't want to tell Wes about her weight loss transformation – that was something that she could tell him herself if she wanted to. I knew she was proud at her success, but I knew all too well the stigmas that could be attached when you talked about something from your past that could potentially make people think less of you in your present state. "But though she may seem like a hard cookie, she's a big softie and she definitely wants to be taken care of by a guy. She's had it hard and I think she'd really like to be doted on for once."

Wes nodded emphatically as if taking mental notes on everything I was saying. "Okay. I can manage that, doting on her and all that. I mean, I won't be quoting any sonnets or anything, but I have a trick or two up my sleeve. And we exchanged numbers and we text every so often. Perhaps I'll text her today and ask her out?"

I glared at him. "Please tell me your manners are better than that."

"Huh?"

I shook my head. "Mr. Montgomery, you should know better. You ask a lady out over the phone or in person – not over text."

"Are you saying you've never asked a guy out over text message?"

"Maybe once or twice, but never for a first date," I replied.

"So if this Mystery Guy had asked you out over text message first, you'd say no?"

I thought back, and then laughed internally. Blaine actually had asked me out for our first date – the coffee date – over text message. But he asked me out for our first dinner date in person. Then again, our whole

relationship... was it a relationship? Anyway, our whole... thing... was kind of atypical anyway so who was I to hold that against him. "I wouldn't have said no. Actually he did ask be out via text message for our first date, but it was a casual thing and he asked me out for our second date in person."

Wes rolled his eyes. "But still, that kind of goes against the advice you just gave me about Lauren."

"True, but I'm also different than Lauren. And remember what I said about doting on her? This applies. Make her feel special – someone deserving of a phone call to be asked out on a date. Text messaging doesn't imply special."

He sighed; he knew I was right. Although Wes was a dapper gentleman who was incredibly smart and successful, he was sometimes just as scared as anyone else when it came to the romance department. I could sympathize, but I knew that Lauren was worth it and Wes would treat her like a queen... if he could get the balls to ask her out properly. "I'll call her tonight," he resigned.

I clapped my hands giddily. "Yay! I can't wait to know all of the details about your date with Lauren!"

"This hardly seems fair. You get to know about Lauren and I have yet to learn anything about Mr. Wonderful who has taken you out at least three times since I'm guessing that's the reason you came home late Sunday night...or rather, Monday morning."

I blushed. I knew Wes had to figure I was out on a date, but was he so observant that he'd been keeping tabs on me? Clearly him going out with Lauren would greatly distract him from being so nosy about my love life. "We had a deal, Wes. And I plan to uphold the deal."

"Good," he replied. "But tell me one thing – does he treat you well?"

I smiled, thinking back to the little things Blaine had already done for me. The way he held the door, how he was always cautious with the way he treated me but confident in who he was, how sweet he'd been after our last date and the way he seemed to be just as nervous as I was about us dating. "Yeah," I concluded. "He treats me incredibly well."

Wes grinned at my comment. "Okay. As long as I know that, I think I can wait until mid-November to meet this guy."

BLAINE

The minute I hung up with Kurt, my office phone started ringing again. "Blaine Anderson," I breathed into the phone.

"Hey B, it's David."

"Oh, hey. What's up man?"

"Not too much, just checking in on those tracks the guys sent over Monday."

I laughed. "You do realize you just sent them on Monday, right? We're not magicians - things take time."

"I know, I know," he replied. "But the guys are hounding me on progress with these tracks. They're practically their children and they're excited to know what people think of them. And having my mom tell them their songs are good just doesn't hold much water anymore."

"I understand that," I chuckled. "But I sent them through Monday. But Clark already cleared you guys to start getting in the studio next week."

"Next week! Holy shit!" he exclaimed.

"Sorry, I must have forgotten to tell you yesterday. I was a zombie and left work early – long night with little sleep."

"That's okay. Are you alright?" he asked.

"I'm fine, just a restless night. They happen every now and then," I replied. Please, like I was going to tell David about Kurt at work. "Anyway, yes, we are going to book time at Avatar Studios, which isn't too far from the office here, starting next Wednesday."

"Damn. This is all happening so quickly!"

"Calm down, David. I know this is happening quickly, but things won't always go this way. The main reason we're able to get into the studio early is because they already had a good catalog to pull from and legal didn't see any issues. Once we get into the recording process, I assure you things will start to get

annoying at times," I stated. It was true – recording took a lot of time from the band as well as the production team and it could take months for the album to be recorded. It was something that people didn't always understand since people assumed that music just magically appeared, but it wasn't an easy process in the least.

"I know, you warned me. Well, warned us. But I think that it won't really seem that way until we're in the trenches together. I'm sure once it's March and the guys are at each other's throats about the coda of some song that your advice will be taken to heart."

"I think the guys will be okay – they've been a band for awhile now already. But just remember that you're the referee, not me; I represent the label, you represent the band. We're the go-betweens and we help each other out but I don't want to take care of any band drama. This isn't the Warblers." I was hoping the last note would soften the serious conversation I had to have with David. Though he and I were friends – or on the way back to being friends like we were – I wasn't going to let our friendship get in the way of the album; it wouldn't be positive for either of us.

Thankfully David laughed and it eased me a bit so I wouldn't have to feel awkward about the stern discussion. "Don't worry, I'm used to dealing with those weirdos. They've been playing in my mom's garage for years so I've helped them through a fight or two already."

"Glad to know you're a man with experience," I joked. "But will the guys be cool with coming in Wednesday? I know it's kind of short notice..."

"Nah," he interjected. "It shouldn't be an issue. They're 20 – what else can they possibly be doing?"

I laughed. "I don't know! Working or going to school?"

"Don't worry they'll be there. But what time? If you don't give me an exact time, they'll come strolling in whenever they please – which would likely be after the sun has gone down."

"Oh, uh, let's say 10 in the morning. That way they can be awake for awhile before they report in."

David was practically choking on his laughter. "I think you give them more credit than they deserve. I don't think I've seen my brother awake on the early side of noon in months. But for this, I'm sure they'll think it's worth it."

"If I bring bagels, will that help?" I asked. I was partially kidding, but I knew they'd appreciate it and Clark wouldn't care about the \$20 it would cost to get bagels and coffee.

"Definitely. You've just uttered the magic words."

"What, bagels?"

"No," he responded. "Free food."

I chuckled. "Noted. Alright dude, I've gotta hustle some things out on my end before I head out for lunch, but 10 in the morning a week from today. Let your boys know."

"I'm on it. Thanks Blaine and I'll talk to you soon. Oh – do you have anything going on this weekend? I was going to see if Wes and you wanted to hang out since the lady will be out of town."

"Actually, I have plans but maybe next weekend?"

"Pencil me in for now – I'll see what Wes says. But sorry that you're too busy to hang out with us," he chided.

"Please, you know I'd be game but I already had things on the calendar. Plus it's Wednesday – I like to have my dance card full before the weekend."

"You're an idiot," he replied, causing me to laugh. "Anyway, we'll chat later. See ya."

"Ciao!"

I hung up the phone with a smile that soon switched to a small grimace as I went through my plans for the weekend and started to analyze my talk with Kurt. The call I had with him just before the one with David had ended strangely. I hoped it was just me overreacting about him not wanting to meet him at his house, but I couldn't help but feel like he might be hiding something.

Was he hiding his living situation, or was he hiding me?

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Thursday, November 1

BLAINE

By some miracle of God, I still hadn't really talked to Santana about the whole Kurt situation by the time Thursday had rolled around. Keeping busy with Atticus Finch had me occupied at work and Santana had been busy at a shoot for another artist this week, so it gave me space from my best friend and – unfortunately – gave me too much time to dwell on Kurt.

Things between he and I seemed to be going really well but I couldn't help but think our last phone conversation had been awkward and he and I hadn't spoken since. Kurt and I having an awkward conversation wasn't something that happened...ever... so this one was hitting me hard because I was worried.

Was Kurt on the same page as I was? I had initially thought so but the fact that he might be embarrassed to be seen with me in front of his roommate made me question. That had to be why he didn't want me to go to his house on Saturday, right?

Just as I was about to continue down this unfortunate train of thought, my cell phone started buzzing on my desk. I saw Kurt's name flash on the caller ID and I rushed to pick it up.

"Kurt?"

"Hey, where are you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Blaine, it's 12:05. I was worried that you were going to stand me up since you're not outside or in the lobby and the security guy won't let me in since I don't have an appointment," Kurt replied, sounding slightly concerned.

Shit, shit, shit. The fact that I had been late two times with Kurt was not helping but I guess I'd been so enveloped in my thoughts that I hadn't noticed the time. "Oh my god, I'm so, so sorry Kurt – I was... uh... distracted. I'm grabbing my things and coming down now."

"It's okay," he breathed in relief. "See you in a minute," he said, ending the call. I cursed internally and gathered my coat and wallet and headed toward the elevator. As the elevator door opened, I saw Santana strolling in; fresh from the set of the shoot she was working at in Brooklyn.

"What's the rush?" she asked as I practically ran into the elevator and quickly pushed the button for the lobby.

"Can't talk – will tell you later," I said waving her off, causing Santana to shrug and head toward her desk.

As the elevator made its way to the lobby, my phone vibrated with a text.

I saw Kurt in the lobby so I'm guessing that's your rush. ;) I'll say this once – treat him well; he deserves it. –S

Santana was surprisingly sweet when you least expected it but it solidified why she and I were friends in the first place. She was a great – albeit obnoxious – friend and I was thankful that she was a mutual friend of both Kurt and I. That would probably come in handy some day.

As I arrived in the lobby, I pocketed my phone and made my way over to Kurt who was standing next to the large glass windows at the front of our building. The way that the sun was hitting his face made him look incredible and I took just a second to admire him before I interrupted his thoughts as he peered out the window. "I'm so sorry I'm late. Again," I said as I walked up to him, drawing Kurt's attention to me.

He smiled and shrugged. "Don't worry, I know you're busy so I figured you had just lost track of time."

I nodded – not willing to admit the real reason why I was late – and motioned toward the revolving door. "Shall we head out?"

"Yes. I have something sort of planned but it's not your typical dining experience."

I shot him a confused look. "What does that mean?"

"Just trust me," he said with a wink. *I would trust you with so much that it scares me*, I thought to myself.

"Okay," I said as I followed him in through the door. We headed toward Broadway and we walked nearly shoulder-to-shoulder down the street, weaving between tourists and other folks rushing on their lunch break.

"How much time do you have?" Kurt asked as we approached the intersection of 57th and Broadway. We both came to a stop as we waited for the crosswalk to allow us to pass as cabs whizzed by.

"Uh, roughly an hour? I have my phone so if there's an emergency people can contact me. But don't worry about it," I replied. Honestly, I probably shouldn't have taken a lunch break today since things were so busy and I'd spent most of the morning distracted and not checking anything off my to-do list, but I wasn't about to admit that to Kurt.

"Perfect. An hour it is," Kurt said. I smiled and nodded until a group of women had abruptly come to a stop behind Kurt and I. As the group shifted around behind us, one woman pushed her way to the front of their group, practically causing me to fall into the street since she clearly hadn't realized I was in front of her or standing on the small curb.

As I felt my foot slip off the curb, Kurt grabbed my hand and sharply pulled me back on the sidewalk, effectively ending my possible face plant onto the busy street. I heard the woman behind me utter apologies for running into me, but at the moment I was too mesmerized by the feeling of Kurt's hand in my own. When his hand was in mine, the world felt right; his touch made me realize how underappreciated the art of handholding was.

"Are you alright?" Kurt asked as the crosswalk illuminated, signaling it was safe to cross.

"I'm fine," I said with a smile, squeezing his hand in mine. I could feel him loosen his grip as the pressure eased from the squeeze but it only made me squeeze harder, unwilling to let go of his fingers locked between mine. I looked over at Kurt, silently asking if it was alright that I'd done that, only to earn a smile in return as we walked hand-in-hand down the street.

I may have been confused about Kurt and if he was embarrassed of me, but in this moment – with his hand in mine – it didn't matter. He was with me, and that's what counted.

KURT

"So where are we headed?" Blaine asked as we neared Columbus Circle. I hadn't been thinking properly since our near incident with the group of tourists a few blocks back. Seeing Blaine nearly fall into the street scared me half to death and I'm surprised I hadn't screamed at the realization that he could have

fallen in the street and gotten hit by a crazy cab driver, but I had somehow remained calm and pulled him back to safety. But after that happened, I had gotten kind of woozy since Blaine had insisted on holding my hand.

It wasn't that we hadn't held hands before – we had obviously already crossed that bridge. But the way I felt with his hand in mine was something spine-tingling that I hadn't felt before and I loved it.

I still wasn't sure if he had wanted to hold my hand – I had only gathered up the strength to hold his in broad daylight because of the crazy tourists who'd knocked him over – because though I was living in New York for years, I still wasn't sure how other gay men felt about PDA.

Personally, I was all for it; I loved holding hands and kissing in public. If a guy and a girl could be affectionate in public, why not two guys or two girls? But I had pulled back on the PDA with William because, well, you know...and I hadn't really been with anyone since so the issue had never come up. And I still wasn't sure what was going on with Blaine and I. Sure, we were dating, but at what point do you call it more? Is there some sort of conversation that needs to be had? Do you ask the guy to be "official"? I was so out of touch I had no idea how this worked between two adults.

"Kurt?" Blaine asked again, forcing me out of my brain for once. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, sorry, was thinking."

"About what?" he inquired.

"About how hungry I am," I said with a chuckle, hoping it would distract Blaine enough that he wouldn't realize that I was thinking about him and...*us*.

He didn't seem to notice since he laughed as well. "I'm with you. I didn't realize how hungry I was until you came and picked me up."

"We're nearly there," I said, motioning for the Shops at Columbus Circle. "But remember what I said about how it's not a typical dining experience."

"You realize you're going to have to tell me what it is at some point, right?" he joked.

"I suppose I can let you in on it," I said, feigning irritation. It caused Blaine to laugh and my heart to soar – he had a great laugh. "We're going to Whole Foods."

"Whole Foods?" Blaine asked. Clearly he was confused – why would we want to eat somewhere so loud and busy and... a grocery store.

"We're going to get plates to go from the hot bar and have a picnic. Is that okay?"

Blaine looked surprised, but not displeased. "That's... great," he practically whispered.

...

Fifteen minutes later, Blaine and I were making our way toward the park. I only had 45 minutes left with Blaine but I wanted to make all of them worthwhile. As we crossed the street, I was sure to grab his hand again and he smiled as he took my fingers between his.

"There's this spot I always sit at a few minutes from here if you don't mind if we sit there. It's on top of some rocks, so you won't get your pants all grassy," I suggested.

Blaine laughed. "I'm not worried about my pants getting messy, but I would be worried if I was wearing what you were," he said, motioning to my red jeans.

"It'll be fine," I replied as we kept down the path. Just ahead on the right, I motioned for Blaine to divert from the sidewalk and head toward the rock formation that was on the outer bank of the park. The formation had us sitting far above the people on the walkway below and if we looked straight down behind us, we could practically see the sidewalk below and the people bustling past. The rocks were a bit slick – likely due to erosion and people like us walking up them over the years – so our handholding became essential when I started to feel my boot slip beneath me.

Blaine tugged on my hand harder and said, "I've got you," as I nearly slid down the rock. His affirmation made me smile. He had me; and he *had* me more than he realized and certainly more than I was willing to tell him at this point.

Once we reached the top, we sat down next to each other and started eating. The nice thing about Whole Foods' take-away food was that you could find pretty much anything so I knew it'd be a safe bet no matter

what we were in the mood for. I had gone with a caprese salad and some chicken fried tofu and Blaine had opted for a smattering of ethnic options – a lot of lentils, curry and rice bursting in his container.

We ate in silence for a while; just soaking in the sunlight that had emerged in the past few minutes and watching the people below walk by. We happily gobbled down our food and before long we were both finished and purely admiring the scenery around us.

"This is great," Blaine admitted as his voice lulled me from my people watching.

"It's one of my favorite places," I said. "I know it's not as formal as eating in a restaurant or anything, but I thought you might like it."

He nodded. "I love the park. It's my favorite place in New York. That's why I was surprised you wanted to bring me here. It was like... you knew or something. Kind of crazy."

I laughed. "I'm pretty sure we're already beyond crazy with the way we ended up... well, you know," I said, not sure what to call us. Together? Dating?

"Yeah," Blaine whispered. "Why did you choose to come here?" he asked.

I sighed. "When I first came to New York, I was totally drawn in by the lights of the city and I was enthralled with the busy-ness that came with it. I spent tons of time just soaking up the lights and sounds of the city – I don't think I even ventured into the park until after my sophomore year.

"But after awhile, the city felt overwhelming; life was overwhelming. And I felt like I couldn't find peace anywhere. There was no solace, no alone time. But then I came here when one of my friends cancelled on me going to The Met. And I ended up sitting here and just watching and thinking. And it was then that I decided that this was the place where I could feel centered again."

I didn't want to mention that part of the reason I needed the alone time was due to my break-up with William – it was far too soon for that – but even the fact that I was sharing something so personal with Blaine was new for me.

But I looked over at him and he had a slight smile on his face. "Thank you," he said softly.

"For what?" I asked.

"For telling me about this place – but really, for sharing it with me. I love the park too, but knowing how you feel connected to it... makes it even better somehow."

Blaine's comment caused me to blush. When he said things like that, it made him seem like he was a figment of my imagination, but feeling his warmth next to my body kept me grounded in the fact that he was real.

Blaine became even more real to me as he took my hand and clasped his fingers with mine and placed our joined hands on his knee as we sat next to each other. I gasped at the contact but shifted so I was sitting even closer to him and I leaned my head onto his shoulder. Our closeness felt so comfortable and... familiar, as if we'd been together for a while already. We hadn't had any Defining The Relationship talks, but our physical connection now spoke volumes.

My head sat contentedly at the crook of Blaine's neck and I just breathed him in. His scent was infectious and I was fairly certain I would forever associate this joyous smell with Blaine for the rest of my life. In a fleeting moment I felt Blaine's hand tighten around mine and I could feel him speaking to me because of the reverberations in his chest, but I wasn't really listening. I was too drawn into the way his jaw was moving and how if he said just the right word, his cheek would brush against my forehead and push me closer into his neck.

In a moment I found my nose directly against Blaine's cheek and I felt him stop speaking and inhale sharply. Blaine rolled his neck to try and look at me, forcing the skin of his neck to my lips and I felt myself panting at his neck. He shivered at the contact and I pursed my lips to kiss his neck lightly. Blaine responded with a sigh and he let go of our joined hand as he moved his arm to wrap behind me – coincidentally shifting us closer and reaching a new level of closeness we hadn't yet achieved.

I pulled back slightly as Blaine looked at me with a shy smile and he moved closer to join our lips. The tentative kiss felt warm and fuzzy and I was practically drunk of Blaine's... existence surrounding me so thoroughly.

Blaine broke our kiss and pulled back to breathe but I couldn't let that happen – my lips chased his and I caught his mouth in a half-open state. Rather than force an innocent kiss, I decided that I wanted more – more pressure of his arm at my back, more of his scent to linger on my clothes, and definitely more kissing.

I decided against pursing my lips and instead lightly sucked on Blaine's extended lower lip. This caused Blaine to pull me in closer and I felt his tongue dip lightly out of his mouth and graze over my lip. I relieved the suction on his lip and gently took his tongue in its place – and I was rewarded for this action by a heavenly sound emitted by Blaine.

I felt his tongue move slightly between my lips and I opened my mouth fully, giving our tongues what they had been searching for. Blaine's hand at my back remained firm and strong, but the way our tongues moved against each other's remained soft and sweet. I didn't think that this could ever be sweet; tongues thrashing and harsh sucking due to passion, yes. But never so soft, sweet and... almost loving.

Our tongues mixed together and the drunkenness I'd felt before reached a whole new level as I savored every passing second with Blaine attached to my mouth. In any of my past relationships, I would have been hyper aware of the fact that I was full on making out with a guy in the park, but with Blaine I just didn't care. The way our lips and tongues perfectly meshed together made everything else irrelevant; time stood still, the earth stopped moving – nothing existed except for us.

I could feel Blaine's breaths from his nose gracing the flesh on my cheek, but it was soon replaced with Blaine's free hand on my cheek. He gently rubbed his thumb along my cheekbone until his fingertips traced along the hair behind my ear. The hand on my cheek and the slight pressure it produced forced our mouths and tongues closer together but the kiss never felt rushed or like there was too much pressure.

It was the singular most perfect kiss I had ever had.

HONK! HONK!

Startled, I released Blaine's tongue from my mouth and pulled away. I hadn't entirely forgotten where we were but I did realize that as hot as this make out session was, it would have to come to an end at some point since we were on a time crunch here.

I opened my eyes only to see Blaine peeking back at me through those luscious lashes of his. "Wow," he said as he rested his forehead against mine.

"Yeah." I giggled. "Sorry that the horn interrupted us."

"It's okay," he said breathily. I could feel his words on my cheek, causing me to shudder. "I probably have to go back to work soon anyway," he sighed.

I sighed as well. After that, I didn't really want to do anything else. I would have held Blaine – and his mouth – hostage for the rest of the day to make him my kissing slave, but I guess we had to be real adults and go to work and stuff.

Annoying.

I glanced down at my watch to note the time. "We should go," I said, still unwilling to move away from the pressure of our foreheads as they touched.

"I don't want to," he whispered.

"I know," I replied. "But I'll see you Saturday."

"Saturday," he said with a smile as he backed away, shifting around to pull himself off the ground. He stood up and brushed off a bit of debris that had clung to his pants and I was at the perfect height to stare at his ass as he continued to dust himself off.

Damn. I was not complaining at the view...

"Ready?" Blaine asked as he reached his hand out to help me up. I smiled and graciously took his hand and pulled myself off the ground with a slight grunt.

"I feel old," I said as I heard my knees crack slightly at the sudden movement.

He laughed. "I don't think we can be old until we're in our late thirties. We still have time."

"I guess. But just remember, I'm older than you," I noted. "So older means wiser."

"Yes sir," he said with a salute.

...

The walk back to his office was silent but happy as I dwelled in the fantastic way Blaine felt against my lips. I was already eager to engage in another make out session with him and though the thought of being physically forward after only a few dates was unusual for me – especially given my guarded nature in

relationships – I felt that it didn't bother me that things were different than my past relationships or hook ups. Things were different; *Blaine* was different.

"I really don't want to go back to work," Blaine groaned as we reached the entryway. "But at least there's Saturday, right?"

I nodded. "Yes. Do you – uh – does 4 work for you to meet up?"

"Sure," he replied. "I'll be sure to pick up a present for them tonight."

"Oh, don't go until tomorrow. They aren't registered yet," I noted.

"Aren't they supposed to do that before they have an engagement party?" he asked.

I laughed. "That's what I said. I'm helping Santana register tomorrow so if you get your gift tomorrow night or Saturday morning you should be fine."

He looked like he was about to ask something, but paused and shook his head – as if letting whatever thought he had go out of his head. "Okay," he said. He looked at his watch. "I hate to leave but I really need to head back in." He pulled my hand and drew me closer to him, embracing me tightly while our hands remained clasped between us. "I had a really good time," he whispered against my ear.

"I did too," I agreed. "See you Saturday, Blaine."

"Saturday," he mimicked. He backed away slowly but he didn't pull away entirely as he placed a soft kiss to my lips. "See you then."

He pulled away – but just barely – and I felt his lips brush against mine again in yet another soft kiss. But that wasn't enough this time; not after I'd felt the pressure of his tongue against mine. I pushed him a bit harder into the kiss and I could almost feel my mouth pulling away the softness of his kiss and replacing it with my own fervent, harder, passionate kiss.

As I backed away from a now-breathless Blaine, I was surprised to see his eyes closed and his lips pursed, as if they were wondering where I had gone. I couldn't help but chuckle slightly at his pose and he opened his eyes.

"Seriously? I have to leave you after that?" he barked.

I shrugged but leaned in – whispering to him as if it was a secret just between us. "I need to keep you intrigued for next time."

He let out a hushed moan – though I'm sure he'd deny the action. "You say that as if it wasn't already the case," he muttered quietly.

To placate him, I kissed him gently on the cheek and bid him farewell. As Blaine walked back toward the revolving doors of the building, he took a moment to glance back at me and I shot him a small wave. I couldn't help but feel a sense of pride as I saw the beaming smile on his face knowing that I had put it there.

In the world of gay men, we may not always be up front about our feelings. I mean, come on – we're guys; we don't always do "feelings" or "emotions." But with a guy like Blaine I didn't care about the status quo as it relates to gay men.

I was falling for him, but I needed to know where we stood.

"Saturday," I muttered to myself as I saw his figure disappear into the belly of the building. "I'm sick of waiting and wondering. Saturday I'm going to find out if he wants to be with me. Exclusively."

CHAPTER THIRTY

Saturday, November 3

KURT

At 3:45, I was nestled safely in the backseat of the cab on my way to Blaine's apartment. I had bought Santana and Brittany's gift while Santana and I had registered on Friday afternoon – while she was not looking, obviously – but it worked out that I wouldn't have to brave the Saturday crowds at the store and could spend that time at the gym.

I didn't consider myself to be a workout fiend but as a man who prided himself in always looking his best, it needed to include my physical appearance as well. I also wanted to keep up my cardio due to my dad's former health concerns and the fact that they were likely genetic, so it was really a two birds, one stone situation.

But that meant I was incredibly sore now that this morning's session had worn off. My trainer – Stephanie – was amazing and worth every penny but damn, I hated her for at least a day after each session.

The cab pulled up to Blaine's apartment and I paid the fare and grabbed the large gift bag from the backseat. I winced at the pain that shot up from my legs as I stretched them out on the sidewalk, but carefully made my way up the stairs of Blaine's building and pushed the buzzer.

After a few moments, Blaine still hadn't responded to my initial buzz so I tried buzzing him again. I swear, I thought to myself. If Blaine makes a habit out of not answering me or being late he is going to be in so much trouble...

"Kurt?" I heard the box scream. I jumped at the decibel of Blaine's voice as it exploded from the box, but I collected myself and pushed the reply button.

"Yes..."

"So sorry, I was just getting out of the shower. Come on up," he said before I heard the buzzer go off and the door click unlocked.

I remembered that he lived on the third floor and made my way to the elevator only to find it out of order. I cursed the situation and briskly walked up the stairs and avoided thinking about the pain sprouting through my legs. Once I was outside of his door, I knocked loudly on the door and waited a few seconds before Blaine answered; Blaine slightly out of breath and disheveled... and wearing only a fuzzy robe.

Oh god.

I realized he had said he just got out of the shower, but I didn't expect that he'd answer the door in his bathrobe. It was tucked tight and covered his body from his neck to his knees, but my hormones seemed to ignore that fact and focus on the fact that Blaine was naked underneath that towel.

"Kurt?" Blaine asked, waving his hand in front of my eyes. "Are you okay? You look like you shorted out or something."

I shook my head – trying to alleviate the thoughts of naked Blaine – before replying. "I'm sorry, I was just thinking about the... party tonight." I've never been a great liar, so I hoped that he and I were still "new" enough that he wouldn't realize I was trying to save my own ass.

"I was just saying I'm sorry I didn't answer earlier. I heard it buzz in the shower but couldn't get to it quite quick enough. My run went a bit longer than I had realized and I ended up being behind. But I shouldn't be more than ten minutes tops. Is that okay?"

I nodded. "Of course. I'm early anyway. Is it okay if I wait out here?"

"Sure," he agreed. "Let me just grab my clothes real quick and I'll be right back. He grabbed the pile of clothes that had been lying on his neatly made bed and jetted to the bathroom. The last time I'd been in Blaine's apartment, the situation hadn't exactly been ideal. This time, it had been of our own accord and we didn't have to have some sort of awkward conversation while we were here.

Admittedly, I knew he and I would have to have some sort of conversation soon about what exactly we were, but I wasn't sure that the day of our friend's engagement party was the right venue for that. Any time people talk about relationships around weddings or engagements, it feels... weird; as if the only reason it's being discussed is because we're around other people in love who are committing themselves to each other. It wasn't that I didn't want to have more with Blaine or commit to him in some way, but perhaps having this kind of conversation today wasn't the best idea.

I also *might* have chickened out a bit since our lunch date the other day and was procrastinating. So sue me.

While Blaine was getting dressed, I decided to look around his apartment a bit more. His decorating scheme was minimal – most guys were the same way – but he had an assortment of photos in corners of his apartment and I had been intrigued. I walked along the windows of his apartment and glanced at the first photo. It looked like a family photo primarily because he so strongly resembled the woman in the photo. I assumed it was a photo of him, his parents, and his brother. He had mentioned his brother, but he had failed to mention the fact that the entire Anderson family was full of knockouts.

His mom was gorgeous – her age was unidentifiable, though she looked quite relaxed and had a beautiful smile. His dad was also a looker with salt-and-pepper hair and he looked nearly identical to his brother, who Blaine had said his name was... Carl? Carson? Something with a C? I was never good with names. Hopefully he'd mention his name again so I wouldn't feel like an idiot when I couldn't remember his name the next time we commiserated about our brothers being idiots.

The next photo on the wall was of him and Santana. I still couldn't believe that he had become best friends with the girl from high school who had surprised me more than anyone else I graduated with. Santana went from being the cheerleader who got around a lot, to the out lesbian – something I still was horribly mad at Finn for doing to her, to fiery and feisty woman who never took anyone's shit.

She and I were a lot more alike than I realized at first but it really sank in our senior year when she struggled to be a lesbian in a school full of homophobia and zero potential girlfriends. It was during our senior year that she and I really stuck together since we didn't have anyone else and though our personalities caused us to clash a lot, we really had become great friends.

Freshman year of college along with the distance between us had caused us to fall apart and lose touch. Plus Santana was oddly against Facebook – something I didn't understand – so keeping up with her had been difficult.

I wished that I'd known that she was living in New York sooner because I'm sure she and I could have painted the city red by now, but I suppose everything does happen for a reason so I should just accept her coming back into my life now.

I laughed at the train of thought going through my mind. Clearly I've been hanging out with Blaine too much if I'm saying this "everything happens for a reason" business; not that I was complaining.

As I was about to observe the next photograph on the wall, Blaine came bursting out of the bathroom, humming a tune as straightened his tie. "I'm just about ready," he said as he slid around his apartment in his socks. "I just need to find my shoes."

I nodded and made my way back toward the gift bag I'd left by the door when I walked in. "Did you have your gift for the lovely couple?"

"Yup," he said as he grabbed the flat wrapped package lying on his bed. "It's a picture of Santana and Brittany that I took awhile back in one of the frames from their registry. I hope it's alright."

I smiled. It was a nice way to add something personal to something off of a list of items. "I'm sure they'll love it."

He smiled in return. "You ready?" he asked as he slipped on his black wingtips. He got one last look of his outfit in the mirror – and I glanced appreciatively at his choice of a gray suit with black skinny tie and black dress shoes – before making his way to the front door and holding it open expectantly for me.

I uttered my thanks as I passed through the threshold and made our way to the stairs. I held the door open for him and he slipped in front of me. I wanted to walk behind him primarily so I could grimace and internally moan at the pain in my legs from descending the staircase. But I suppose having Blaine walk in front of me for the view wouldn't hurt...

We quietly made our way to the lobby – even though I was practically groaning inside with each step as my bones and muscles screamed at me – and out on the street to flag down a cab. Blaine waved his arm and a cab practically screeched to a halt. He approached the driver and told him of our destination, but soon held open the back seat door to allow me in.

I slid in the backseat and Blaine popped in next to me. He placed his gift on the side closest to the window and I did the same, effectively positioning ourselves next to each other without the gifts between us.

"Sorry I wasn't ready when you got there," he said as the cab pulled away from the curb.

I shook my head dismissively. "It's totally fine Blaine. I was early anyway."

He gave a slight laugh. "I was worried you were going to think I had a habit of being late or not being ready for our proposed meet up times. I swear, the fact that I was late twice is already haunting me."

I chuckled. "It's okay. I know both times were out of your control – you had the worst morning of all mornings and the other day you were busy with work. I understand."

He looked sort of... off... when I mentioned Thursday's tardiness, but I didn't want to think too much about it. It's not like we'd been around each other enough to know each other's signals for when something was off, right? His face was still plagued with some emotion I hadn't quite figured out, but I instinctively grabbed for his hand that rested between us and soothingly rubbed my thumb over his fisted fingers as my digits clasped in the nook by his thumb.

The contact earned me a smile from Blaine and I couldn't help but feel slightly overjoyed at the fact that something so small could make him smile. "So, how was your Saturday morning?"

I groaned. "My personal trainer kicked my ass so I've been in recovery mode ever since. She is totally worth it, but I really hate her right now."

He chuckled. "You seem fine," he concluded.

I laughed. "I'm just really good at trying to hide the fact that my legs are practically planning a revolution with my kneecaps at the moment. I'm fairly sure that they're planning to dismember me and join someone else who is less crazy in order to get a break."

Blaine guffawed and flipped his hand to link our fingers together rather than have my thumb run over his hand. Once we were joined, he squeezed my hand gently. "Let me know if I need to start carrying you or something. You know - if your legs really do decide to book it."

"You'll be the first to know," I replied with a wink. "What about you?"

He sighed. "First I called my parents – Saturday tradition. My dad travels a lot with his business during the week, so the weekend is usually the best time to catch both of them at home."

"What does your dad do?"

"He does consulting for big companies – helping them figure out more fiscally responsible ways to spend and manage their money," he replied nonchalantly. "I only know that because that's how he describes it to people. It's all way too boring for my taste," he admitted with a chuckle.

"And your mom?"

"She used to be a CEO for a nonprofit in Columbus, but she retired last year. I think the only reason my dad still works is because he can choose his own schedule and he gets to travel a lot and bring my mom along. It really works for them, I guess," he replied.

"How often do you see them?" I asked. Blaine hadn't really opened up much about his family – then again, neither had I – so I was intrigued to know more about the people responsible for the man.

"A few times a year, I guess. It sucks for them since Cooper and I live on opposite sides of the country, but they make sure to come and see us at least once a year on our own. But we always make our way home to Ohio for Christmas. Usually, we do Thanksgiving here and Fourth of July in LA just to make sure each of us gets a holiday on our home turf."

Ah, Cooper, I thought to myself. Okay, how am I going to remember this? Cooper... copper. Blaine's eyes are the color of pennies, pennies are made of copper, copper is spelled similarly to Cooper – voila!

"Kurt?" Blaine asked, squeezing my hand again.

"Oh, sorry. What?"

He shook his head with a laugh. "I'm starting to get a complex since you aren't listening to my questions."

"I'm so sorry," I resigned. "I was just... embarrassed."

He looked at me, confused. "Embarrassed? About what?"

I sighed. "Earlier, I was looking at pictures in your apartment and I saw the one of you with your family and I remembered you telling me about your brother and I couldn't remember his name. You said it just now and I was trying to figure out how to remember it." I was praying that he wouldn't ask what I had thought of to remember his name because then I'd have to admit that I was thinking... actually, dreaming... about Blaine's eyes and that would seem so creepy.

Thankfully he didn't think much of it or he didn't want to ask. Instead, he chuckled. "That's nothing to be embarrassed about."

I snorted. "It is when you call your friend's girlfriend by the wrong name three different times."

Blaine's laughter was boisterous at my admission and even the cab driver looked a bit startled at the laughter erupting from his mouth. "I'm guessing that put your friend in the dog house a time or two."

I giggled. "Not really. I really am awful with remembering names and I admitted that to her and promised that my friend hadn't done anything ungentlemanly when she wasn't around him. I didn't want her to think he was bringing all of these women around and we just couldn't keep track of their names! I'm just really not great at remembering things – it's a bad habit."

"It's no big deal, Kurt," he shrugged. "I'm bad at remembering things myself - or listening. My parents used to always joke that I was deaf because they thought I never heard them when they spoke. Like one time, my mom kept telling me about this benefit that she was going to that I had to accompany her at when I was in sixth grade. The whole time she'd gone on about the gala and its inner workings and I remembered those details and the different people she'd wanted me to meet."

"But in the end, I couldn't remember what the gala was raising money for. I thought it was for bald beagles - you know, the dog, but it was raising money for *bald eagles*. I was so confused why they were talking about their need to soar above the rest and I asked my mom if we could get a flying bald puppy too."

I couldn't help but stifle back a laugh. I could imagine a young Blaine getting really passionate about the issue of helping bald beagles and wanting one himself and being so confused about what the adults were talking about but still trying to be as helpful as ever despite his confusion. It just seemed like something he would do... and it was endearing.

"I know, I know," he said with a laugh. "But I try to listen better now, but I'm still not great. It drives Santana nuts sometimes."

"Lots of things drive Santana nuts," I replied. I thought for a moment about the things I'd done in high school to piss off Santana before I remembered what had gotten us off on this tangent. "Oh, what was the question that you'd asked me earlier?"

"Oh," he said. "I was asking about your family. You said you have a stepbrother, Finn?" I nodded, somewhat irritated at myself that he'd remembered Finn's name when I couldn't remember his brother's name. But it was so typical for Blaine to be so damn thoughtful and cute. "What about your family? I know your dad means a lot to you."

"Definitely," I replied. "My dad has been my best friend for years. He was always in my corner in everything I tried. I swear, the man only knows how to look out for me. Sometimes it can be a bit overwhelming, but I know he means the best by it."

"That's so great. It sounds like you and your dad have a great relationship. What about your mom?"

"Oh, she passed away when I was a kid."

"I'm so—" he started.

I waved my hand, dismissing the topic. "It happened a long time ago and it's okay. You don't need to apologize. The thing I learned from all of that is that my dad just became so important to me, and me to him. But once Carole and Finn joined the picture, it just made things a bit sweeter."

I proceeded to tell him the story of how my dad met Carole – leaving out the bit about my teensy crush on Finn – and talking about their wedding and the relationship between my stepbrother and I. As I was telling the story, Blaine's emotions ranged from touched, to joy, to laughter and to hope – the last bit emerging when I talked about my dad's previous health problems and how we conquered them as a family.

"Wow," he surmised. "You have a great family."

"It seems like you do too," I said as I tugged on our joined hands.

"Yeah," he agreed. "We weren't always that way though. I think growing up in a part of town where you're meant to "Keep Up With The Joneses", being a family with a gay kid and an actor made us stick out like sore thumbs. After awhile, my parents just realized that keeping up appearances didn't matter and they needed to be there for us. Even though they were high-powered people, they made time for us. It was something a lot of other kids from our neighborhood didn't get. Cooper and I were lucky because of it."

"Seems like we both had it pretty good," I said with another squeeze of the hands.

"Yeah," he agreed as he squeezed back.

I looked out the window and took in the information Blaine had shared with me but before long the cab pulled to a stop and the driver looked back at us, indicating that we'd reached the destination.

"Oh, we're here," I said as I stumbled with my pants to find my wallet to pay for the fare. Before I could get my wallet out of my back pocket, Blaine had given the cab driver cash and started to get out of the car. I followed suit and walked up to the curb, standing next to the balloons that had adorned the outside of the brownstone to designate that the party was here. I heard the heels of Blaine's shoes click against the pavement as he took his place next to me.

Huh, his place next to me.

"Shall we go?" he asked as he extended his elbow for me. I laughed at his behavior and looped my arm with his.

"Absolutely," I said as we ascended the stairs toward the party.

BLAINE

As soon as Kurt and I approached the front door, I decided against knocking and tentatively grabbed the doorknob to see if it was unlocked. It clicked open and I pushed the bright blue door in and alleviated my arm from Kurt's – slightly disappointed at the loss, but realizing that we couldn't fit through the door side-by-side.

"Blaine! Kurt!" Santana bellowed as soon as I'd turned to close the door behind us. "Thanks for coming," she said softly before hugging Kurt and then me.

"Of course," Kurt replied. "Now where is the lucky lady? I haven't had the privilege of meeting Brittany and I want to meet the woman who finally whisked you away."

Santana laughed. "Hey Britt," she yelled toward the kitchen behind her. Not a moment later, Brittany's blonde head poked out from behind the wall and Kurt stood back, seeming stunned. "Britt, you remember

Blaine – that annoying guy I can't seem to ditch." I couldn't help but laugh at Santana's statement as I shot Brittany a small wave. "But this fabulous man with scraggly Blaine here is—"

"—Kurt," Brittany finished, extending her hand to shake Kurt's. I could tell Santana was as confused as I was.

"You two have met?" I asked.

Brittany nodded. "I met him at a diner a few weeks ago. He's friends with Lauren who used to work on Bring It On! with me. She said that she and Kurt worked together."

Santana's eyes bulged from her head. "Hold the damn phone! You work at Bring It On!? How did I not see you there before? Also, Lauren who? I swear, the fact that I only saw you perform a handful of times is clearly making me look like I don't know your friends."

Kurt shrugged. "I just started working there a few weeks ago. I had worked on their touring company for awhile but decided that I was over the constant traveling so I asked after a position with the company in New York and they had an opening, so I accepted."

"And what about Lauren?" Santana asked. Knowing my best friend, she was not only curious; she was also jealous.

"Lauren Zizes. Do you remember her?" Kurt asked.

Santana laughed, seeming somewhat relieved. "Of course I remember her! She was one bad ass bitch. She works at Bring It On! too?"

Brittany nodded. "She started the week before I left. Apparently Kurt started not too long after I left, which sucks because I bet he is the best hugger."

I wasn't sure how that point was relevant, but this was Brittany's logic. And she also wasn't wrong; Kurt was a great hugger.

Kurt laughed at Brittany's suggestion. "Yeah, well, she's a bit different now. But we can hang out sometime. I know we weren't all best friends in high school and you and I just reconnected again, so I wasn't sure you wanted to hang out with her."

"Of course I do!" Santana exclaimed. Normally Santana wasn't one to hang out with people from high school – she seemed to have hated her time there – but she'd made an exception for Kurt and I'm guessing since Lauren was in with Kurt, she wasn't going to say no to rekindling that friendship as well.

"Brittany? Santana?" a voice screeched from the kitchen.

"In here," Brittany shouted. A moment later, a woman joined their group, looking at Kurt and I expectantly.

"Hello," the woman said. "I'm Brittany's mom, Linda. And you are...?"

"This is Kurt, a friend of mine from high school," Santana said as Kurt moved forward to shake her hand. "And this is Blaine, a co-worker of mine."

"Who also has the title of Santana's best friend – aside from Brittany, of course," I said with the most charming smile I could muster. Santana rolled her eyes at my statement.

"Well it's nice to meet you both. I know this is mostly a family gathering on our side, but if Santana invited you, you're as good as family to us now," Linda said as she waved them toward the kitchen.

The kitchen was just to the right of the doorway we'd come through and as we turned into the room, the presence of the festivities was evident. The place was covered in balloons – bright colors like orange, teal, purple and pink dripping from the ceiling. There was also a piñata tucked into the corner, which caused me to look at Santana curiously. She followed my eye line and gave a small chuckle with a shrug at the piñata's presence; clearly it didn't phase her any and it was probably Brittany's idea anyway. Santana wouldn't counter Brittany even if she was 100% wrong – she loved that girl too much.

Once we'd spent a moment looking around, the attention of the room seemed to rest on we newcomers that had joined the party. Noticing that we were standing there somewhat awkwardly not sure where to start, Santana picked up.

"Everyone, this is Kurt and Blaine," each of us waving as our respective names were called. "They're friends of mine." The room gave their salutations briefly before going back to their conversations and the food on the plates in front of them.

Brittany took my hand into her left and Kurt's into her right as she led us to the first group of people. She introduced us to every person in the group and gave a little background about each of us before shuffling us along to the next group and following the same process. Twenty minutes and plenty of small talk later, Brittany had introduced us to practically everyone in her family tree and I was still reeling from all of the handshakes and questions.

Kurt clearly seemed unphased by the attention as he was currently wearing a small smile at his lips, one that made me want to kiss him but realized this probably wasn't the time or place for that. Hand holding in the cab, sure. But kissing at another couple's engagement party? Maybe not.

"Would you like something?" I asked Kurt as I looked longingly at the punch bowl that had been set on the counter. I was parched.

"Sure, punch would be great," he said softly. I nodded and grabbed us a cup each and also picked up a few cheese cubes that I shoved down before joining Kurt again, who was in conversation with Santana.

"Thanks for inviting us," I heard Kurt say as I handed him his punch. Kurt smiled in appreciation.

"Like I wasn't going to invite my two favorite gays," she retorted. "Besides, I don't have family here, so you guys are as close as I get. I mean, besides Brittany."

I nodded in understanding, as did Kurt. Being from another state was hard when it came to celebrations or holidays and we were all too familiar with the birthdays spent with only our friends and celebrations we wished we could share with our families. "Well, I'm honored to be your New York family," I said as I lightly nudged her shoulder.

"Same here," Kurt said excitedly as he took another sip from his cup. I smiled at him; he hadn't even been friends with this older, wiser Santana for very long but he was already thrilled with the presence of the boisterous Latina in his life again.

"Aww, shucks," she quipped. "Well, since my family couldn't be here today, you guys are going to have to pinch hit instead."

"Pinch hit?" Kurt asked.

"Sorry," Santana chuckled. "Forgot I'm talking to the guy who's allergic to sports."

Kurt rolled his eyes. "You know that's not true." She looked at him pointedly and his resign let up a bit. "Okay, it's not *entirely* true."

"Either way," she said, "You guys might have to give an embarrassing speech on my behalf since my dad isn't here to do it for me. Hope you're okay with that."

"I'm sure between Kurt and I, we have plenty of ammo," I suggested, causing Kurt to flutter with laughter.

"Definitely," he agreed.

Santana sat back and the thankful expression in her eyes said more than her words could; she was genuinely glad we were there. She knew we would be there physically, but she was also thankful that we were her support system. Kurt had been during a time of her life where she seemed like she needed it most and I was there just as her life was changing for the better. Kurt and I were both lucky to have experienced Santana in these ways and now we could show her love in a new way – together.

"I'm going to go grab a snack, you want anything?" Kurt asked.

I shook my head. "Sorry, if I'd known you wanted something else I would have..."

"...I am perfectly capable," Kurt replied, slight tease to his voice. "Be right back," he said, turning away.

"Damn Anderson," Santana said, her voice full of innuendo.

"What?" I asked, truly puzzled.

"I didn't expect you or Hummel to put out that quickly."

The sip of drink I'd just taken was immediately spit back into my cup as I tried to collect myself after Santana's statement. "I – uh – what? Why? Huh," I said, clearly flustered.

"You don't have to play the virgin act with me, B. Kurt's walking funny, I'm guessing you had something to do with that," she said as she winked at me.

I groaned. "Dear god that is not what happened at all. We're not... not yet... well, we haven't..."

She laughed. "Okay, so it wasn't you - who was it?"

"His personal trainer," I answered nonchalantly. Her eyes had shock clearly displayed. "Who's a woman."

She chuckled again, this time less suggestion behind her laugh. "Ah. Well, sorry that my mind went to the gutter. You know me," she claimed, and I nodded in understanding. "So what have you and your boyfriend done?"

"He's not my... I don't know what he and I are," I said quietly, looking at my shoes in the process.

"Damn it Blaine," she replied, her voice rising a little.

"Santana, stop!" I exclaimed with a whisper. "Can we please not talk about this here?"

She tugged my arm and pulled us both into the hallway, not looking back to see if we'd caused any commotion in the process. "What is going on Blaine?" I didn't want to meet her eyes yet so I shrugged for the time being. "Look, I know you are trying to be cautious for some reason I don't fully understand, but is there a reason you and Kurt haven't talked about whatever you are? It's not like you have to be like 'we're boyfriends' or something, but have you at least talked about how he makes you feel?"

I shook my head. "I can't."

"Why not?" she asked softly.

I stood for a moment with my eyes clenched shut, hoping that I did not have to have this conversation at Santana's engagement party with Kurt in the other room. "I'm terrified."

Santana laughed lightly and my eyes flickered open and I shot her the most malicious glare I could gather. She patted me lightly on the shoulder. "It's okay to be scared, Blaine. You haven't been in a relationship in awhile and neither has Kurt from what I can gather. I bet he's just as scared as you."

"I'm not just scared that he'd be my first relationship in ages. It's that... I feel like he's embarrassed to be with me or something. Ever since we got here, he hasn't touched me or held my hand or anything." I started to fold within myself, embarrassed at my lack of confidence.

"B, he's never met these people before. And Kurt is just a guarded person – he's had to be because of being from backwards bumpkinland. You can relate to that," she said. I nodded in silent agreement. "But I know it isn't just this. You may be a cuddle whore, but you're not one to worry too much about one instance like this."

I sighed. I sometimes hated that Santana knew me so well that she could read me like a freaking book even when I didn't want to talk about things. She just... knew. That bitch. "It kind of started the other day. When we went out for lunch. I suggested we meet at his apartment to meet up before coming here and he quickly said that he'd rather meet me at my place. He said he had to pick up your present on Saturday, but then he said he was going to register with you. Then when I met him today, he said he had gotten his present to you while you guys were together.

"It's like he doesn't want to be seen with me or something. Is he afraid to bring me back to meet his friends or something? Is he afraid I'll think less of him or something? I just don't understand."

Santana smiled and rubbed my shoulder in a comforting way. "I'm not entirely sure, but I think it has to do with his roommate. I've never met him, but Kurt talked about him a bit yesterday and said that he's taken on the role of being his protective older brother figure. He even said he was similar to his dad in the way he'd be a 'helicopter roommate' at times. And I've met Burt Hummel – the man is the epitome of overprotective. I can only assume his roommate is similar if he made the comparison."

A flash of fear was surely evident in my eyes, but Santana's smile calmed me a bit. "Kurt is a really independent guy, but I think even he wasn't immune to making bad relationship choices. I know he and his roommate have been friends for years and I'm sure he's seen Kurt stumble a time or two. Kurt might just be doing this to protect himself, but I'd bet he's also trying to protect you. It's kind of the same way you didn't tell me right away about Kurt – you wanted to be sure first. I think it's the same for him."

Even though Santana drove me crazy, she was right more often than I liked to admit. And she was probably right this time. I sighed. "I mean, that makes sense. But why didn't he tell me?"

"Why didn't you tell him how it made you feel?" My lack of reply caused her to laugh. "I definitely do not miss dating guys. You guys suck at talking sometimes."

"Whatever," I retorted. "But we're amazing at sucking other things," I joked, hoping to pull us out of this more serious conversation.

She laughed with a slight groan at my awful joke. "It's true," she acquiesced. "But maybe just talk to him about it. Kurt's a nice guy and he's a great listener. And besides, this is about both of you – you need to figure out what you want and he needs to do the same for himself. But give him some slack; neither of you are perfect."

I nodded. "I know he's not perfect, but he's pretty close."

She laughed. "You've got it bad."

"I do."

I do.

Being that I was at an engagement party, hearing that phrase wasn't new, but would I get to say it to a man someday? What if that man was Kurt?

"We're here!" a voice yelled from the front hall, effectively pulling me from the thoughts of Kurt being called my husband in casual conversation. I saw Santana's eyes flicker open and a bright smile graced her face as she directed her attention to the doorway. The sight that came bustling through was clearly a surprise – one Santana was thrilled with – and once I saw that it was her mom and dad, I knew my best friend was the happiest girl on the face of the planet in this very instance.

"Mom? Dad?" Santana asked, not believing who was in front of her.

"Surprise," I heard Brittany whisper as she came up behind Santana and wrapped her arms around her waist.

"You did this?" Santana questioned, and Brittany nodded.

"I knew you wanted them here so I got them to agree to come for the weekend," Brittany said with a smile.

"We're sorry we're late," her mom said as she crossed through the room to give her daughter a hug. "Our plane was delayed – otherwise we would have been here sooner."

"Considering I didn't know you were coming, you're just on time," Santana replied, still bewildered at her parents' presence in her fiancée's family's kitchen. She hugged them tightly and beamed back brightly at her fiancée.

They joined fingers and walked with Santana's parents back into the kitchen where Brittany's family welcomed them with open arms.

"They're really happy aren't they?" Kurt asked as he stood next to me.

"They are," I said as I watched the two women kiss and practically ooze affection as they took in each other in the presence of their families. I was content to watch them just be with each other before I felt Kurt's hand link with mine. I looked down to see our fingers locked before looking back up at Kurt and his sweet smile. He was still looking ahead at Brittany and Santana before turning back to me with that infectious smile of his.

I thought about the insecurity I'd had about Kurt. Santana was right; we really did need to talk. But this small act gave me a hope I hadn't realized I needed and the courage to do what I wanted to since I'd met him.

...

"Can I have your attention please," Santana's dad said as he clinked a spoon along the champagne flute in his hand. We were all seated around the large dining table in the formal dining room, crowded in together as we were waiting to eat dessert together. Dinner had been spectacular, but I was definitely eyeing the three-layered chocolate cake with strawberries that Ms. Pierce had brought out for us to enjoy.

As the room went quiet, Mr. Lopez began to speak. "I wanted to take a moment to thank the Pierce family for hosting this engagement party. And thank you for welcoming my wife and I into your home and family as quickly as you did with mi preciosa Santanita."

"Dad," Santana uttered at the nickname spouted from her dad's mouth.

"Okay, okay. I promised Santana I wouldn't embarrass her too much, but I wanted to offer a quick toast to the happy couple. If we could all raise a glass," he said and we all followed suit. "To Brittany and Santana. May your love be everlasting, true, honest, and pure."

"To Brittany and Santana!" we all chimed as we clinked our glasses with each other.

At this point, Brittany's mother stood at her spot next to Brittany's dad. "In the spirit of toasts – and I'll try to make this short so we can eat this cake," she said, we all chuckled at her statement. "Phil and I also wanted to wish our best to the couple. When we first met Santana, we weren't quite sure what to do with her." Linda laughed and Santana groaned, clearly bringing back a somewhat unfortunate memory as Brittany kissed her cheek lightly, assuring her that it was all right.

"But we knew Santana was special when we saw how she was with our little girl. The love that pours out between these two is something special and I'm so glad that Brittany found The One she was looking for."

Santana blushed at the compliment and Brittany whispered something into her ear. I smiled when I saw Santana lean in to kiss her fiancée on the lips.

"So, to Brittany and Santana – they've found The One."

"To Brittany and Santana!" we cheered again and took another swig of their glass. I turned to look at Kurt who was sitting next to me, finding him slightly teary eyed.

"Is everything okay?" I asked as I looped my arm around his back loosely.

"Yeah," he said with a watery smile. "I'm just... really happy for Santana."

He leaned into my side and I brushed a light kiss to his forehead. "Me too," I whispered.

"Ahem!" I heard a voice clatter from the other end of the table. I snapped up to see a devilish Santana smile, realizing she was the one calling our attention. "If you two boys are done macking, my father asked if you'd like to share a word or two on our behalf since you're the only unbiased people at the table."

I felt Kurt nod into my shoulder as he brought himself to his feet, standing to be sure he could be seen since we were at the very end of the long table. "I'd like to say something," he said as he looked down at me, silently asking if it was okay. I nodded – slightly curious about what he had to say and wondering why he needed my permission.

"I've known Santana since freshman year of high school and let me tell you, when they say high school is no picnic, it obviously happened to someone at McKinley High School." His statement earned a small

laugh. "Santana and I were really there for each other in high school and I'm so thankful for her presence during those four years." He took a moment to collect himself and I took his hand into mine and lightly rubbed at his fingers. He looked at me appreciatively before continuing.

"But I'm even more overjoyed to see Santana meet the love of her life and find the happiness she and I dreamed about in high school. She was such a wonderful person then and her wonderfulness has only blossomed since she's been with Brittany. So, I'd like to propose a toast to them, and more specifically, to happiness."

He raised his glass and we all mimicked his motion. "To happiness," he said with a smile.

"To happiness!" we chorused. Kurt took his seat and I couldn't help but squeeze his hand at his speech.

"That was really...wow Kurt. You really have a way with words."

He smiled. "Thanks," he said, leaning in for a light kiss on the lips; a kiss I happily reciprocated.

"Ahem!" I heard Santana say again.

"What?" I asked harshly, causing the party to erupt in laughter.

"Geez Blaine, calm down. Do you have anything to add?" she asked.

I shook my head. "I think Kurt covered it," I said as I turned to see him smile. I could hear Santana muttering something about covering and Kurt before Brittany's mom started passing around the cake I had my eye on for most of the night.

"Thanks," Kurt whispered into my ear as I shuffled back into my seat and out of his personal space.

"For what?" I asked, turning to face him again.

"For just... being you," he said.

"Oh. You're welcome?" I said with a soft chuckle.

...

The rest of the party has passed quickly and soon we were on our way back to Manhattan, but not before being bombarded with hugs from nearly every person at the party. We had called a cab since finding one roaming the streets in the residential area wasn't likely and found ourselves back to our destination by just after eight.

"That was fun," Kurt sighed as he slunk into the backseat of the cab. I nodded in agreement as Kurt kept chatting. "And I hadn't seen Santana's parents in a long time. It was nice to catch up with them and see how things are." Not long after dessert had been cleared away, Kurt had sequestered himself with the Lopezes and they looked very animated as they chatted with Kurt for about twenty minutes. I remember watching them interact but keeping a keen eye on Kurt who couldn't help but smile and laugh every few minutes, causing my stomach to turn with butterflies at the sound of him laughing from across the room.

As we continued on the drive back, Kurt kept chattering about this thing that they'd said and the little things he'd noticed about the Pierce home, but I couldn't take it any more.

"What is this?" I asked, effectively causing Kurt to stop in his train of thought. I was already looking at his profile, but he whipped his neck so that we were facing each other.

"What's what?" he asked gently.

"This," I said, gesturing between us. Though it was dark, I could see the surprise in Kurt's eyes and I was eager to start backpedaling. Leave it to me to ruin something with my damn mouth. "It's just... I'm sorry; I don't know what I'm supposed to say when it comes to this kind of stuff. I haven't been with anyone in a long time and I don't know what proper decorum is."

Kurt still sat silently, so I continued. "But when you were making that speech about Santana finding happiness... I just. I just wanted you to find that happiness too, Kurt. It shouldn't be a dream for you or for me. It should be reality."

I sighed, knowing I was about to take a big step. "And for me, I'm finding a lot of happiness with you. I don't know what to call this," I said, gesturing between us again, "But I know you make me happy and I hope I do the same for you."

He was still quiet, so I was inclined to keep going, afraid of the silence and what it could mean. "The way you smile, the sound of you laughing, the way you want to get to know me... I want that all the time. I want

to spend time with you all the time. And it scares the living hell out of me, but I know that you will make it worthwhile. I—"

Kurt interrupted my rambling and gingerly placed his forefinger on my lips. "Stop," he insisted.

I gulped. *God, what have I done?*

Rather than start yelling at me or asking the cab driver to stop the car, he launched forward and pressed his lips against mine, taking me by total surprise. I felt his lips move against mine in want and I responded with equal vigor. Our lips moved against each other's firmly but kept our tongues to ourselves. After a few light pecks to my lips, Kurt pulled away and I can't help but feel breathless by the whole event.

"Okay," he stated simply. I quirked my brows in confusion, but he continued. "Okay, I'm in this for as long as you are."

I couldn't help but squawk a bit at his revelation and I pulled him close to me, into a firm hug. Our chests were flush against each other and I was sure Kurt could feel how hard my heart was beating since it felt like it was practically bursting from my ribcage.

Kurt's arms found their way around my waist as I clutched longingly around his shoulders, his cheek against mine, his chin tucked into my back. It wasn't the most comfortable position for either of us in the backseat of a car, but it didn't matter.

"You make me happy, you know," he whispered. "Those things you said about me. I think them about you too."

I smiled and I could feel his smile against my cheek as well. "I'm so glad," I breathed. "That's all I want." I dipped my neck a bit lower and placed a soft kiss onto the skin of his neck where the collar of his shirt had slipped down. He sighed contentedly and I eased out of our hug, trying to regain some sort of normal posture in the backseat. He fidgeted along next to me and soon we were facing forward again, with his head nestled against my shoulder and my chin resting on his head, placing soft kisses into his hair.

"This is nice," he said softly and I hummed in agreement. "You do realize we'll have to tell Santana that we're *together* now, right?"

I laughed. "I'm pretty sure she knew it was going to happen soon enough. But I'm sure the confirmation will make her happy." He giggled slightly then pulled out his phone, but pocketed it almost immediately after looking at the flashing screen. "Are you expecting someone to call you?" I asked.

"No," he replied. "Just seeing what day today was."

"It's November 3rd - why does that matter?"

"It's an important day, Blaine," he said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. He looked up at me with a grin before explaining why. "It's our anniversary."

I couldn't help but radiate joy in that moment and placed a supple kiss to the tip of Kurt's nose. "That, it is."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Thursday, November 8

KURT

Five days into our official relationship, I had decided that Blaine was the sweetest man on the face of the planet.

After the party on Saturday, I dropped him off at his apartment – not without a fairly public make out session on his front stoop – and walked home. I probably should have taken a cab given the time of night and the fact that my apartment wasn't exactly close to his, but I had too much pent up energy to just sit idly in the back of a cab.

I, Kurt Hummel, had a *boyfriend*. *Blaine* was my boyfriend.

Okay, boyfriend seemed like a somewhat juvenile term given that I was 26-years-old, but what else should I call him?

I spent most of the walk back to my apartment that night practically radiating with happiness and by the time I made it home, Wes was on his way out and asked why I looked like I had been "puking rainbows" – his way of describing my probable lovesick expression.

Thankfully I didn't have to really answer his question since he was on his way out – on a date with Lauren, which I had learned of on Friday when Lauren and I partook in our Friday night post-show dinner ritual at the diner. I had gone to sleep that night with a smile on my face and a text from my boyfriend in my inbox.

I had planned on spending Sunday after the show running errands and parking myself in front of my TV, but when Blaine texted to ask what I was up to, I didn't want to turn down the chance to spend time with him. He and I ended up seeing a movie, a romantic comedy, and spent the entire time holding hands and laughing along with the shenanigans of the movie. We snuck kisses every now and then, but it didn't evolve past a simple smooch. Though we had made out a couple of times by now, we weren't teenagers who needed to spend \$15 a piece in order to make out in the dark.

The rest of Sunday had been somewhat uneventful in terms of what most people would determine to be exciting, but I was happy to spend so much time with Blaine. After the movie we went out for coffee that

turned into going out to dinner that turned into grabbing frozen yogurt together. Even though it was nearly freezing outside due to the early November frost that seemed to envelop New York, I didn't care that we had gotten froyo – I didn't want to relinquish my time with Blaine.

By the time we said goodbye that night, we made promises of at least one lunch date this week with plans to spend the day together again next Sunday. He'd joked about it becoming our routine to spend time together on Sundays after the matinee at my work, but I liked having this kind of routine with him.

Now it was Thursday and I couldn't remember the last time I had felt so incredibly happy for so many consecutive days. It seemed like Blaine turned me into a puddle of goo at every possible opportunity; sending me sweet texts, emailing things that made him think of me. It was nice and I appreciated the fact that he thought of me during his day. He took the time to make me feel appreciated and thought after – it was a sweetness I hadn't had before and I soaked it up like a sponge.

And I knew this week was going to be stressful for him. He said during our time on Sunday that he was going to start having time in the studio with the band he'd signed starting on Wednesday. I knew he was excited at the thought of going into the studio with the band – he'd admitted it himself – but I knew a lot rode on this band for him. Professionally, it could open doors for him and he could be a producer – a dream he'd had since he was in high school. Personally, he wanted to prove to himself that he could do it; he could help a band become chart toppers.

Even though I wasn't very familiar with the whole recording process, I knew it was a big deal for him. The timing wasn't great since we had just started spending more time together exclusively and he had to work a lot more hours, but I understood. Sometimes you can only plan for so much in life.

I wasn't surprised when the texts and emails had lessened in frequency yesterday and today, but he still made an effort and I still loved it.

"Yo, Hummel," a voice beckoned. I was getting ready for the evening show at work and apparently had been in a different headspace as Lauren was now impatiently looking at me from where she stood just outside of the changing area on the side stage.

"Oh, sorry Lauren, I wasn't paying attention."

She rolled her eyes. "Obviously. I haven't been able to talk to you much this week – how've you been?"

"Good," I replied noncommittally as I took the steamer to some of the costumes that needed a few wrinkles taken out.

"Uh huh," she said, clearly implying more than I was letting go. I laughed. "I know something happened with you and Blaine because Wes said that you haven't been around the apartment much or you're constantly on the phone when you are home."

I looked at her in panic. "Please tell me you didn't talk to him about Blaine."

She shook her head. "Of course not. You asked me not to talk to him about it – not that I understand why – but I am a woman of my word." I eased once she admitted that she hadn't spoken to my roommate about my boyfriend. "But you do realize that you'll have to talk to him about Blaine at some point, right? The fact that he keeps mentioning it to me means that it's bothering him a lot."

"I'm sure he's only saying that because you have an inside with me."

She shrugged. "Maybe. But I think some of it is that he thinks that you're hiding something – or, rather, someone – from him. I'm not trying to pressure you or anything, but is there a reason that you don't want to talk to Wes about Blaine?"

I sighed. "Sort of." I paused, not wanting to go into detail about my entire dating history since that conversation didn't need to be had so soon before we both had to be on our A-game for work. "Long story short, Wes has seen me pick some real duds in my life when it came to guys I dated. Because of my string of Mr. Wrongs, Wes has taken on some sort of protector role and constantly scrutinizes every guy I've been interested in; badgering me with questions about the guy, one time he even asked if he wanted to run a background and credit check on this guy I admitted I had a crush on. I'm just afraid that he's going to do the same with Blaine."

"I don't see why him being protective of you is a bad thing," she admitted.

"It's not really that he's protective. I mean it is weird because he has no need to be *that* involved in my love life. But it's more that by having him asking all of these questions and second-guessing the guys I date, it makes me do the same. It makes me paranoid that there's something inherently wrong with the guys, so I break up with them. I mean, usually there *is* something wrong with them - there has been every

time so far. But that realization makes me think there's something wrong with *me* because I keep picking guys who aren't winners."

She stood, seeming like she was in thought, as I continued to steam the costumes on their hangers. "Do you think Blaine is a winner?"

"Yes? I mean, I think so. He's really nice, quite gentlemanly and very sweet and kind."

"Then why does it matter what Wes thinks?" she questions.

I sigh. "I don't know. I think it's just because he hasn't been wrong so far. Wes can read people like no one I've ever met. Perhaps it's why he'll make a great lawyer." She laughs a little, causing me to pull from my thoughts. "What?" I ask.

"You're kind of already dooming Blaine from the start. As someone who has met and is sort of friends with the guy, I can tell you that he's cut from a good crop. And the way he's been treating you so far – I mean, we all saw that cute basket he sent you," she added, making me blush. "He's different, Kurt. And the biggest thing about all of it is that *you're* different, too. Honestly I don't think he'll have any issues with Blaine; Blaine is a great guy and you know my bullshit reader is better than most."

I laughed. It's true; Lauren also has an amazing ability to read people – minus the fact that she didn't realize that Blaine was gay. She may not have a great gaydar, but she does know how to tell whether or not someone is a good person.

"But I also think you need to trust yourself more. You've seen the type of guy you don't want and I'm assuming Blaine fits into the category of the type of guy you do want." I nod in agreement as she continues. "More than proving to Wes that Blaine is worthy, just remember that you think he's worthy too. If he wasn't, you probably wouldn't be acting the way you have been for the past few weeks."

I chuckled. Lauren was one of the few people I felt comfortable around and letting my guard down, but I didn't realize I'd let it down so much that I started acting differently around her since I started dating Blaine. "I guess I have been acting a bit strange lately, huh?"

"Understatement of the century! You walk around here like you're in a haze... it's certainly a change from how you were in high school." I tense as she broaches the subject, but soften at her touch on my shoulder.

"Your judgment is great, Kurt. And if Wes gives you any problems, just tell him to come see me," she said with a wink.

I laughed. "Yes, because sending Wes your way is just *so* awful."

She nudged me lightly with a smirk. "Whatever."

"Oh just say it," I goaded. "You like Wesley Montgomery! And you want to kiiiiiiiiss him and huuuuuuuuuuug him..."

"Don't you dare!" Lauren stated, trying to sound annoyed but failing miserably due to the telling smile on her face. "I'll tell Wes!"

"No you won't," I countered. "But don't worry, you don't have to worry about me giving Wes any form of approval on you – not that he asked anyway."

She chuckled. "Well it's because he knows I'm the shit, he doesn't need you to agree with him."

"So modest," I noted.

She laughed a bit more before slipping into a slightly more serious tone. "Whenever you do decide to give Wes full access to your lover boy, maybe we can set up a double date or something. It could be fun."

I looked at her, brow quirked with curiosity. "A double date? Are you and Wes moving into that kind of territory that you're willing to be seen with other couples?"

She blushed and held a small smile, as if a secret was behind her lips. "Yeah."

"Well, you and Mr. Montgomery shall be the first to know," I decided.

She beamed. "It'll be so fun!"

"I hardly consider any date with Wes fun, but whatever."

"You know you like him," she joked.

"That I do," I concurred. "But so do you."

I don't wait for her reply – the flushing of her cheeks and the way she slips out of the dressing area says enough; she's smitten with my roommate. And I couldn't be happier for her.

BLAINE

"One more time, Zach," I said through the microphone in the mixing booth to Zach in the recording room. "This time, can you try to lessen the vibrato at the end of the sentence? It makes you lose the power of the note. If you held it steady, you might be able to hold it longer."

"Sure thing," Zach spoke into the microphone. As the playback comes through the speakers in the booth as well as the headphones on Zach's ears, I sat back and sighed.

This workweek had been crazy due to the work we had started in the studio, but I could hardly tell. I had spent most of the past few days thinking about Kurt and texting my *boyfriend* every chance I could.

I was afraid that it would come off too strong since I wanted to make sure to talk to him in some form at least once a day, but I got the unofficial green light when Kurt started replying to each text and sometimes even initiating conversations on his own.

One thing I had discovered since Kurt became my boyfriend was how great he was at offering encouragement. He had known that this week would be stressful for me, but he had gone out of his way to ask about how his 'celebrity record producer boyfriend' was doing now that he was recording and I couldn't help but beam at his compliment – both for thinking so highly of me and for seeming proud that I was his boyfriend.

He would call me every night on his way home from work, admitting that he had decided to walk rather than take the subway but wanted company for his journey. I knew the walk took him more than twice as long as the subway ride, but I wasn't going to complain about the fact that I was getting one-on-one phone time with Kurt.

Our conversations were usually about our work and what we'd been up to that day or something else somewhat mundane. But it never felt boring; it just felt comfortable. We would usually continue our talk

until he had made it safely into his apartment where we'd then say our goodbyes, but I found myself spending time before bed each night thinking about Kurt.

Was it crazy to think about him as much as I did? Maybe. But the little indications that Kurt had shared showed that he was probably thinking about me, too.

During our phone call last night, Kurt had talked about a New Year's party he'd been invited to last year while he was still on tour with the touring company of Bring It On! in LA and wondered if they did something similar with the New York cast. He had said, "if they do, I'll have to let you know. We'll need to plan our outfits accordingly."

We.

Kurt had used 'we' in a context for an event in the future – and not even the near future! Sure, New Year's was only two months away, but he was giving us a future of some kind. I couldn't help but cling to that small hope that Kurt had thought about a future with me and I just ran with it.

Which consequently meant that all day today, I was thinking of things we could do together over the coming months; Christmas shopping together for our respective families, Valentine's Day dinner dates, summer vacations planned together.

Yes, the things I was considering were much further in the future, but that didn't mean that we couldn't still be together by then. I certainly wanted to be.

"How was that?" Zach asked once the track had cut off.

"Oh, uh, let me play it back," I uttered quickly, trying not to let Zach know that I hadn't been paying attention to my work. Clearly this was not the way to get a promotion.

Satisfied with the recording, I sent Zach a thumbs up. "Sounds great. I think we'll wrap for today now that it's nearly 8. I'll see you and the rest of the guys tomorrow at 11."

"Cool," he said taking off the headphones. I messed around with the levels as I replayed the initial recording of one of the songs I wanted Jeremy to consider for the album, but soon heard the slight smack of the soundproofed door from the recording booth open and close.

"What're you up to for the rest of the night? Me and some of the guys were going to grab a bite if you're interested," he said.

I shook my head. "Thanks, but I can't tonight. Maybe next time."

"Sure thing," he said as he grabbed his backpack off the lounge chair by the door. "See ya tomorrow," he said.

"Later," I replied as he sent me a small wave and left the booth. With Jeremy coming in on Monday to listen to the demos for the tracks we wanted to have included on the album, I wanted to make sure they were just right. Well, as best as I could anyway.

I didn't have much experience behind the soundboard, but I had learned enough to record a decent sample of the songs the guys wanted to record and had solicited the help of one of my friends at the recording studio to help show me the ropes. Jeremy would teach me more once he came in, but I wanted to have at least a basic grasp of the board before he got here so I wouldn't be floundering.

"Knock, knock," I heard a voice say at the doorway. I looked up to see Santana leaning against the doorjamb. "How's it going?"

"Fine," I replied. "Just trying to lay a few things down before Jeremy gets here on Monday."

She laughed. "I didn't just mean with work," she joked. "I meant with your boyfriend, you doof."

I rolled my eyes but smiled at her question. I had admitted to Santana early Monday morning that Kurt and I had gotten together officially over the weekend and she practically had sent my coffee cup flying as she grabbed me around my shoulders and tried to swing me around. Thankfully her heels had prevented her from succeeding, but she insisted that we go out to lunch so I could tell her everything.

So we did. We went to lunch and I told her about the conversation he and I had in the back of the cab, how he was an amazing kisser, the way we spent our Sunday afternoon and evening together, and just generally talked about how cute she thought it was that I was with her high school friend. She tried to make fun of my antics since I knew I was probably acting like a teenage girl, but the small smile she wore during the whole conversation led me to believe that she was happy - for the both of us.

"Things are good. Great, actually," I admitted.

She beamed. "I figured as much. I think you've used your Twitter so much in the past few days that it has nearly doubled your amount of tweets. And I'm guessing all of those cat videos were not things you found on your own."

"Whatever, I like cats."

"But Kurt likes them more. And I'm betting he sent them to you."

I shrugged. "Well, I thought other people might want to see them too."

She laughed. "At least you aren't declaring your love for him on there yet. I'm just waiting for the day that you start tweeting about things you're doing with Kurt all the time. Oh wait, you kind of already did that."

I blushed. I had been tweeting more to my Twitter account and writing about the things I had been up to over the past few days, but nearly all of the activities I had tweeted about had involved Kurt. I never explicitly said so, but Santana knew better. She knew I only used Twitter when I was really excited about something and wanted to share it with the world. I grumbled.

"Anyway, I wanted to see if you and your boy toy wanted to maybe have dinner with me and Britt on Sunday night. You guys can come to our place and we'll cook."

"Let me check with him first. He'll probably agree, but I want to ask him."

"Already having to ask the boyfriend for permission?" she retorted.

"I'm not asking for permission," I snipped. "Kurt and I like to spend Sunday afternoons together since our schedules are fairly opposite during the week."

She faked a groan. "God, you guys already have a date night. Be cuter."

"You're just jealous."

"Hardly," she said with a chuckle. "Well, ask your precious boyfriend and we'll set it up, okay?"

"Sure thing," I said. I had been talking with her and messing with the board at the same time. I fiddled around with some of the levels as I played back the bassline on the track I had just finished recording with

Zach before I felt my phone buzz from my pocket. A text from Kurt greeted me as I unlocked my phone screen.

What are you up to? -K

I hastened to type an answer.

Just finishing up a few things at the studio then heading home. How are things at the theater? -B

I only waited for a few seconds before he replied.

In the usual pre-show scurry. But I wanted to let you know I can't call you after the show tonight. They're having a going away party for one of the swings. But I'll make it up to you. :) -K

I was slightly disappointed that I wouldn't get to talk with Kurt before I went to sleep tonight, but was eager to know what he was planning to do to make it up to me. If it were anything involving Kurt I would adore it. If it were anything involving kissing him, then I'd freaking love the hell out of it.

It's okay. I'm intrigued to see how you'll make it up to me. You know I'm not one for surprises. ;) -B

"Who's that?" Santana asked as she wiggled her eyebrows.

"Kurt," I replied sharply before putting my phone in my lap.

"Figures," she said as my phone buzzed in my lap. I quickly brought the phone up to read and Santana laughed; clearly I looked eager to see what he had to say. "Tell Kurt I said hi."

You'll just have to wait and see. And one of these days, you'll learn to love surprises. -K

I chuckled. Kurt sure had delivered when it came to surprises thus far.

Whatever you say. Oh, and Santana says hi. -B

I could feel Santana watching me with bated breath and I willed myself to focus on the screen of my phone rather than the malicious smirk I'm sure my best friend had on her face.

I'm right – you'll see. And tell Santana I said hello! But I need to get back to work, but I'm sure we'll talk tomorrow. –K

Okay, have a great night. Bye! –B

I typed in my last message and shoved my phone in my pocket, still feeling Santana's glare on me. "You don't have to be here, you know," I thought aloud.

God, she was driving me crazy. "Considering I live down the street and Brittany is at rehearsal, I figured I could stop by. It's not like you're doing anything exciting at the moment."

"I *am* working, San."

"Fine, fine," she uttered. "I'll leave you alone. But see if I ever come by again while you're working late." She turned on her heel and walked out of the room.

"Bye Santana," I shouted after her as I heard her heels click down the hallway before the door shut with a thud. With Santana out of the room, I sat back in my chair again and relaxed against the leather. Things were going so great with Kurt and I couldn't wait to see what else was to come.

Especially how he planned to "make up" our call tonight.

And for the first time in a long time, I went to bed that night with anticipation, joy, and excitement radiating through my core as I pondered about what surprise Kurt had in mind. It was the first time I'd ever been so excited for a surprise since I was a kid at Christmas.

Then again, being with Kurt made me feel like a kid at Christmas. And damn, I was one lucky kid.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Monday, November 12

KURT

This weekend had not exactly gone according to plan.

Well, really, things hadn't been going according to plan since last Thursday when I realized I had forgotten about the going away party for Jamaal, one of our swings, who was moving on to have a larger role in the new production of Newsies. It turned out to be a good night, but getting home at well after 2 in the morning without talking to Blaine felt... weird.

And I had every intention of making it up to him on Friday, but Roselyn had called in sick with the flu so I had to take over her role. Which meant staying late to prepare for the back-to-back shows we had Saturday and yet another night without talking to Blaine since I didn't want to call him at 1 in the morning. I had texted him goodnight and since he hadn't replied I had assumed that he was asleep. Plus common courtesy taught me that you generally shouldn't call people after 9pm unless they've given you express permission to do so. And while Blaine had previously said that I could call him after a show, it didn't mean that extended to the wee hours of the morning.

And Sunday had gone no better. I woke early to get ready for the day's matinee and called Blaine to see if he had plans for the evening only for him to say that he couldn't do anything tonight since the producer he was working with on the new album was coming into town that night and his boss had insisted that he take the guy out on the town.

Apparently the guy had bumped up his flight to Sunday night so he wouldn't be rushing into the city on a Monday morning, so I begrudged the guy a bit for being so eager to do his job and take me away from my time with my boyfriend.

I knew that Blaine getting along with the producer that he practically idolized – the past few days had been full of Blaine waxing all poetic about the guy's abilities behind the soundboard – was really important. But one week into our relationship, we were already getting too busy.

I knew that this whole thing was a perfect storm and that this busy time was short-lived – we both had decided that already. That didn't make it any less frustrating.

So I spent my Sunday afternoon at the gym and dragging myself back to my apartment to make myself a salad and watch the first thing that caught my eye on Netflix Instant. I managed to catch Wes on his way out to see Lauren and wished him well, but with Wes gone and no plans with Blaine for the next few days, I felt bored. And a little lonely.

I shoved the fact that I was already feeling attached to Blaine into the furthest recesses of my mind – afraid to acknowledge what this meant or how damaging that admission could be – and woke up Monday with a sense of determination to try and get something on the books with Blaine for this week. I understood that he needed his space and this was going to be a busy week for him, but was it such a bad thing that I wanted him to know someone was thinking about him?

After I had readied myself for the day, I peeked at my clock and decided that it was late enough to text Blaine without seeming like I was crowding him and I hoped he wouldn't be too busy to reply.

How's the studio treating you today? –K

Not expecting an immediate reply, I went to the kitchen to start making myself a cup of tea and bagel before I heard chirping coming from my phone. I continued to spread the raspberry preserves onto my bagel as I heard my phone chirp one, two, three, four times in a row.

Four?

I sped to my room – wondering why I would get that many texts at once only to be confronted with a barrage of texts from Blaine on the home screen of my phone.

I have a major case of the Mondays. : (–B

But working with Jeremy is pretty awesome. –B

But I'm not looking forward to the fact that it's going to be a late night tonight and I might not get to talk to you again. –B

Also, is it weird to say that I miss you? –B

As I read each message, my face went from smiling to a slight frown to a giant smile as my eyes glazed over the last one. The fact that I felt a little concerned at how... clingy I felt soon went out the window once I realized that the feelings were reciprocated.

Well, I didn't want to keep the man waiting.

Sorry that you're not off to a great Monday. Glad things are going well with Jeremy – I bet he's everything you've dreamed of. ;) It's okay about not being able to talk tonight, it happens. And it's not weird – I miss you too. –K

Content with my reply, I waited a moment – sure that Blaine would reply immediately.

I wasn't wrong.

Whew! Well, I should probably get back to work, but I'll text you when we're breaking for dinner. I think Jeremy might give us time to get food on our own, but it'll probably only be for a half hour or so, so I might be able to call you then. Otherwise I'd propose a dinner date. ;) –B

I tapped out a reply hastily.

It's okay – just text me whenever. Go get 'em, Blaine. :) –K

I chucked my phone onto the bed, leaving it connected to the charger, and plopped myself down onto my bed onto my back, causing the mattress to jump beneath me.

While I was on the road, I had forgotten about how bored I could get at times. With the constant moving and packing up on the road, I didn't have time to linger on anything – no new friends to keep up with, no towns to learn, no time to even think, really. But the one thing I hated about Mondays is that they tended to give me too much time to think.

And the past two Mondays, I'd been thinking of Blaine.

Well, okay, more than the past two Mondays. But the more so than Mondays past, that's for sure.

Blaine had been so incredibly sweet since day one and he always took time to make me feel special. But having the spare time today and thinking about Blaine all too much, I decided that I was going to finally

cash in Blaine's favor that I owed him. Mainly because I wanted to repay him the favor, but it also gave me an excuse to think about Blaine without feeling like I was hovering over him in any way.

I lay in bed for a while, pondering on what I should do when a brilliant idea popped into my head. I flicked through my phone's contacts and found the one I needed.

"Hey Santana, are you busy? I need your help with something..."

BLAINE

"Once more, guys. The bass sounds great, but I really want you to push it with the distortion. It'll give the bass line a more transient feel as we shift into the chorus," Jeremy said as I scribbled down the section we were about to record. I didn't really have to take as many notes as I was, but I wanted to be prepared and learn as much as possible from Jeremy – especially if he might be my unofficial mentor.

Jeremy was probably one of the least pretentious people in the music industry. It was something that made him incredibly easy to work with and someone who was extremely desirable since he wasn't prone to diva tirades like some producers and musicians could be.

In the entertainment industry – film, music, television, and even theater – we're surrounded by people who think they're the best of the best. A lot of times, they're not wrong – they truly are the best. But ego is the one thing that can make or break a career; if no one likes you and no one is willing to work with you, they'll only put up with you for so long before they'll find the Next Big Thing.

Thankfully for Jeremy, he wasn't going to be replaced anytime soon.

He was a small guy – shorter than me, which I didn't think was possible – and definitely epitomized the look of a hipster guy. Clad in mid-wash skinny jeans, a plaid button up and a navy cardigan topped off with wide rimmed tortoiseshell glasses, he looked like he belonged in Brooklyn.

But rather than exhibit any form of pretentiousness, he was the coolest guy ever. When I had offered to pick him up from the airport last night, he dismissed my offer and insisted on taking the Super Shuttle from the airport to his hotel. He agreed to meet me for dinner that night, but insisted that we dine at this

restaurant he had heard of from a friend of a friend in Alphabet City. It was a restaurant off the beaten path and basically consisted of a hut that sold food truck tacos – and they had been amazing.

Even in Atlanta he had been incredibly casual, but I thought it was purely because he was on his own turf. But seeing him here in my city and knowing that he wasn't interested in being catered to, it was a nice change from the producers and label talent I would've had to shuffle around if it was for any other project.

I shook my hand and my head – trying to free the tension in my hand and the thoughts from my head as I looked blearily at the clock. We'd been going since 10 this morning and we showed no signs of letting up since Jeremy was in "a groove."

It was 7:15pm.

At the realization of the time, my stomach grumbled and Jeremy's close proximity allowed him to hear the protest it emitted, causing him to laugh. "Let's take a break for now," Jeremy spoke into the microphone. "Grab dinner and come back by 8. Hopefully we can wrap up this section and be done with this track today."

The guys in the booth set down their instruments and stretched – clearly thankful for the break. Jeremy shot me a smile as I laid down my notebook and pen onto the booth in front of us.

"You could have told me that you thought a break would be good," he said.

I shrugged. "You were jamming and we were in a good place. Besides, I didn't think that would be my call."

He shook his head. "It's the one thing I forget about as a producer working with new bands – so you'll need to call me on things from time to time. I'm used to working with bands that have been around for a while and will put in 12 to 14 hours at a time in the booth without thinking twice. I'm sure these guys would do the same, but they're just not used to it yet. If you think they need something, say so. Or just let your stomach speak for you, whatever."

I laughed at his joke but wasn't sure if I would feel comfortable enough to give Jeremy Reed any kind of order or suggestion. He might be really easy going, but he was Jeremy Reed; that sort of talent was meant to be revered and unquestioned. But I would certainly give it a try – especially since he insisted.

The guys left the recording booth and Jeremy was hot on their heels. The other thing that made Jeremy great at this job was that he took the time to spend time with the band. It was important for a producer to understand the band and its vision of their album, but he did it in a way that felt more like he just wanted to spend time with his friends and hang out. It made the guys be more laid back and they had been killing it while they were recording as well. Jeremy really knew how to bring the best out of people and it was inspiring to see.

"We're going to grab something from the Chinese place around the corner, you wanna come?" Zach asked as Jeremy turned back to me, waiting to see if I was game.

I shook my head. "I gotta run and do something real quick, but I'll see you guys back here at 8." Jeremy clapped his arm on Zach's shoulder as they went to join the rest of the band in the elevator bay. I sat for a minute to stretch and pulled my phone out of my pocket, eager to call Kurt.

I found his number in my recent calls list and pushed start. The phone rang twice before Kurt picked up.

"Blaine?" Kurt asked breathlessly.

"Hey!"

"Hi," Kurt replied, sounding flustered again.

"Is everything okay?" I asked. "Did I catch you at a bad time?"

"No," he stated. "Just have my hands full and I'm trying to open a door. Not a good combination."

I chuckled. "I suppose not. What are you up to?"

"Oh, I was just grabbing dinner. How about you? I'm guessing you guys are breaking for dinner as well."

"Yup," I acknowledged.

"So what are you going to get to eat?" he questioned.

"Oh, I don't know. The guys went to this Chinese place around the corner, but I didn't go with them."

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because I had to do something first," I said with a blush, thankful that Kurt couldn't see me because I was still afraid to admit that the whole reason I hadn't gone was so that I could talk to him in private. I was about to ask him what I should get until I heard mumbling and a bunch of static coming from Kurt's end of the call. "Kurt you still there?"

Rather than reply, I heard Kurt's voice muffled in the background but soon his voice was clear again. "Yeah, sorry. Just getting some help. What were you saying?"

"Oh, uh, I was going to think aloud about my dinner options but that's pretty boring."

Kurt laughed. "If you want to talk about dinner then you totally can. I won't think it's boring. But I have a recommendation."

"Yeah? Do tell?"

"How about Thai?" he suggested.

"That does sound good. And it's my favorite. Plus there's this great Thai place not too far from here that I could pick up from." I drooled a bit at the thought of the food from Pam Real Thai – one of my favorite places on my side of the island. "You're a genius, sir."

"Well I like to think so," Kurt said, his voice coming through the phone with a slight echo.

"You are," I mused.

"I know," he replied as the door to my right clicked open to reveal a Kurt holding two take out bags with his phone smashed against his cheek. My jaw dropped at seeing him there and he wore a smug but delighted smile at seeing my face. "I did okay?" he asked, gesturing to the food in his hands.

"More than okay," I said, lurching out of my chair and into his arms. The phone dropped softly onto the floor and he wrapped his arms around mine as he still held onto the bags.

"If I'd known you'd be this happy about the food, I would have come sooner," he joked.

I poked him in the rib, causing him to squirm. I pulled back from the hug and looked him in the eye.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi."

"You're here. How did you know I was here? And how did you have the food ready at the exact moment we'd be breaking for dinner?"

Kurt chuckled. "Santana helped me with the first part. She said you'd be here and I figured since you had a busy night ahead of you that I'd come and bring you food so you wouldn't have to worry about it. Plus, it gave me an excuse to get out of the house – Mondays are so boring. And as for the timing, that was pure luck. I just figured most people ate around 7 so I'd bring it by even if you were still recording. I had expected to merely drop it off and say hi, but bringing the food during your break has just worked out better - it means we can eat together."

"I am not complaining on any front. Thank you for bringing me dinner. You really didn't have to," I said, taking the bags from Kurt and placing them on the small table against the back wall of the recording booth.

He shrugged. "I really don't mind. I really was going crazy at home all day and I haven't seen you in a while, so it's kind of a win-win for me."

I giggled as he sat down at the table, placing a soft kiss onto his cheek. "Well, it's a win-win for me too," I replied as I sat in the seat across for him. "So, what'd you bring with you?" I asked as I pulled the containers out of the bags.

"Well, I wasn't entirely sure what you liked, but Santana said you like peanut dishes so I got Pad Thai and some dumplings with peanut sauce," Kurt stated as he pulled two Thai Iced Teas out of the bag in front of him. "And these. Because they're simply the best."

I moaned at the fact that Kurt had managed to get some of my favorite dishes. The noise caused Kurt to quirk an eyebrow, but he chuckled softly as he pushed the Thai Iced Tea in front of me.

"You managed to pick some of my favorite foods. This seriously is the best. Thanks Kurt."

"It's really nothing," he insisted.

I took his hand from across the table, stilling it in my own. "No, this really means a lot. You didn't have to come and bring me food or even spend time with me tonight. But it means a lot."

Kurt gave a small smile, cheeks slightly flush with embarrassment over the compliment, but it was true. It meant a lot to me that he took time out of his evening to think of me – especially when he didn't have to. Kurt was incredibly caring and thoughtful and it was one of the things that I liked best about him. And what made it better is that he probably didn't even try – he was just naturally a very nice, thoughtful guy.

We ate in relative silence – me interjecting every now and then about how work was going with Kurt listening, totally absorbed in what I was saying when I spoke. We finished in about 15 minutes, giving up ample time to just enjoy being in each other's company before the rest of the guys would come back.

I cleaned up the boxes and plopped down onto the plush leather couch that was next to the table Kurt and I had just dined at. Kurt came and sat next to me after he had wiped down the table. I leaned my head and placed it on his shoulder and he lightly wrapped his arm around my shoulders. It was nice.

"I'm so tired," I admitted as my eyes fluttered shut on his shoulder while I inhaled his scent.

I felt his shoulders move beneath me as he laughed. "You didn't say so before. Otherwise I could have brought you coffee."

"I didn't really have time to process how tired I was until now. Plus this couch is really comfortable."

His shoulders rolled again and I felt him place a kiss into my hairline. I was thankful I had abandoned hair products when I was in college, otherwise I wouldn't have been able to enjoy that kiss as much and his lips would have been covered in gel.

I tilted my head back and leaned further back into the couch, bringing my eye line to meet Kurt's. Kurt smiled but leaned forward to place a kiss onto my nose. I had done it to Kurt, but it made my heart swoop as he did it to me. It really was sweet.

God, we were total saps. And I loved it.

I leaned forward to catch Kurt's lips in mine – mainly because I hadn't had the pleasure since he had arrived – and I was greeted with a pressure from Kurt's lips that made me turn to putty.

With Kurt leaning on top of me, he pushed slightly harder onto my lips as he took my face into his hands and opened his mouth slightly. Eager to take the opportunity, I slipped my tongue between his lips and reeled at the sounds coming from Kurt. Damn, they were hot.

Kurt continued to tease his tongue with mine but positioned himself at a slightly less awkward angle, forcing our mouths apart for just a second, but Kurt's tongue tingling at my lips. Lips still attached he turned to face me, as I turned sideways to meet him. I brought my knee into a bend with my other leg draped on the side of the couch.

I couldn't focus on what was happening and before long; Kurt's mouth was practically sucking my tongue out of my mouth and into his – causing both of us to shudder at the feeling. I could feel him leaning into me as he clutched onto the back of my head and my hands frantically sought a place on his hips to pull him closer. The tugging of my arms at his waist pushed him even closer, practically bringing him to a seated position in my lap.

Holy shit.

This was not how I had expected the night to go but damn, I was not complaining. We were sweet, but at the same time the attraction between the two of us was tangible and obvious. We couldn't get enough of each other.

Kurt pulled away with a loud smack and I whimpered softly as he retreated but my sadness over the loss of his lips and tongue were soon replaced by utter bliss as Kurt started kissing my jaw and moved his way down my neck.

My arms around his waist squeezed tighter and the embrace I had tentatively held at his sides was now fully encircling him with my hands clutched together behind his back as I moved my head to the side to leave Kurt on his journey with his tongue, lips and nips moving down my neck. I felt my way up his back over his shirt and I could feel the muscles rippling beneath my fingers as he moved his arms around my head.

We hadn't moved this far in terms of the physical department, but I had been thinking about it pretty much since our first kiss. We generally kept things pretty PG, but being two guys in the honeymoon phase of our relationship, that PG factor was only going to last for so long.

But I didn't want to think about that right now. I wanted to be immersed in the way the drag of Kurt's teeth felt against my neck, the way he smelled as I tried to place my own kisses on his neck only to find myself totally breathless, wrecked and practically unable to move. I was too busy feeling Kurt practically sitting my lap and attached to my neck to realize that there was a world going on around us; all that mattered was Kurt and me and the way we made each other feel.

We were both too busy to notice anything else; or *anyone* else.

"...And this is the recording booth, where... Blaine?" David's voice said as it cracked through our bliss and swiftly brought us back to reality.

"Kurt?"

At that moment, my lips were relinquished from Kurt's neck and both of our heads snapped to the direction of the now-open door.

"Wes?" Kurt cried. Wait, *what?*

"What in the..." David said.

"What...?" I stuttered.

"Oh my god," Wes proclaimed.

Well, I thought to myself. Just when I thought things couldn't get weirder.

....

"So... uh..." I tried to say but I had no idea where to start. For a few moments after the realization, me, David, Wes and Kurt just kind of gaped at each other, after Kurt leapt up off my lap, of course. It was obvious that there was a lot to be said right now, but I had at least figured out a few things with the silent time of

us just grasping at straws of what was turning out to be the weirdest circumstance known as my relationship with Kurt.

Apparently, Kurt knew Wes somehow. And I obviously knew Wes and David. But how did Kurt fit into this conversation?

"How long has this been going on?" Wes asked, trying to sound like the stoic lawyer he pretended to be, but he was probably as internally shocked as the rest of us felt.

"Officially or unofficially?" I offered.

"Both?"

I was about to answer, but before I could Kurt started talking. "Unofficially, a few weeks. Officially, a week and a few days."

"I see," Wes stated, as if no further elaboration was needed. David was still standing next to Wes, slightly confused but somewhat amused at the situation that was playing out. I had to agree – this all was funny and weird, but laughing didn't seem like an appropriate reaction just yet.

"So... how exactly do you know Wes?" I asked Kurt, wanting to reach out and hold his hand, but not sure that would be well received right now.

"We're roommates," he stated. I looked up with shock to Wes who nodded.

Roommates?

Oh god. *This* was the roommate that Kurt was afraid to introduce me to. It was Wes; the Wes who I had gotten shit-faced drunk next to at a Warbler party my sophomore year, who sang a duet with me – while drunk – to Beyonce's "Freakum Dress" and decided that he needed to become the back up dancer to everyone else's singing during the karaoke party.

The Wes who Kurt desperately wanted a seal of approval from in order to date me... was the guy I was friends with at Dalton and who I had more blackmail material on than most of the other Warblers combined. I hadn't ever planned on using it, but now that I knew this, it could certainly come in handy.

I smirked at the realization; I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have a problem getting on Wes' good side when it came to Kurt. Kurt, however, was not smiling – instead his face was lined with worry and uncertainty. He was still trying to figure out this whole puzzle too. I don't think he realized that not only did Wes know we were dating, Kurt wasn't aware that Wes and I had already met – and he certainly wasn't aware that we were friends.

"Kurt, remember when I told you about the guys who I reconnected with from high school?" I asked. Kurt nodded, unsure as to why this was relevant in this moment. "These are them – Wes, David and I went to school together back in Ohio."

The admission made his jaw drop and his eyes flickered from me to Wes and David and back to me. "Oh god. Private school... Columbus... and you even told me that you sang in an acapella choir. How did I not figure this out?"

David came in at that moment, clearly able to respond on behalf of Wes who was still eying Kurt and I suspiciously. "How would you? It's not like we ever mentioned Blaine and he never mentioned your name when he was out with us." I saw Kurt smile at me out of the corner of my eye, but I kept focus on David as he attempted to calm Kurt. "Plus Blaine looks pretty different now than he did in high school, so even if you saw pictures you might not recognize him."

"I don't look *that* different," I retorted.

"You do," David admitted. "Your hair is totally different, you might have grown half an inch," causing me to growl and Kurt to giggle slightly, "and we all look completely different out of uniform. And it's not like we've been hanging out with Blaine long either – we started spending more time with him around the time that Wes said you'd moved back to New York."

"Oh," Kurt said quietly. He continued to lean against the table behind him and shook his leg – likely due to nerves – as he stared off into space.

"I can't believe this," Wes uttered, finally coming out of his silence. The sound of his voice made Kurt and I turn back toward the duo at the door. I expected Wes to be slightly amused by the whole scene, but his face was turned into an angry frown.

"Well, believe it. Kurt and Blaine are... together or something," David said calmly, clearly reading the anger on Wes' face. It wasn't often that Wes was angry – at least not from what I remembered from high school – but I wasn't sure how to placate him at the moment.

"If you had just told me who you were dating earlier, this wouldn't have happened!" Wes said as he turned sharply on his heel and practically ran down the hall. David sent an apologetic smile our way as he darted after our friend.

I was confused by Wes' reaction, but Kurt looked stoic and somehow sad. Now that David and Wes were gone, I felt it was okay to reach out to grab his hand. I rubbed it tentatively, but Kurt's posture didn't relax at my touch; it seemed to almost get stiffer. "What are you thinking about?" I posed, hoping that he'd give me some insight as to what was going on in that head of his.

"I can't... like, what just..." he stuttered but shifted into himself and wrapped his arms across his chest, letting go of my hand in the process.

I stood up and reached forward toward him, hoping to blanket him in a hug if he'd let me. He looked up at me with my arms outstretched toward him and he took a step forward, inviting my hug. I brought him close to me and wrapped my arms around his shoulders. Kurt didn't let go of his arms as they were crossed in front of his chest, but I didn't care. He seemed stressed and I wanted to do what I could to calm him down.

"It'll be okay, it will," I promised Kurt with a kiss into his hair. But I wasn't sure how my tone came out – mainly because I wasn't sure if it was true.

What the hell just happened?, I thought to myself. And what is wrong with Wes?

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Tuesday, November 13

KURT

I got home at around midnight after spending a lot of time sitting at the diner by myself, with a warm cup of coffee between my cold hands.

I had left the recording studio not long after Blaine had tried to calm me down, but I admitted to him that I just needed to take some time and figure out what was going on with Wes. He agreed, but I could tell that when we parted things were left in a somewhat unsure place. It wasn't because we weren't sure that we liked each other – that had been well established – but I think we were both surprised by Wes' reaction.

I was still reeling after everything that been uncovered but what I hadn't recovered from at all was Wes' reaction. Santana had been confused, but in the end was really happy for us. But the fact that Wes had practically stormed out and mad at me for not telling him sooner really surprised me. I had hoped that when he met Blaine that he'd be receptive to him, but I hadn't expected him to know Blaine but to also somehow seem to dislike that we were together.

What other reason would have provoked him to practically storm out of the recording studio? I thought he was friends with Blaine, but apparently not. I mean, why else would be so jilted by the fact that Blaine and I were together?

The whole scenario made me question if – once again – Wes wasn't keen on the guy I was dating. The thoughts I'd had about Blaine being well received by Wes, thoughts that Lauren had agreed with, were now out the window and my relationship with both Wes and potentially Blaine were up in the air.

I couldn't wrap my head around why he would react that way. He seemed to be okay with Blaine whenever I mentioned how he treated me and he was even *friends* with Blaine. So what gives?

After paying for the coffee and bundling up, I had blearily made my way back to our apartment, hardly noticing the rain that had started as I walked. It wasn't a heavy rain, but a gloomy mist that seemed to just create the right dreary mood to match my internal conflict.

Once I got back to the apartment, I hung my mist-covered coat on the coat rack near the door and kicked off my boots, not caring where they landed. I flicked to turn on the light in the main room only to find my roommate sitting on the couch, his arms resting on his knees and his chin tucked tight to his chest. As the light illuminated the room, Wes looked up at me, somewhat expressionless but the anger his face wore before had been eradicated.

"I need to talk to you," he said as his eyes met mine. I couldn't hold his gaze for more than a few seconds; deathly afraid of where this was heading.

"You make it seem like we're breaking up," I joked trying to lighten the mood. I smiled tentatively at Wes who still wore his stony expression, so I dropped the act.

I sat in the armchair next to the couch that Wes was perched on, crossed my legs and placed my hands in my lap. I didn't want to rush him; he tended to be very intentional in what he said and I didn't want to crowd him. A few minutes passed, the silence nearly killing me, before Wes sighed. I took the noise to mean he was on his way to start talking to me.

"Tell me everything about how things happened with Blaine."

It wasn't a question; he needed to know. So I told him everything; how Blaine and I first saw each other at a restaurant in town, how we officially met at a show in Brooklyn – the show for the band that Blaine was working with in the recording studio, how we first talked through the online dating site, and how those conversation led to where he found us this evening. As I spoke, Wes stared at his hands as he wrung them in his lap. I tried to initiate eye contact at a few points in the story, but the gaze he had so easily held when I had arrived was gone.

Once I had told him everything up to tonight, I sat back and just waited. There had to have been a reason that he asked about Blaine and I, so I gave him the time to process.

It was agonizing.

After another five minutes, Wes spoke and it startled me. "First, let me say, I'm not really mad at you, Kurt." I breathed a bit easier knowing I hadn't done something that would potentially damage my relationship with my roommate, but I was still uncertain of what that could mean for his friendship with Blaine. "And I'm not mad at Blaine either."

With that thought, I was confused. If he wasn't mad at me and he wasn't mad at Blaine, why did he get so angry?

"I honestly don't know why I got so angry. I don't have *one* exact reason, really. I think more than anything I'm frustrated by how it happened with you and Blaine," he stated. I wanted to understand where he was going with this, but he had me lost.

"So, you're not mad at Blaine or I, but you're frustrated at... how we got together?" I questioned.

He sighed. "Yes? No?" He sat back and thought for a minute before continuing. "You're going to think this is weird, but I'm just mad I didn't reconnect with Blaine sooner or that you had moved here permanently sooner than you did."

"I don't see how that matters, Wes."

"Look, I know you kind of hate it when I go all overprotective with you, but Blaine was the first person I ever did that with since I don't have any siblings. Growing up, he was like a brother to me and before I met him, he had it really rough." As he paused, I let it marinate that Blaine hadn't told me anything about his previous experiences or too much about his life aside from what he was doing now. I didn't even know where he had gone to school – hence why we were in this predicament.

"I regret that Blaine and I lost touch because we were so close, but that's just how it happens sometimes. And you, well, you're the second person I've ever really looked after and it's just crazy that the two people I've cared for like brothers end up getting together – and not even by my doing."

I stared at him incredulously. "So, basically, you're mad because you wish we could have been set up sooner?"

"Yes," he agreed. "I could have helped you – helped you both," he admitted. "I've known you for a long time and the same for Blaine. I've known Blaine longer but I know you better, but I'm just... mad you guys couldn't have connected sooner. Then there wouldn't have been the situation with William and Blaine wouldn't have spent the last few years surrounding himself in his work."

I kept staring at him, but he still refused to look at me. "Wes, you couldn't be my – *our* – savior. That's not fair to you to hold that burden against yourself. Also, as someone once told me, everything happens for a reason. There was a reason I needed to experience dating William and the other guys I had in my life and

the same must be true for Blaine. But for you to think that you could have made things better by introducing us sooner is kind of ridiculous."

At that notion, Wes finally looked up at me, causing me to smile. "I appreciate that you wanted to make both of us happy Wes, but don't think that you could have had things happen any sooner or in any other way. Both Blaine and I have admitted that the way we got together was kind of crazy, but it obviously happened when it did for a reason. I don't want to question why – I just want to enjoy it."

Wes met my smile with one of his own. "So you don't think I'm weird for wanting you guys to get together sooner?"

"Oh, it's definitely weird – you are far too involved in my love life. But I think we're both okay with how it netted out. But honestly, I think you could have eased up on getting so mad when we told you... or rather, when you found out." I blushed at the last note, still not believing that Wes and David caught Blaine and I practically in each other's laps with full-on making out.

He laughed. "I still can't believe you're dating the guy I went to high school with."

"I can't believe you actually know the guy I'm dating. This whole thing has been bizarre. Did I tell you about how he's best friends with Santana, this girl I went to high school with?"

"You went to high school with Santana?" Wes asked.

"Uh, yes. How do you know her?" This whole thing was just too eerie.

"I met her a few weeks ago when Blaine signed on David's brother's band at a bar after this gig they performed at. She's hot."

I chuckled. "She's also gay. Besides, you have Lauren now – no need to check out Santana."

He shrugged. "I'm not saying I was going to do anything, but one can appreciate aesthetics."

I chortled. "You are going to owe me big time not to tell Lauren what you just said."

He countered with a loud laugh of his own. "I'm pretty sure I'll be okay. Besides, I know all about your precious boyfriend's high school days and his ridiculous antics. Did I ever tell you about our duet when we

had Beyonce karaoke night?" I shook my head and laughed at the thought of Blaine busting out Beyonce numbers. "I think that'll be a fair trade."

"Fine, fine," I conceded. "So, tell me about this Beyonce karaoke with Blaine. And don't leave out a single detail..."

BLAINE

A night that had started out with such a promising start crumbled before my very eyes. Kurt and I had an awkward goodbye when he left and I still had to put in a few more hours at the recording studio before I could call it a night.

Thankfully, Jeremy and the guys seemed oblivious to my ragged emotions as we powered through the night, adjourning around 11. By the time I rolled home around midnight last night, I was exhausted, but sleep wouldn't come. By this morning, I still hadn't heard from Kurt or Wes and it was killing me.

I knew that Kurt greatly valued Wes' opinion since they had been roommates for a while – since college from what I could remember. But if Wes was truly mad at Kurt – or me – what would that mean for *us*? We were so early in our relationship that I could see that he might break it off without having any qualms since we weren't heavily invested.

But god, that would suck.

"You doin' okay?" David said as he clasped his hand on my shoulder, pulling me out of my Kurt-less nightmare my brain was thinking up. I sat up straighter in the seat at the booth as I turned to look David in the eye. He and I liked to be early for our recording sessions and apparently today was no exception. I hadn't realized that it was 9:30 since I was in a timeless reverie as I had barely remembered most of the morning.

"Uh – yeah. I guess," I lied.

"No you're not. And that's okay. Wes was being an idiot last night and it's bothering you."

I slouched forward in my seat and took my head into my hands. "What was with him last night?" I uttered.

David patted me on the back in comfort. "I'm not entirely sure, man. I tried to catch up with him after he jetted out of here, but he caught a cab and I tried to follow him for a while but never found him. I'm sorry. And I'm sorry that I didn't come back here last night, though my brother said you didn't really need me anyway."

"It's alright," I shrugged. "We really didn't need you though I wish you could've tracked Wes down and talked to him. He was certainly acting differently than I've ever seen him act before."

"Yeah," David agreed. "And I tried to call him too, but he must've turned his phone off." I nodded – I had come to the same conclusion last night when I tried to call him... and Kurt... with no success. I figured they just needed their space and I would give them that, even though it was eating me up internally. "I'm sure things are fine and Wes was just taken back by what happened. I mean we did find you guys in *quite* the position."

I blushed at the mention of how my high school friends had discovered us. I hadn't dated in high school, so it felt like this occurrence was just a long time coming. Lord knows I caught Wes and David in some interesting predicaments over those four years at Dalton. "Yeah, well, it wasn't planned," I garbled.

He chuckled. "I could tell. The doe-eyed look you both wore kind of gave it away. But hey, at least you picked a hottie for us to catch you with - a hottie *and* a genuinely nice guy. Way to pick 'em, B," he joked.

"Yeah, well I'm not sure if he'll pick me in return after all of this," I moaned.

David looked at me with curiosity as he perched himself on the edge of the booth next to me. "What do you mean?"

I sighed. "I don't know, I mean, what if Wes doesn't approve of me dating his roommate? I know Kurt and Wes are close – closer than Wes and I were in high school – and Kurt values his opinion endlessly. If Wes says no, I'm afraid Kurt will too."

"You know he won't do that, right?" David asked.

"Who won't do what?"

"Well, Wes won't tell Kurt not to date you and Kurt won't listen to Wes if he does, for some crazy reason, not approve of you guys," he stated.

"What makes you so sure?"

"The way Kurt would talk about you," he insisted. "I mean, he never said it was you, but you could tell he was smitten by the way he spoke about this mystery guy he was seeing. And besides, you know Wes loves you – you were like a brother to him and he acknowledges it."

I looked up at David and didn't see an ounce of doubt in his eye. I couldn't help but believe him – he hadn't made me doubt him yet. "I guess," I said lightly, still slightly unsure but only because I needed to know for sure from either one of them where we all stood. I believed in David, but I'm a seeing is believing kind of guy sometimes – especially since I had already put so much out there already, I just needed some reassurance.

At that moment my phone pinged and I practically pawed at my pocket to get my phone out. I practically beamed when I saw the name across the screen.

Kurt.

It was as if the gods had heard my plea. Or at least that's what I hoped. I mean, it would be really tacky to break up with someone over text, right?

I slid the message to open it and the smile I held got even brighter.

So boyfriend, what are your plans for dinner tomorrow night? My roommate would like to meet you. ;) –K

Everything would be okay, I was sure of it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Wednesday, November 14

KURT

"Wes, I swear to GOD, if you embarrass me, I will kick your ass!" I yelled from the kitchen as Wes shuffled back into his room to pull out a scrapbook of pictures of us from our days in a capella choir. I was worried about one in particular of me dressed up in lederhosen. Though I could pull off the look, I looked a bit like Pinocchio and I wasn't ready for Blaine to see me in such embarrassing photos just yet.

"Whatever," I heard him reply as more noises of drawers opening and closing inside his room. I rolled my eyes as I turned back to the risotto that I was working on. I wasn't the most amazing cook, but I could work my way around a kitchen – at least more so than Wes could – so I insisted that Blaine come over and enjoy dinner at our apartment and so he could "officially" meet Wes.

Wes had shared a bunch of stories of him and Blaine in high school – most of which ended with both of us in stitches – and I was thankful that I was dating a guy who was so fun and full of life. He probably had changed a bit since high school, but the fact that he and his Warbler friends had nearly broken the school's fountain because they switched out the water in the fountain with dish detergent was pretty hilarious.

Though I wanted to hear more stories of Blaine from Wes, I wanted to learn about them from Blaine. In the same way that I didn't want to look up information about Blaine from the internet, I didn't want to learn too much about him from his high school friend. Although the story about the two of them singing Beyonce was pretty fantastic.

I stirred the risotto and contemplated the evening. It was nearly 6 now and Blaine would arrive around 6:30. I had managed to get the evening off – only working the matinee – since Roselyn said I put in more than enough time over the weekend. Wes had gotten home at 5:45 and had spent most of his time in the last 15 minutes trying to annoy me. It was moments like this that made me wonder why I had lived with him for so long.

"I've got to run somewhere really quickly," Wes said breathlessly as he grabbed his coat from the coat hanger.

I looked at him, stunned. "What exactly do you have to do right now? Blaine will be here in half an hour!" It wasn't like he was helping much, but I never know what Wes is up to; he's so unpredictable sometimes.

"We're out of wine and beer and I figured we could restock. Plus I know I'm just bothering you anyway, so I doubt that you'll be hurt if I'm not around for a little while. Besides, I'll be back in like 20 minutes, so I'll be here to open the door and welcome our guest, take his coat, all that," he said with a wink.

"Whatever," I replied as I rolled my eyes. "Make sure you get two bottles of red," I called after him as the door closed. I heard him yell something in the affirmative and I got back to cooking.

After the sauce thickened and I checked on the asparagus, I heard a knock on the door. Wes had left maybe 5 minutes ago, and I guessed that he had forgotten his keys. Again.

"Wes did you forget your...oh," I said as I opened the door, surprised not to see my roommate who had forgotten his keys, but a very distinguished looking Blaine. "Hi."

"Hi," he replied with a smile. He leaned forward as if to kiss me and I leaned in reply, but he backed away before we could get too close. "May I come in?"

"Of course," I said, moving aside to let him pass. "Welcome to our humble abode."

Blaine breezed past me and shrugged his coat from his shoulders, which I took and hung on the coat rack. "I'm sorry I'm a bit early. I just didn't want to wait around the studio and it's freezing outside, so I hope it's alright that I busted in earlier than you'd planned," he said as he glanced around our apartment. I realized he hadn't been to our place before, so he was probably itching to look around a bit.

"It's perfectly fine. I'm just going to be in the kitchen for a bit finishing things. But feel free to look around and make yourself at home. I'm right through there," I noted as I pointed through the archway into the kitchen, "If you need anything."

He replied with a smile and I scurried back to the kitchen. It felt weird to leave Blaine in the living room of our apartment just looking around, but what was I supposed to do, make him sit with me in the kitchen? That would be boring... and I'd probably try to make out with him again and that would ruin the whole dinner. The way his navy dress shirt was fitting in the shoulders... it was droolworthy. And don't get me started on the fit of his gray trousers.

I didn't hear Blaine emit more than a few hums here and there as his shoes clicked along with the hardwood floors in the living room, so I continued stirring and checking on the food until I had determined it was done as well as it could be and turned off the stove, joining my boyfriend in the living room.

I expected to see Blaine looking through the various pictures hung on the wall – some of me, some of Wes, and some of our friends and family – but instead I saw Blaine sitting on the edge of the couch. "What do you think?" I nervously asked as I crossed the living room and joined him on the couch.

"It's really nice," he said. "It's bigger than my place and far more stylish looking, though I'm guessing that's due to you and not Wes."

I laughed. "You're correct, sir. Oh, where are my manners! Do you want anything to drink? Wes actually just stepped out to get us some wine and beer for tonight, but we have water and some juice if you're interested."

He shook his head. "I'm okay, thanks though."

I smiled. "Okay." We sat quietly for a moment; Blaine continuing to take in our apartment and I had placed my hand lightly on top of Blaine's and rubbed his knuckles with my thumb. "Thanks for coming tonight," I said, pulling Blaine away from the arrangement of photos he was looking at on the wall next to the couch.

"I'm just glad you asked me to come. I wasn't expecting it."

I quirked my brow with curiosity. "Expecting what? Dinner?"

"No, expecting you to call."

I was stumped. "Why wouldn't I call you?"

He sighed. "I don't know. Things were... weird after Wes barged out of the studio Monday and we barely talked yesterday aside from you inviting me to dinner. I just... wasn't sure if we were on the same page anymore."

He shuffled in his seat uncomfortably as I took in what he said. Why wouldn't we be on the same page? I liked him, he liked me; I thought that was clear. I called him boyfriend in the text I'd sent him yesterday morning and everything – I don't see how he would think that.

"I know you really value what Wes thinks and... I guess I was worried that if Wes somehow wasn't okay with us dating that you'd end things with me or something. And since I didn't hear from you at first, I feared for the worst," he stated, still not making eye contact as I sat next to him on the couch.

I had maintained contact with Blaine's hand but it had stilled while he spoke. As I was thinking, I started rubbing again, but soon forced my hand in under his and clasped our fingers together. "I'm really sorry that I made you wait like that, Blaine. I honestly didn't even think about it. Wes and I ended up spending most of Monday... well, Tuesday morning talking about everything – mainly you and me – and we didn't get to bed until 3 in the morning and I figured you needed your sleep for Tuesday. Then I texted you when I woke up and I didn't even think about how me not telling you about this would... I'm just really sorry Blaine. God, I feel like an idiot."

He squeezed my hand and I looked up at him – happy to see his eyes for the first time during this heart-to-heart. "You're not an idiot. I admit, I'm a bit oversensitive sometimes and it was in full effect after Wes shook everything up. But I did want to let you know how I felt. I just... wasn't sure where we really stood and I figured I wouldn't really find out until we talked in person."

I smiled. "I really am sorry, Blaine. Sometimes I think I'm just oblivious to the way people feel, but I want you to know I'm still very much into you – and us."

He beamed in response. "Okay."

"Okay," I replied, squeezing his hand again. I leaned forward with my eyes intent on his lips and Blaine pushed forward in response and our lips met gracefully and softly. My eyes fluttered shut as I was taken away to the feeling of euphoria that was Blaine's lips against mine.

"I swear, every time I see you two, you're attached at the face," Wes moaned as he walked in the front door carrying two paper bags.

"Whatever," I replied. "You're just jealous."

"Please, if I had wanted Blaine I could have had him back in high school," he said as he went to the kitchen to put the alcohol away. He came back out and jetted to the couch and wrapped himself around my boyfriend, who had risen from the couch in preparation – with a full smile on his face at seeing his high school buddy. "Hey B."

"Hey Wes," Blaine replied.

As I looked at my best friend and my boyfriend clutched together in their hug, I realized that for once in my life all things were going in my favor. But more importantly, I understood that even if Wes hadn't approved of Blaine, I would have fought tooth and nail for him - because Blaine was worth it.

BLAINE

Kurt left Wes and I to catch up again now that the initial shock of me dating his roommate was under the table and soon Kurt was insisting that we stop discussing Kurt's many "unique mannerisms" – as Wes called them – and join him at the table.

Kurt had prepared quite the feast of mushroom risotto, asparagus and some sort of apple crumb cake and Wes insisted he'd done a fair job as well picking out the wine and beer, to which Kurt rolled his eyes. Thankfully I'd ended up in the seat across Kurt and next to Wes, which meant I could look at Kurt while we ate and link our feet together under the table without Wes having any idea. I was fairly certain that Kurt planned it that way since he insisted he sit in the seat closest to the kitchen in case he needed to hop up and get anything, but I wasn't complaining.

"Will you two stop making googly eyes at each other while you're eating? Some of us are trying to keep their food down," Wes requested. I hadn't realized that I was staring at Kurt, but given the rosy glow on Kurt's cheeks, we were both caught red handed. "I guess you guys are cute and everything, but I just got used to the fact that you two are dating, so give it a rest."

"Oh please Wes, you're thrilled," Kurt replied.

"Yeah, yeah," my high school friend retorted. "So, Blaine, I already heard Kurt's side of the story – tell me about it from your perspective."

"I'm pretty sure the same things happened on both sides," I said, winking at Kurt in the process. "But I guess I can just give you my perspective. I was out to lunch with Santana and David and I saw this guy at the restaurant we were at, and—"

"Wait," Kurt interjected. "Santana and David were the people you were eating with that day?" I nodded. "Jesus, that would have saved me a little bit of trouble."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"When I saw you at Cosi, I thought you were straight because this woman's arm was around you. Not only that, but it was Santana – of all people," Kurt huffed.

Wes chuckled. "You guys have the weirdest story."

"I suppose," I decided. "But anyway, I saw him at Cosi and was totally taken by him, but then I ended up meeting him in person at a show in Brooklyn where I found out he was friends with Lauren," I nudged Wes with that note as I watched him blush due to the name of the girl who he was smitten with. "And tried to get a hold of him through her."

"And she also thought you were straight," Kurt added.

I laughed. "I swear I'm gay."

"Oh, I know," Kurt added with a wink.

"I *so* don't want to know," Wes uttered.

"Anyway," I continued. "I had Lauren's phone number and was planning on calling her to get in touch with Kurt that way, but I found him on NYCDate instead. He was my top match and I took the risk and messaged him and he messaged me back and the rest, as they say, is history. Did I leave anything out?" I asked Kurt.

He shook his head. "And just so you know it's the same story I told Wes, just obviously not realizing the whole 'lunch with Santana and David' thing."

We kept talking as we ate and I learned more about how Kurt and Wes became roommates while they were in college and witnessed the friendship between my high school friend and my boyfriend. Wes and Kurt were on the opposite sides of the spectrum – Kurt was intentional where Wes was sporadic, Kurt was neat and Wes was messy, Kurt was calm and Wes was emotional, but their friendship had thrived and it seemed like they brought out better things in each other.

Plus I'm fairly certain that without Kurt living with him, Wes was going to end up on the TV show Hoarders.

Once the meal was finished Kurt got up to gather the plates but I insisted that I help, which earned me quite the death glare from Kurt, so I let it go.

"That must be your first Kurt Death Glare," Wes chuckled.

"Well, the second. I'm pretty sure the first one was when I was late to our initial coffee date. I totally deserved it since you know how I feel about tardiness, but I don't think I've ever felt more intimidated, especially since I hadn't ever truly talked to him in person."

"Don't worry, his bark is worse than his bite," Wes added. Silence fell over our table as I could hear Kurt moving around in the kitchen and the familiar sound of water running gave away what he was doing. "But can I talk to you about something?" Wes asked.

"Sure thing."

He sighed. "I just – I really am sorry about what happened the other night. I was just so surprised because it all just seemed too good to be true. So, I apologize for freaking out. And I wanted to let you know that I'm really happy you found someone and I'm even happier that the someone you found is Kurt. You're both such great people and fantastic friends... I still can't believe that you guys are dating."

"I'm happy I found him too. And it's okay, I just think you freaked Kurt out more than anything."

He nodded. "I know. And I apologized to him profusely."

"Good," I chuckled.

"One last thing," Wes said as Kurt hummed away in the kitchen. "I am saying this as Kurt's roommate and unofficial brother, but please don't hurt him. He's had it rough relationship-wise and I'd hate to see that happen again."

I gaped at Wes. "Wes, I'm saying this as a friend, but you don't have to worry. Not because I won't hurt him – I mean, I wasn't planning on it – but because Kurt is a strong guy who can take care of himself. You can't be his protector all the time - it's not fair to you or him. And I get that you don't want to see him hurt, no one does, but I'm sure Kurt can handle whatever life throws at him. I don't know him as well as you do, but he's feisty and determined and even if I did act like an asshole once or twice, he would surely put me in my place quicker than you could name all of the Supreme Court justices."

Wes laughed at that note. "I guess you're right. I just... I feel responsible for him sometimes – especially because of... well, I don't want to get into it because it's not my place. But just know I'm looking out for him."

"I'm glad someone has his back – and you're a great friend. But if I'm being honest, I have a lot of baggage from past relationships as well, but Kurt and I will talk about those things when the time is right – I'm not going to force him to tell me anything he isn't comfortable with. Plus, we've been together for like a week – it's a bit early to have the ex-boyfriends talk."

Wes snorted. "I suppose. But seriously man, I'm just... glad it's you."

I smiled. "I'm glad it's me too."

"Gentlemen," Kurt said from the doorway as he wiped his hands on a towel. "Now that I've let you two play catch-up, would you guys be game for a movie and some wine?"

"Count me in," I said playfully, looking to Wes.

He shrugged. "I guess. But no Moulin Rouge, Kurt."

"Fine," he sighed. "Love Actually then?"

"Isn't that a Christmas movie?" Wes asked.

"Hardly," I replied. "It's a movie that's good year-round. All of the interconnected stories, British people, Hugh Grant... it's practically perfect."

Kurt laughed as we entered the living room and took our places in front of the TV – Wes sitting in the armchair and me on the couch, with plenty of room for Kurt when he finished putting the DVD on. As the opening titles ran, Kurt plopped down on the couch next to me.

"Love Actually is one of my favorite movies," he said as he scooted in next to me and grabbed my hand. "I knew there was a reason I chose you."

I smiled as I squeezed his hand, hearing Wes making exaggerated barfing noises from his side of the living room – but I didn't care. Kurt chose *me*, and that was enough to make me forget about anything else.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Tuesday, November 20

BLAINE

"That's a wrap for now, guys. We'll resume back on Monday after the holiday. Just please don't do anything dumb like break your arm in the next few days," Jeremy mused as the guys packed up their gear.

A lot had happened in the past week; we had recorded and finalized one track for the Atticus Finch album, I had dinner with Santana and Brittany at their place, David, Wes and I went to a karaoke bar and killed it, and Kurt and I had two dates with at least five *very* heated make out sessions. All in all, a fantastic week.

It was the Tuesday before Thanksgiving and I was honestly thankful for the break. Cooper and my parents were coming into town tonight, so I offered to see Jeremy off to the airport so he could head back to Atlanta and, in the meantime, I could pick up my family from their flights. I was one of those strange people who liked to go to the airport – probably because everyone seemed so happy when they arrived from various cities across the globe – and that type of joy is infectious.

Clearly, I had watched Love Actually one too many times. Obviously Kurt was okay with this.

Each of the guys said their goodbyes as I helped clean up the coffee cups that were littered around the sound booth while Jeremy packed up his messenger bag.

"I can't believe how much coffee we go through in a day," I moaned as I picked up five discarded coffee cups off the table.

Jeremy laughed. "They're not used to being up before noon. It was bound to happen."

I grabbed one last Starbucks cup and saw something scrawled on the side.

Chris – 212-555-9630, with a heart over the i.

I chuckled as I flashed the side of the cup to Jeremy. "Looks like someone from the band already has a following."

Jeremy chuckled. "They better get used to it. They're relatively unknown now, but with Rialto at the helm, the fact that they're all good looking and fantastic musicians – they're definitely going to break out of the pack."

I smiled. The fact that Jeremy acknowledged that Atticus Finch was going to make it only assured me that my ability to find talent was right - at least this one time. I knew that the band was good when Jeremy signed on since he wouldn't have agreed to produce otherwise, but having him say it aloud meant something different entirely. I was just thankful to take a part in the journey and especially happy to be making some friends in the process.

Looks like we have at least one Romeo on our hands, I thought to myself as I chucked the cup into the trashcan. "You about ready?" I asked as I scanned the room one last time for any remaining trash.

"All set, let's roll out," Jeremy said as he grabbed his duffel and laptop bag.

...

"I'm glad we left early – this traffic is awful," Jeremy said as we sat in the back of the cab in a standstill with all of the cars working their way across the Queens Midtown Tunnel. I figured that traffic would be worse around this holiday since everyone seemed to travel both into and out of New York, but this was pretty ridiculous.

"One of the perks of the holidays," I joked. Jeremy jokingly rolled his eyes as my phone chirped in my coat pocket. I pulled it out and was pleasantly surprised at the text that I'd just received.

Packing is the worst thing ever. –K

I smiled at Kurt's groaning. He was leaving later tonight to go to Ohio for Thanksgiving and even though I was bummed that he and I wouldn't get to spend time together for the holiday, I was glad he would get to spend time at home. He loved traditions around the holidays – one thing I'd learned as his discussions of Christmas became more frequent these days – so I knew my boyfriend would return from Ohio a happy, content man. I was never going to say no to that.

Just pack a bunch of sweatpants for the Turkey Day and Post Turkey Day feasts. That's always my plan. –B

I chuckled internally at my text. I knew Kurt probably didn't own a ton of sweatpants, so I was sure his reply would be great. If Kurt was anything, it was hilariously pithy.

I resent the fact that you think I would do such a thing - although maybe I should get some just for the occasion. When in Rome, right? -K

I laughed aloud. Only Kurt would think of an "occasion" to own sweatpants - rather than most people who used a lazy Saturday as their excuse to wear loungewear in public.

"Something funny going on there?" Jeremy asked, nodding toward my phone.

"Uh, yeah," I stuttered. I realized I hadn't talked to Jeremy too much about my personal life and things could get fairly personal in a second - especially depending on his feelings about my... orientation. "It's my boyfriend." Jeremy sat there looking at me. There was no judgment coming from his stance or his eyes - it seemed like he just wanted me to elaborate. So I did. "He's packing to go to home for the holidays and he hates packing. Apparently my recommendation to pack sweatpants wasn't up to his standard."

He chuckled. "Not a sweatpants guy? That's a shame. For him, of course."

I snorted. "Not really. He doesn't think one has to look like a hobo if you want to look dressed down. He has very... finite opinions about such things. But he always looks like a million bucks, so I should probably listen to him," I said as I gestured down to my somewhat worn jeans and beat up boots. I didn't look like a slob, but I definitely didn't look like Kurt.

"Eh, looks fine to me," he stated without giving my clothes a second glance. "Tell me about him."

"Who? My boyfriend?"

"Yeah, who else? Tell me about him."

"Uh, sure. His name is Kurt, he's from Ohio like I am, he works at a Broadway theater helping out with costumes."

"He's not a performer?" Jeremy asked.

I shook my head. "Not now. He used to perform in high school but he found his calling with clothes."

"Ah, so the fact that he works with costumes probably fulfills his desire to perform and the whole clothing thing."

"I suppose," I shrugged.

"And how long have you been dating?"

"Two weeks. Give or take a few days."

"Ah, new budding romances. They're so fun in the early stages."

I nodded in agreement. "Yeah. I mean, we've known each other for over a month or so and we actually have a lot of the same mutual friends." I laughed internally about how exactly we found out about our mutual friends, but that was something I didn't feel the need to elaborate on. "But it's going pretty good."

Jeremy nodded and looked out the window at the other cars eager to make their way across to Brooklyn. After a minute of silence, I thought I should probably ask him stuff too, since we're going to be spending a bunch of time together and stuff. "What about you? Anyone in your life?"

"Yeah," he said breathily. "Her name is Jess. She's a total sweetheart, but definitely knows how to keep me in line."

"How long have you been together?" I asked.

"Six years, but we've been friends since high school. So we've had a relationship of some sort for eighteen years."

"Wow," I uttered. "That's practically forever."

He laughed. "That's more than half your lifetime, youngin'."

I chuckled in reply. "So you've known each other for almost twenty years but together for three. It must be great to date someone you're such good friends with."

"Yeah," he agreed. "I think with Jess and I, there was always an underlying attraction but the timing just wasn't right. She was with someone when I first met her and we had this dance back and forth over the

years of being really close friends but never getting together. Then, a few years ago, the timing was right and we've been together ever since."

"That's a great story," I thought aloud. "I'm a big believer in everything happens for a reason, and your story just proves that."

He giggled. "I couldn't agree more."

...

After the long ride in the taxi, Jeremy made it onto his flight but I still had time to kill before Cooper or my parents arrived. Thankfully none of their flights were delayed so I wouldn't end up spending the evening in the arrivals lobby at LaGuardia. It was small and there wasn't much to do, though the people watching proved fantastic as usual.

After 20 minutes of watching people pick up their friends and loved ones and a few rounds of Fruit Ninja, I was bored. I had left my headphones at my apartment and I was regretting that decision since I couldn't just lose myself in the lyrics of artists I admired. Instead, white noise, PA announcements and the occasional conversation in passing served as my soundtrack.

Instead of sitting restlessly for the next half hour before Cooper's flight came in from LAX, I decided to call the person who'd been on my mind.

"Hello?"

"Hey Kurt."

"Hey," Kurt said softly, my heart flickering with excitement at his change of tone. "You're lucky you're talking to me now instead of 30 minutes ago. I was not having any luck with this whole packing thing and I'm fairly certain I scarred Wes for life."

I chuckled. "Wes has seen worse things, I assure you."

"Either way, I think he forgot that I tend to get a little... tense before I go home since I haven't been here regularly for awhile. I'll just have to buy his affections with some killer cookies when I come back from Thanksgiving."

"I'm sure you know this since you've known Wes for awhile, but if you give him cookies, he'll treat you like royalty. The man has a soft spot for sweets."

"I know – I think the only reason we became roommates is because he wanted into my cookie jar."

"That's better than him wanting into your pants," I noted, not realizing what I had implied until it was out of my mouth. Well, I guess my crass side was bound to come out at some point.

"Who said that didn't happen already?" Kurt replied cheekily and I nearly dropped the phone in surprise. I would've thought that Kurt might be a bit embarrassed at my off-color comment, but the fact that he just replied like that kind of blew me away.

And *damn*, it was sexy.

"Uh, well, if that's how—"

I heard Kurt laugh heartily. "I was kidding, obviously Wes is straight as an arrow and he's also not my type on so many levels."

I laughed, slightly unsure of how to proceed. "Well, that's good to know." I paused for a second to try to collect myself mentally. "So now that you're done packing, when do you have to head to the airport to fly out?"

"My flight is out of JFK at 8, so I have quite a bit of time."

I glanced at my watch, noting that it was 4:00 now. "You certainly have time, but traffic was awful and that was to LaGuardia so plan accordingly."

Kurt groaned on the other end. "Great, just what I needed."

"Just don't forget your headphones like I did and you'll do just fine."

"As if I'd forget my headphones. They're necessary to watch Netflix on the plane home. Plus they inevitably help me drone out my stepbrother and dad's rantings about football over the next few days. There's only so much of that I'd be able to handle without my music keeping me sane."

I laughed. I could understand the need to have your own space – especially around the holidays since I had a feeling Cooper would be insufferable and my parents would be, well, parents. I loved all three of them, but with them in my city and hanging out in my space where I'd happily lived alone for a few years was going to be trying on my patience. "I'll keep that in mind."

"What time does your family get in?" I loved the way Kurt remembered the little things I'd told him. He swore up and down that his memory was awful, but I think he was bluffing.

"Cooper gets in around 4:30 and my parents sometime after 5. I'm already at the airport so I'm just biding my time until they get here."

"Wow, that was really nice of you to wait at the airport for them."

I shrugged but realized Kurt couldn't see. "I don't mind. I was dropping Jeremy off anyway so it was a two-birds-one-stone situation." I would've gone into detail about my affinity to people watch at the airport, but I was worried it would make me seem strange – even if it was mentioned in one of Kurt's favorite movies. "Anyway, so. Ohio. What are you most looking forward to this Thanksgiving? The Black Friday sales, perhaps?"

Kurt snorted. "Not especially. Midwestern women are ravenous about their sales and there's nothing there that I couldn't just get here anyway. I mean, how many duvet covers do I really need to buy at 60% off?" I chuckled as Kurt continued. "Definitely looking forward to seeing my dad and stepmom, and maybe my stepbrother. I'm excited for all the food. There's nothing better than turkey and stuffing covered in gravy; it's my one annual indulgence. But I'm also just glad that I'll have some time away from the crazy – and definitely will love not having the streets smell like rotten sewage."

I laughed. "That all sounds great to me."

"What about you? Since you're staying in New York, are you planning on seeing the parade?"

"Yeah, my dad has connections with some people that own a building near Central Park, so we'll probably spend the morning with his business associates watching the parade and do a traditional Chinese dinner later that night."

"You eat Chinese for Thanksgiving?" Kurt questioned, slight disappointment coming through his voice.

"Yeah. My kitchen doesn't really allow for a ton of cooking or anything and their hotel doesn't have a kitchenette, so we save our big, fancy family meal for Christmas when we're in Ohio."

"Oh," Kurt said.

"It was weird the first few years they came up here, but we got used to it after awhile. But we do make sure to have at least two pumpkin pies on hand – one for me, one for everyone else," I added with a giggle.

Kurt laughed melodically. "I can see that. I'll have to remember to bake you one of my pumpkin pies. You'll die."

"The fact that you can make a pumpkin pie makes me want to die. Are you sure you have to go to Ohio? Can't you stay here and bake me pies all weekend?" I joked.

"As if. I'm headed home and you can't stop me. Besides, it just gives you more of a reason to keep me around – with my promises of baking and all that."

"As if I needed more reasons to keep you around; you're incredible," I murmured but realized Kurt could probably hear me since the phone was so close to my face. Silence rang through from Kurt's end so I awkwardly cleared my throat. "Well, uh, I better let you get ready to leave and all that. I'm sure you have other things to do before you leave and stuff." Clearly I was very articulate in this moment.

"Uh, yeah. I do have a few more things I need to take care of." Kurt sighed. "But I'll text and call you while I'm in Ohio – I'll need someone to keep me sane in Buckeye Land."

I chuckled. "Sounds good. Have a great flight and we'll talk soon."

"Of course, enjoy your time with your family." Just as I was about to hang up, I heard Kurt on the other end. "And Blaine?"

"Yeah?"

"Just so you know, I think you're incredible too."

The air escaped my lungs and a smile glowed on my face. "Okay."

"Okay," he stated, laughing softly. "Bye Blaine."

"Bye Kurt."

I dropped the phone into my lap and victoriously thrust my fist into the air – then realized I looked like a total idiot when half of the people loitering around in baggage claim were now staring at me as if I had a second head. Well, they'd be pretty damn excited if one Kurt Hummel thought they were incredible too; they clearly were just jealous.

"You look like an idiot," a voice bellowed from a few feet in front of me. I looked over to see my brother leaning against a pole with his leather weekender bag slung over his shoulder. That asshole managed to look put together even after a five hour flight. Jerk.

"Hey Cooper," I said as I stood to greet him with a hug. "I didn't realize what time it was. I hope you haven't been waiting long."

"Nah, just walked over from the gate. Didn't check a bag this time so I didn't have to wait around." He motioned for us to take the seats I had been sitting in. I sat in the seat and Cooper dropped his bag in the seat next to mine but opted to stand – probably due to the long flight he'd just come off of. "What time do mom and dad get here?"

"Their flight arrives around 5, but I'm sure we won't get out of here until almost six since you know mom will stop at every vending kiosk on her way back and they will have checked too many bags to count."

Cooper chuckled. Even though my parents had been here multiple times – heck, we had a vacation house not far from Manhattan – my mom still managed to always go home with an assortment of New York-themed trinkets. She tended to do that no matter which cities she traveled to, but in her collection of knick-knacks most of them were from New York. "Then that gives us about 45 minutes to catch up before they get here," he said, looking to his watch to confirm the time. "So, what's got you going all Breakfast Club in the middle of the arrivals terminal? Is Brooks Brothers having a sale or something?"

I tried to kick him from my seat, but he moved away quick enough that I only nicked his pants. "You know I don't shop there anymore, I'm not at Dalton."

"Whatever. So it wasn't Brooks Brothers. Then what's got you all riled up?"

I didn't really want to talk to Cooper about Kurt yet. It wasn't because I wasn't sure about Kurt – I knew he and I were happy and were definitely going somewhere. But admitting it to Cooper meant opening up Pandora's box with the parents, who have been hoping that I'd find Mr. Right for years. In the past, I hadn't ever spoken to my parents about who I dated – it was very convenient that they only visited me in New York once a year and when we spoke we kept love life topics to a minimum. But I didn't want to lie to Cooper – or my parents – but I didn't want them to put any pressure on me or my relationship with Kurt yet either. I had been dating the guy for only a few weeks and they had gone great, but knowing them they'd start to allude to wedding colors and suitable neighborhoods for raising children if I talked about Kurt too much.

"I'm not sure I want to say..." I said.

Cooper glared at me. "Why not?" he whined.

"Because you'll give me a hard time then you'll tell mom and dad and I'll never hear the end of it."

"So it's a guy, isn't it?" I reddened at his realization. "Oh my god, it IS a guy! Tell me everything! I have to know!"

"Cooper, calm down. You're worse than Santana."

"I'm your brother – of *course* I'm worse than Santana. I've known you longer."

"Whatever," I chided. I crossed my arms over my chest as a sign of my reluctance, but Cooper just stared at me expectantly with puppy dog eyes – an Anderson trait I was cursing at the moment because that jerk always knew how to make me crack.

"Fine," I breathed, clearly amusing my brother as he was practically giddy at this point. "But on one condition."

"Name it," he countered.

"You can't tell mom and dad."

"That's not fair!"

"Cooper, why would you want to tell them anyway?"

"Because it's so much fun when mom starts planning your wedding! She hasn't done that since you were a freshman in college so I'm sure she has some great plans for you and your man candy."

I rolled my eyes. "This is non-negotiable, Coop. I don't want to put any pressure on me or my relationship with them right now. It's really new and I don't need mom's nagging to wig me out in any way, shape or form. Just let me tell them in my own time, okay?"

My brother resigned himself. "Fine," he sighed. "But since you're making me keep this from mom and dad, you have to deal with me calling you regularly to talk about this guy. Someone's gotta keep tabs on you."

I agreed, knowing that my brother rarely remembered to call anyone so I figured his pestering wouldn't last too long. "The basics are, his name is Kurt, he works in costuming for a Broadway show, and he's from Ohio – which is where he's spending the holiday so don't even ask if you can meet him."

"Aw, man. I wanted to scare the little guy."

"He's not little," I interjected.

"Damn, B. Already getting into Kurt's pants? You're a quick one," he said with a wink.

"Oh my god, Coop!" I practically shouted. "Not like that! I meant; he's not small as in *height*. He's taller than me. Jesus. Pervert."

"Whatever. You'll find out soon enough."

I rolled my eyes. "God, you really are worse than Santana."

"I try," he admitted. "So, he's from Ohio. Small world."

I laughed internally as I thought through the story I was about to tell Cooper – about how we met and our mutual friends. "Oh, you have no idea..."

KURT

I was practically bubbling with anticipation as the plane taxied into the gate at the Columbus airport. With all my traveling around the country touring with the show, I hadn't had much time to visit Dad and Carole due to work commitments. The last time I'd been home was earlier this year for Dad's birthday and July 4th, so to say I missed them was an understatement.

Plus with my dad closing out his final term in Congress – he had decided to retire after this term – he would finally be able to wind down with us and relax, something previous Thanksgivings hadn't allowed since he was usually busy working with his campaign staff or attending meals and gatherings hosted by his supporters in the district. We always managed to have the Thanksgiving meal together, but I knew he was thankful to get his life back on the normal side of things around the holidays.

As we pulled into the gate I extracted my phone from my pocket and brought it to life, shooting my dad a quick text.

I'm here! See you in baggage claim? Pull the car around, no need to wait inside. –K

I figured I wouldn't get a text back from him – the man was just as hopeless with technology now as he had been in high school – but he tried from time to time.

And apparently this was one of the times he was trying.

K

Burt Hummel, folks – technology wizard.

I chuckled as I pocketed my phone and stepped into the aisle. I had lucked upon a seat toward the front of the plane – primarily due to the fact that I'd arrived to the airport early thanks to Blaine's memo about the traffic – and discovered not many people had checked in yet. Thankfully, that meant getting placed in the aisle of the row directly behind first class, earning me the quickest exit.

As passengers shuffled behind me to collect their bags, I clutched my messenger bag on my shoulder and impatiently stuck my earbuds into my ears – eager to plow my way through the airport and make my way quickly to baggage claim to pick up my bag.

Unfortunately I had to check my bag since I was staying Tuesday night through Sunday morning so an overnight bag wouldn't suffice. Plus I was hoping to potentially grab one or two things for my apartment while I was here during the Black Friday sales – even if I had told Blaine otherwise.

As Phoenix filled my ears – a recommendation from Blaine – I made my way out into the terminal and practically jogged all the way to the baggage claim. The airport wasn't nearly the size of JFK, but it was still large enough that I found it slightly infuriating that the baggage claim wasn't right outside my gate. I mean, this is *Ohio* – are there really that many people living here?

Another five minutes and constant stares at my phone to see if my dad would call, I finally saw my bag making its way on the conveyer belt and I quickly snatched it up and headed outside. The brisk wind hit my face once I left the confines of the heated indoors, but it didn't matter when I saw my dad's pick up truck in the passenger queue. I could feel the smile light on my face as I walked toward the truck and threw my bag in the flatbed, not really caring if the bag got a little scuffed during the journey. I opened the passenger door to see my dad with a smile on his face – the same toothless grin that I had; the only thing that really made my dad and I look alike.

"Hey buddy," he said as I threw my messenger bag on the floor. I reached across the console to give him a small hug.

"Hey dad," I replied as I inhaled his scent. It smelled like Old Spice and the faintest smell of motor oil but it was the smell I'd grown to know as Burt Hummel.

"I see you got my text," he said.

"Yeah, your one letter text *really* let me know where you were. Besides I was the one who told you to wait out here," I insisted.

He smiled, not giving any kind of snarky return. "I missed you."

"I missed you too, dad."

As Dad pulled out of the queue and made his way onto the highway back to Lima, I sat back and fidgeted with my phone, checking to see if Mercedes had texted since she was planning on coming to Ohio for the holiday as well.

"So how are things in New York these days? I know we haven't talked too much since you moved back there permanently, but are things going good?"

"Yeah," I replied. "The job is great, I actually work with Lauren from McKinley... do you remember her?"

"Name sounds familiar, but you had so many glee kids coming in and out of the house it was hard to keep tabs."

I chuckled. "Either way, she and I have become friends again and that's been really nice having her around."

"And how's that roommate of yours?"

"Still up to no good. And he's dating Lauren."

Dad laughed. "You're back for a month or two and you're already playing matchmaker for your roommate. He better appreciate it."

"Oh he does. He owes me."

As I was about to elaborate on how Wes was pining after my old friend, my phone rang in my pocket. I was surprised to see the name across the phone screen and I hesitated to answer the call.

"Go ahead," Dad said. "I don't mind – I know you're a busy guy with a lot of friends you want to catch up with."

I rolled my eyes – clearly my dad thought I was too cool for school, but whatever. "I'll keep it short."

"Hey," I said into the receiver.

"I'm already regretting having my family come here for Thanksgiving."

I giggled. "Oh please. What could they have possibly done already? They've been in town for maybe a few hours."

"They've done enough already. Cooper has been going through my stuff – again – and my mom keeps asking me if I'm eating enough and practically bought out the grocery store. And my dad keeps playing with my records and now they're all out of order and I think he broke my record player!"

I chuckled. I could imagine the scene somewhat now that I knew what his family looked like, but it was even more comical imagining where Blaine was at the moment since I could still hear people talking in the background and I knew the noise wasn't coming from the TV. "And where exactly are you calling me from?"

"The bathroom," he replied sheepishly. "I'm fairly certain it's soundproof since I haven't received any complaints from my neighbors about my shower concerts, so I figured it was safe in here."

"You could have texted me if you wanted to – I hate to think I'm bothering you," I joked. Clearly he was looking for someone to save him, so I figured it'd be worth the sacrifice.

"Please, you *know* you're not bothering me. But I am surprised to catch you, I wasn't sure if you had landed yet or anything. Plus it's late so I thought you would be busy or something."

"Yup, landed, picked up my bag and am already on my way back to Lima."

"Oh, am I distracting you from the drive? I'm sorr—"

"I'm not driving, Blaine. I'm with my dad," I replied. How would I have driven anyway? Apparently the time with his family made his logic go slightly amiss.

"Who's Blaine?" my dad asked next to me.

"Uh, my... friend?" I replied holding my hand over the receiver. I did not need my dad to find out about Blaine being my boyfriend while the guy in question was on the other end of the phone. "Remember, I told you about him. He works in music, from Ohio..."

"Again, too many friends," he retorted.

I rolled my eyes. "Sorry," I said as I removed my hand from the receiver. "My dad was... asking me a question."

"No problem," Blaine replied.

"Blaine what are you doing in there?" I could hear a voice ask on the other end of the phone. I heard Blaine try to muffle the sound, but it didn't work; I could hear everything.

"I'm on the phone, Cooper. God."

"Who are you on the phone with, B?" the voice – Cooper, apparently – asked, slight tease in his tone. "I think I know who..."

"Just give me a minute, and I'll be right out."

"Blaine, dear, are you sure everything is okay? Should I have picked up vitamins from the store? Or... Blaine, please tell me you aren't doing *that* in there. Couldn't you just wait until we left for the hotel to do that?"

"Oh dear Jesus," I heard Blaine utter and I stifled a laugh. "Mom I am fine! I am on the phone in here because it is too loud out there. I will be right out. I swear to GOD give me a minute of peace!" I heard Blaine take a few deep breaths before settling back into our conversation. "I'm sorry about that, I didn't mean to put you on hold."

"So does Cooper really know who you're on the phone with?" I joked, earning a questioning look from my dad and a gasp on the phone from my boyfriend.

"Please tell me you didn't hear all that."

"I was always taught not to lie."

"Dear god, I am so incredibly embarrassed."

I chuckled. "Don't be. It's fine, though you sound like you have your hands full. I'm sorry I can't save you from your misery but I can call you again later and make sure you're still alive if that's okay."

"I'd like that, you're practically my knight in shining armor," he breathed. "And I really am sorry that my family is full of idiots."

"Isn't that their job?"

"I suppose," he replied. "Well, I guess I better go throw myself to the dogs. But I'm glad you made it home and I'll talk to you later?"

"Of course," I answered. "Try to have fun with your family and I'll call you soon."

"Okay, bye Kurt."

"Bye Blaine," I said as I ended the call.

"So, again. Who's Blaine?"

I sighed. Despite the fact that my dad was a fairly oblivious man – probably by choice – I knew I couldn't lie to him. "He's my boyfriend."

Dad just sat there, blank look on his face. It was the one Hummel trait aside from the smile that made me like my dad – we could be impossibly hard to read at times. So rather than dwell on the silence, I decided to just blurt it all out.

I mean, what could possibly go wrong?

"So, Blaine. He's around my age – a bit younger. Lives in New York but originally from outside of Columbus, oddly enough. He works for this record label and he loves his job. He discovers bands or something... sometimes I'm not quite sure how to explain what he does but he just really loves it and music. He already met Wes – well, he knew Wes, but that's a different story – and I really like spending time with him. He's charming and hilariously dorky but a total sweetheart. He's just... Blaine, I guess."

Dad let it seep for a moment. I couldn't believe I just said all of those things. I wasn't one to wax poetic about guys – especially not with my dad – but now that I was an adult, I felt like I needed him to know what was going on in my life. And Blaine was a part of that now, I guess. In a small way, I just wanted my dad to realize that even though I'd been through hell in Ohio, I was moving on and moving up in Manhattan... and I was going to live out my happily ever after.

"Oh," my dad said, cutting through the silence.

I peered over at him from my seat, shifting uncomfortably at his lack of words. "Oh? That's all you're going to say?"

He fumbled around for a moment but soon started speaking. "Look Kurt, I'm not going to pretend like you're still in high school and I have to act like some sort of Papa Bear with you. You're a grown, mature man who is managing his own life and I'm proud as hell of you for that." He sighed. "I'm glad you told me that you have a boyfriend and this Blaine guy seems like he's right up you're alley. And the fact that you mentioned him at all means something to you, I just know it. You haven't mentioned having a boyfriend in a while, so I just hope that he's treating you all right and that you're doing the same for him. Anything else you want to tell me, you can whenever you want to. You know that."

"He's really nice and I try to treat him with as much respect as possible – you've raised me well, dad. I haven't forgotten what you've said just because I don't live here anymore."

He smiled. "Well, the fact that you're in your mid-twenties and live on your own still makes me feel old."

I nudged him with my arm over the armrest between us. "You were already old, dad."

"Gee, thanks son. Nothing like making your dad feel ancient within the first twenty minutes of you being home."

"That's my job," I replied with a laugh, with Dad mirroring my laugh with his own. "But really, thanks for being such a good dad."

"That's my job," he parroted. "But you've certainly made me proud."

With that I let the silence steep as I thought about the relationship I had with my dad. We had been through a lot as a duo, but we still remained close. I didn't tell him about every detail of my life – lord knows it would've given him a second heart attack if I had – but we still maintained a close bond after all these years.

"So," he said interjecting the silence. "When am I going to meet this Blaine?"

I rolled my eyes. "Don't push it, dad."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Friday Morning

I forgot about how rabid soccer moms are. –K

Sorry, I'm just now getting your text because I was still asleep at 7am like normal people are when they don't have to work. What made you come to that conclusion so early in the morning? –B

Bed, Bath & Beyond was more like Blood Bath & Beyond. It was worse than any catfight I've seen on the Real Housewives and that means something. –K

Ah. I thought you weren't going to the Black Friday sales? –B

I needed a few things and they happened to be on sale. –K

You couldn't keep away, could you? –B

I guess not... :) –K

Now I know one of your weaknesses. –B

Please, that's hardly a weakness. I'm pretty sure most of America can get behind a sale. –K

One of these days I'll find out a weakness of yours. You already know mine. Speaking of which, I better go make sure there's some pie left this morning before my brother eats it. –B

Oh, you should already know one of my weaknesses. –K

Oh yeah? What is it? –B

I'll never tell... –K

But if I already know it, it's not a secret. –B

Well, I'm not 'enlightening' you then. –K

Can I have a hint? –B

Nope. –K

Meanie. –B

;) –K

FRIDAY NIGHT

If I get arrested for murder, will you come visit me in jail? –B

Uh, I'm going to need an explanation here... –K

My brother does not deserve to live anymore. –B

What did he do? –K

He ate all of my pie! –B

Hahahaha I hardly think that is worthy of him being murdered and you spending your life in jail. –K

But perhaps I could write it off as a crime of passion? –B

I doubt any jury would let that go. –K

They should. Pumpkin pie is sacred. –B

You are such a dork. –K

Whatever. It doesn't seem to bother you too much. –B

Nope, it doesn't. –K

SATURDAY MORNING

That voicemail you left me earlier this morning was a riot. I can't believe you and your brother just Rick-Rolled me over voicemail, but your singing was quite impressive. Who knew you and your brother were such hams? –K

Please my brother works in Hollywood. Of course he's a total ham. –B

What's your excuse then? –K

I'm naturally awesome? –B

And so humble! –K

What can I say? ;) –B

What are you up to? I hoped that I would get some sort of singing voicemail in return. Besides, I still haven't heard you sing. –B

I'm actually on my way to the movies – family tradition. And I highly doubt you want to hear my dad singing Joan Jett right now (which is what he's currently doing. Though you can hardly call it singing). –K

Even if it's horrible, I bet it's hilarious. At least there's that, right? –B

I guess. But it makes it more obvious that my singing abilities were not inherited from my father. The world should really be grateful. –K

Speaking for the world, I'm glad there's one less tone-deaf person in the world. Though you better blow my mind with your singing – you're setting the bar pretty high there. –B

Oh, I'll definitely blow your mind. ;) –K

I had no doubts. ;) –B

SATURDAY AFTERNOON

Remember how I said I missed Ohio? I'm over it. I'm definitely ready to come back to New York. –K

:(What happened? –B

Stepbrother is driving me crazy and hogging the TV, my dad keeps bugging me about what I'm up to in New York and keeps asking if I've taken self defense classes in case I get jumped in a back alley. –K

That sucks! What about your stepmom? Hopefully she's treating you okay. –B

No, she's being great – as always. Sigh. How are things with your family? –K

Good. Today we're going to The Met at my mom's request. Cooper will probably try to make crass jokes about the paintings with naked people in them and my dad will just wander around playing with his phone. Truly exciting stuff. –B

Sounds better than the entertainment currently blaring from the TV downstairs. –K

You'll be home soon. What time does your flight get in on Sunday? –B

At 4. Literally counting down the hours. –K

You have about 24 until you board the plane. Hang in there. :) –B

I guess I can try if there's a light at the end of the tunnel. –K

How about we go out Sunday night as a welcome back to the city party of sorts? –B

That would be great! Will your parents still be around; I'd hate to intrude. –K

Nah, they're heading out tomorrow morning – thank GOD! Why don't you call me when you get back and we'll work out a time? –B

Sounds perfect. –K

Great. See you tomorrow! –B

I think I might be more excited to come home now. ;) –K

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 25

BLAINE

"Hi."

"Hi," Kurt replied with a blush as he opened the door to let me into his apartment. I decided meeting him at his place would be easier since I had spent far too much time in my own place over the past few days and I figured Kurt would appreciate not having to get in another cab to head up to my neck of the woods.

"Wes isn't home yet – he'll be back Tuesday morning."

"Mmmmm," I nodded in agreement as I leaned in toward my boyfriend to give him a hug. I wrapped my arms around his waist as he latched around my shoulders. I could feel his breath teasing my neck as he laid his head on my shoulder, the tip of his nose tickling the collar of my polo shirt.

"I'm so glad to be back," he said quietly as he shifted slightly in our hug.

"I'm glad you're back too," I replied, realizing that I truly was thrilled for my boyfriend's return to New York. I inhaled sharply as I basked in the hug Kurt had enveloped me in and got a whiff of his scent. "You smell nice."

"Thanks, so do you," he said as he took a deep breath. "You smell much better than my brother."

I chuckled against him, feeling his warmth as the laugh thrummed through my chest. "That's not saying much – you said he was somewhat barbaric."

"It's true, but it makes me appreciate people that bathe on a regular basis so much more."

I laughed harder as I leaned my head on top of Kurt's and angled myself to kiss him, my lips grazing over his ear. The contact caused Kurt's breath to hitch and I tried to ignore the fact that if I stuck out my tongue just a bit, I'd probably illicit some sort of divine noise from the incredibly attractive man in my midst. But we weren't to that point quite yet and being that we were in his apartment with no roommate (and knowing that I hadn't had sex in years), I didn't want to fly through the "bases", slide into home, and regret it later.

In order to preserve the sweet moment and ensure that I maintained a gentlemanly demeanor, I pulled away from him slightly – causing his head to snap up and for a sliver of space to come between us.

As we got some distance between us, I finally took a good look at Kurt. He had on a sleepy smile and I couldn't help but return it. I could tell he was exhausted, but I was thankful to be spending time with him. Just as I was beginning to study the crinkles in his smile and observe the way his cheeks had slight dimples, he leaned in and placed a soft kiss on my lips.

The glow I felt when he smiled at me tripled when his lips fell on mine. I don't know how I had gone so long without kissing someone. In my lifetime, I had kissed maybe 10 people – mostly guys, but a few girls (unfortunately). Those Warblers were suckers for playing Spin the Bottle with the girl's school and somehow the bottle rarely seemed to land on any cute guys when it was my turn. I bet those assholes rigged it.

But of all the kisses I'd had, somehow the ones I shared with Kurt seemed to reach my soul on a deeper level that I couldn't really explain.

It scared the hell out of me to feel so strongly about something purely based on the simplest touch of flesh as our lips puckered against each other's, but it was something I couldn't help.

Kurt pulled away and I internally groaned at the loss. Thankfully his scent still lingered in my nostrils and the warmth of his arms still cocooning me in a way I had missed over the past week.

"So," he said pulling me from my trance, "what's the plan for tonight?"

"I'm game for whatever. Are you hungry? I figured it's dinner time and I'm guessing you didn't eat between your flight and now."

"I definitely could eat," he admitted. "What are you in the mood for?"

"I could go for anything."

"We clearly are very decisive people," Kurt chuckled. "How about something simple? Chipotle?"

"Eating from a chain restaurant? That seems sacrilegious."

"Technically Cusi is a chain restaurant," he reminded me. I rolled my eyes and he laughed softly. "Besides, we drove past one in Columbus and I've been thinking about burritos ever since."

"Well, let me not get in the way between a man and his burrito," I mused; causing Kurt to limply hit my arm. I was going to pretend that Kurt's mild tap hurt, but he kissed me gently instead, causing me to lose track of what I was thinking.

As we broke our kiss, I couldn't help but smile again and his icy blue eyes pored into mine. *God, he is incredible*, I thought to myself.

"Let's go," he said, grabbing his coat from the coat rack.

...

The walk to Chipotle was short, full of handholding and stolen kisses as we waited to cross the street. Despite the influx of tourists in town for the parade, there was hardly anyone on the street after the parade concluded - making the city seem somewhat abandoned in the wake of a tidal wave of people. It almost made it feel like we were in some sort of alternate universe and I was thrilled to be there with Kurt.

After we ordered our food and found a seat in a booth by the windows, I immediately took to devouring my burrito. Kurt chuckled as he unwrapped his burrito and used a knife and fork to cut it and place each bite carefully into his mouth. I laughed internally as I thought of the scene we probably conveyed to the diners around us - one man looking totally put together and eating so carefully and the other man with somewhat unruly hair looking like a barbarian as I shoveled down mouthfuls of tortilla-wrapped goodness.

"I hear that it's supposed to get warm soon," I said between bites. Kurt nearly lost it as he practically choked on his burrito and gulped down some of his water, laughing the whole time. "What's so funny?" I questioned.

He giggled as he took another sip. "I can't believe we're talking about the weather. That seems like something people would do when they run out of things to say or when they're trying to make small talk."

I shrugged. "Well, I have plenty to say, but I was just making a note." I was slightly embarrassed – I didn't want Kurt to think I had nothing to say or that I was just itching to make conversation.

He reached out for my hand over the table. "It's fine, Blaine. I'm just teasing you." He winked and turned his attention back to his burrito. I smiled and let the moment pass. I was thankful that he and I were comfortable enough to joke around but still maintain a flirty balance. It was incredibly comforting.

"So, tell me all about your trip to Ohio."

He rolled his eyes. "I texted you like the whole time I was there. You know what I was up to."

"Yes, but I'm sure you left some things out. Like, what did you end up getting while you were—"

"Kurt?" a voice asked.

Kurt turned his attention to the voice and I followed suit. I recognized him, but couldn't quite place him.

"Hey James! I haven't seen you in a while."

"Yeah, I've been busy," the man – apparently named James – said as he ran his hand through his sandy blonde hair. I flicked back to watching Kurt and saw a soft smile on his face as he made eye contact with the gorgeous man who had come over to our table.

"That's good," Kurt said, still facing James. I looked between the two and sipped on my drink. There was a niggling feeling in the back of my mind, like I was missing something. James clearly was a very, very attractive man. He seemed tall and incredibly well put together and probably rich, given the fact that he was wearing a Rolex on his left wrist.

I kept my gaze fixed on the pair as I sipped my drink, but soon the drink was gone as I sucked the remnants of my tea dry, causing the telltale noise of an empty cup to radiate through their conversation.

"Oh, I'm sorry, am I interrupting something?" James asked, turning to me as I placed my now-empty paper cup on the table.

"Oh, sorry, how rude of me – I forgot where I was for a second. James, this is Blaine. Blaine, this is James."

"Nice to meet you," I said extending my hand out to him.

"Likewise," he said, matching my grin with his own. And – of course – he had perfect teeth and sparkling blue eyes. Ugh. "And you're..."

"—He's my boyfriend," Kurt interjected, causing James' mouth to form an 'o' and me to feel a mixture of smug and touched that I wasn't the one who needed to clarify my relationship with my boyfriend.

"Oh, uh, wow. Okay," James stuttered and I tried my best to hide my haughty grin, not wanting Kurt to witness my small victory in my mind over this guy. "Well, you must be incredible if Kurt's your boyfriend."

"Guilty as charged," I replied, causing James to look somewhat uncomfortable and Kurt to nudge me under the table. I looked over at Kurt to see if I'd crossed some sort of line with my joke but he just smiled in return and the bump under the table seemed to be in jest rather than him actually being upset with me.

"Well, I don't want to interrupt – I was actually headed home anyway. But it was nice to see you, Kurt. We have to set up time to go shopping soon."

"Of course," Kurt said with a nod. "I'll call you sometime." James responded with his own nod, seemingly pleased with Kurt's promise of a shopping trip.

"And – uh – it was nice to meet you Blaine," James said, a leery look on his face.

"It was nice to meet you too," I said with my most sincere smile. I admit, the guy was hot and seemed to be a little *too* into Kurt, but I didn't dislike him by any means. I didn't even know him.

"Bye," Kurt said with a wave as James exited the restaurant. I followed him out with my eyes and tried to be friendly as I waved at him as he rounded the corner. Once he was out of my line of sight, I turned back to Kurt who sat nibbling on his burrito again.

"So. James," I stated as I pushed around the chips that were nestled between Kurt and I.

"What about him?"

"How do you know him?" I admit, I probably came off a bit overprotective at the moment, but I was really curious.

"You should recognize him if you saw me at Cosi," he said, slight tease coming through his voice.

"Cosi?" I asked rhetorically, thinking back to the moment I first saw Kurt. I remembered the way the light hit his hair as he sat next to the window, the way his vest fit against his chest, and I remembered...

"The guy you were with that day. That was him." Kurt nodded. "How do you know him though? He doesn't seem like the type of guy who works with you and he doesn't really come off as the kind of guy you were best friends with in college or anything."

Kurt sat chewing with his index finger held in front of him, noting that he needed a minute to finish chewing. "I mean, I'm sorry," I uttered. "I realize you don't have to tell me or anything but I'm just curious. Sorry if that like crosses the line or anything, I totally don't want to seem like I'm—"

"Blaine, it's fine," Kurt interjected. "We went on a few dates a while back, but I decided that we were better off as friends."

"You decided you were better off as friends?"

"That's what I said," he chuckled.

"Sorry, but – uh – have you seen him?"

He laughed harder. "Uh, yes. He was just standing right here."

"No, I mean. Ugh." I was totally going to come off as insecure or creepy or jealous. Or all three. "He's really attractive Kurt." I carefully dusted off my black polo and fidgeted in my seat. If Kurt was going to turn down a guy like that, what did he want to do with me? Kurt was sweet, successful, confident and incredibly attractive – he could practically land any man he pleased. I just felt inadequate in comparison – and especially in comparison to James.

In the world of gay men – or dating in general – landing a guy that looked like James, complete with his slight country accent, would be like hitting the jackpot. And yet, here he sat at the table with the slightly dorky, music nerd with weird hair and whose mouth was probably covered with salsa and rice bits.

"And?" he questioned.

I shrugged.

"I mean, don't get me wrong, James is super hot." Kurt's admission made me laugh nervously. The fact that he acknowledged that he found his friend – and apparently the guy he used to date – attractive did nothing for my self-esteem. "But he and I just weren't going to work out in that way. He wasn't what I needed and I couldn't be what he wanted."

My eyes bugged at his last note. "He wasn't into, like, S&M or something was he?" I posed; whispering the last bit since this hardly seemed like the place to discuss such things.

Kurt snorted. "Hardly. He was just... not in the same place in life as I am. Which is totally fine, but in the end we wouldn't have made each other happy." He looked up at me as I attempted to swipe a napkin over my mouth, hoping to clear any burrito remnants that had taken residence there. "Besides, he never made me laugh like you do. He couldn't do what you do... to me," he said, blushing.

My heart swooned. I realized that Kurt and I were far too early in our relationship to have any real, finite admissions of feelings, but the fact that he admitted – without saying it outright – that I made him happy set my heart on fire.

He maintained his gaze on me for a moment before the reddened hue reached his ears in his slight embarrassment and he turned back to the nearly finished burrito in front of him. While he sat transfixed on his food, I looked at him a bit more closely. The way his hair swooped in front of his eyes as it had lost its perched position on his head made me want to reach forward and tuck it back into place. The way his tongue slipped out of his mouth when he was concentrating on cutting made me want to reach out and touch the lips that it was encased between or, better yet, acquaint his tongue with my own. And I willed for him to look at me again so I could look into the eyes that had captured me from the first time I saw him; eyes that weren't quite as expressive as mine, but ones that had seen so much of the world and desired to see and experience more.

But more than all of that, it was who he was – inside and out. He was an incredibly hot man, but his laugh could make the darkest day shine, his wit could leave anyone laughing for hours, his passion for life and the things he loved could make anyone agree with him without a second guess. Kurt embodied so much of what was wonderful and I was thankful to be a part of it to see him truly shine on the world.

It was then that I realized – I was falling in love with Kurt Hummel.

And it terrified me.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Saturday, December 1

KURT

The one thing I hated about Thanksgiving this year is that it meant that the Christmas season was longer than normal. Sure, Christmas season technically started around Halloween when window displays sparkled with red and green, but this year we would have five whole weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas; something that hadn't happened in a while.

Normally, I'd say it was a good thing; spreading out the holiday season and helping me to cherish Christmas for longer than usual. But it wasn't.

It meant that I had way too long to think about what to get Blaine for Christmas.

I was the type of guy who tried really hard to be thoughtful when it came to giving gifts; a gift card simply was not an option. But I hadn't bought a Christmas gift for a boyfriend in... well, ever, so I found this particular revelation – and season – especially troublesome.

So here I sat, laptop in my lap with Tabatha's Salon Takeover on in the background perusing every website known to man to look for a gift for my boyfriend. I probably would have had better luck if I had any idea what to do, but I was starting from scratch and didn't know what kinds of things one would get for their boyfriend in the first place.

I started with clothing stores – a natural for me since I spent so much time on those sites anyway. But since I didn't know Blaine's size and I figured he wasn't big into labels, I closed out of those tabs.

Next I went to Amazon to try and search there, but I felt weird using their gift guides for what to buy "the man in your life." Also, I'm fairly certain Blaine would not be impressed if I bought him a tent – one of the suggestions – so I had a feeling this site would also net no positive results.

After clicking out of Amazon – not before buying a few gifts for Dad, Finn and Wes first – I went over to Etsy to see if the world of the handmade gift would help me find anything. I found some really cool antique pieces, but the site seemed riddled with baby stuff and monogrammed things for girls; clearly not helpful on my quest for Blaine's gift.

"Ugh!" I exclaimed as I rolled my head to the back of the couch and closed my eyes. "This is pointless!"

"Calm down," Wes said as he emerged from his room, hair slightly damp from his shower. "I don't know what you're even talking about, but I have a feeling you're overreacting in some way."

I sighed. "I hate Christmas shopping."

"That is a lie," Wes stated. I replied with an icy glare, causing Wes to laugh. "You really don't hate Christmas shopping, Kurt. You're just frustrated right now. But you still have time to find the gifts that you're looking for."

"It's already the first week of December and I have about three weeks to figure out the perfect gift for Blaine. This is ridiculous and this whole online shopping thing is fruitless," I said as I carelessly threw my closed laptop onto the coffee table.

"Well, I was about to head out to go look for a present for Lauren. Want to come with and see if you get inspired?"

I shrugged. "I guess. Do you already know what you're going to get her?"

"Sort of. I have a general idea, but I'm not locked into anything at this point." He took his coat from the hanger and put it on, glancing at his watch in the process. "It's nearly 11 now – we have plenty of time to look at some stores before you have to be at work."

"Fine," I groaned as I pulled myself up from the couch. "But you better help me or else no Christmas cookies for you."

...

It was nearly 12:30 and I was still no closer to finding anything for Blaine. I had bought stuff for my dad, my stepbrother and Wes already and I had found a stationary set for Carole that I knew she would love. I also had found the perfect pair of earrings for Mercedes and even managed to get a gift for Lauren – a new purse that she would probably use forever.

"Are you done yet?" I asked as Wes tugged me out of the store with his vision set on a store across the street.

"One last stop," he said, practically pulling me across the street. I think this was the one time that Wes was more excited about shopping than I was and while it was a scary revelation, I just kind of wanted to be back home before I had to work later this afternoon.

I heard a bell ding as we stepped into the warm shop. I hadn't noticed where we were until the ringing pulled me from my grumblings and I was surprised at where we had ended up.

"A jewelry store?" I asked Wes. He replied with a shrug as he started looking at the shiny items in the display.

As soon as his eyes started sweeping the merchandise, a salesclerk approached us. "Hi gentlemen. Something I can help you with today?" she questioned, black blazer highlighting the ornate brooch that was clasped onto its lapel, likely a piece from the shop's display. I smiled, nodding to Wes as he spoke.

"Yeah, I'm looking for a Christmas gift for my girlfriend," he replied and the woman nodded. I smiled at the mention of his girlfriend, but didn't say anything about how he just used the term for the first time in my presence.

"Anything you have in mind?"

"Not really," my roommate admitted. "I'm hoping this guy here can help me out a bit once I decide on what kind of jewelry I want to buy," nodding toward me as he spoke.

"Well, he certainly looks like a man of discerning taste," the woman added with a wink as she scanned over my ensemble. I figured her wink wasn't flirty, but more of an unspoken acknowledgement of my style. She certainly wasn't wrong; I was damn stylish. "In this case, as you can see, we have earrings and down here we have pendants and necklaces and a bit further down we have rings and—"

"Oh, it's a bit early for rings," I joked as I nudged Wes' shoulder. He didn't reply or acknowledge what I said; he actually avoided my gaze, effectively causing me to be a bit confused.

It was as if the saleswoman knew that we needed to talk as she softly excused herself and said she'd be available when Wes had an idea of what he wanted to look at.

"A ring? Really?" I whispered as Wes stayed fixed on the earrings in the case below where his hands were laid on the glass.

"No, I mean... maybe?" he struggled as I tried to keep my eyes in their sockets. This was Wes we were talking about; the guy who was kind of a slob and whose mood would fluctuate the blink of an eye but who hadn't had a serious girlfriend in years. And yet, here he was, a few weeks into dating Lauren and the thought had crossed his mind that he might buy her a ring – let alone *the* ring - at some point, maybe even today. "It's not like I want to propose right *now* or anything," he admitted, causing me to relax a bit. "But I have thought about it at least a little bit." He sighed. "We're at the age where we don't just date to have fun anymore. I'm fast approaching on 30 and I'm done trying to meet women at bars or through mixers at work. The women at bars tend to be trashy and the ones at firm mixers tend to be boring."

I laughed as I imagined Wes trying to date a stoic lawyer. He could be incredibly serious at times, but I knew he'd find someone so severe tiresome after a while. "But Lauren... she's really different, and in the best way possible. And I think I'm in love with her. So, yes - I have thought about a...future with Lauren. And even though I'm not going to drop down on one knee tomorrow, I think with time I might. I'm just sick of dating around and with Lauren, I don't really think I'd find anyone that would hold a candle to her at this point."

Wes' cheeks flushed as he still refused to meet my eye line. I gently placed my hand on his shoulder, the contact causing him to look at me over his shoulder with a tentative smile. "It's okay, Wes. I'm just... surprised that you've already thought through all of this already. I know you're a big picture kind of guy, but I didn't realize that you wanted all of that right now."

He shrugged. "Why wouldn't I? I have almost everything I want in life and I just want one last thing before I truly have it all."

I quirked my brow, not fully understanding. "A wife?"

"No," he said with a gentle laugh. "Well, sort of. Love. Preferably with a wife. Someday. And it could be her, ya know?"

I chuckled, the thought of my high school friend marrying my college roommate and best friend from college would certainly not have been something 16-year-old me would have expected. But hey, things change and expectations shift, as we get older.

"Have you thought about it at all?" he asked as he looked over the earrings in the case.

"Thought about what?" I questioned as I stood next to him looking at the pendants in the next case.

"Getting married. Or being in a committed long-time partnership, or whatever."

I shrugged. "Of course I want that – I'd be lying if I said no. But I haven't really thought too hard about who it would be."

"What about Blaine? You must like him if you've been dating him for as long as you have. Do you think you could love him?"

I rolled my eyes. It wasn't that I was irritated with him for asking; I was just worried that Wes was going to go down this path of us having twin weddings or something. He had joked about it one night when we were drunk in college, but I had a feeling he was only partially kidding. Plus the fact that he and Blaine were friends and Wes still felt like he needed to be the guardian of my love life made me wonder if he was looking out for me or just plain curious. "I don't know."

He nodded slightly and walked next to me, looking at the necklaces that I was standing in front of. I started thinking about what Wes had said – that he was starting to realize that he had feelings for Lauren that might be love and might, one day, end up with them married. I figured some of Wes' desire had to do with his internal clock telling him he needed to be married by the time he was 30, but I knew some of it was just that Wes was ready and Lauren seemed to make him happy and that was enough for him to feel like she could be it.

Then I thought about my relationship with Blaine. I don't remember ever being so drawn to someone before. The fact that I remembered a random face from a random restaurant and it lingered for so long surely had to mean something. Coupled with the fact that he also pursued me and we ended up together in the way that we did... it was already turning into more for me.

He made me happier than William ever had, made me feel more self worth than any of the guys I'd dated casually over the past few years, and he made me feel cherished in a way I hadn't experienced from anyone – not even my dad or departed mom.

But was it love? Was it just infatuation? Was it pure lust? I admit the clothing-free scenarios that my mind had been dreaming up lately were definitely at the top of mind – especially in the mornings. But was that

it? Was it because Blaine was the first man to really pursue me since William that it would be enough to eliminate all others?

Sure, James had been attracted to me and I to him. But it felt more like he was looking for a starter boyfriend and someone who would help him on his journey out of the closet rather than someone like me who was starting to consider the fact that one day soon I'd be ready to settle down.

I wasn't ready to even truly consider Blaine just yet. He and I were still incredibly new and – really – can you know that you love someone in the span of a month?

"What you thinking about?" Wes asked as he looked at me, the light from the glass cases below illuminating his face.

"How are you already sure about Lauren?" I questioned, the ask slipping out of my mouth before really thinking about what I just posed.

"I'm not really, truly sure, Kurt. But all I do know is that she makes me... feel. In a way I haven't before. And it doesn't really matter that we haven't been together long, I'm just going off what I feel now. And I think, well, know – that I love her. Sure, that might change, but if it doesn't – well – I'll be a really lucky guy I guess," he said nonchalantly, as if admitting that he might marry Lauren is just another thing that he let slip from his lips.

I took in what he said as he continued to peruse the jewelry. I still wasn't convinced that I loved Blaine. To be honest, I didn't really want to think about anything past what we currently had. Not because I didn't want that some day down the run with someone, but because I felt like it was too much pressure to put on a new relationship.

More than anything, I was questioning this whole love thing in the first place. In looking back, I realized that I was never really in love with William and I wasn't sure that I had ever really been in love. So how do you know when you love someone? Does some sort of revelation pop into your head, as if a light bulb goes off and you just know? Or is it a creeping sensation and before you know it, you're in love with someone and you ride off into the sunset together.

Sure, I had cared about people I was with, but I never really said I loved them. Not even my friends from high school not even Wes. The only people that had captivated my heart with love were my parents. Even

loving Finn was debatable at times since he drove me so crazy, but those familial loves are so different than romantic love. I mean, they had to be, right?

And yet, here was Wes. Admitting that love was definitely in his grasp and he had no qualms about it. So why did being in love freak me out so much?

But at the same time, why couldn't I put a finger on what I felt about Blaine? What *was* it? How could I ever decide if I was in love with... anyone, Blaine or otherwise?

"This looks really nice," Wes interjected as he, thankfully, pulled me from my qualms and doubts about me ever falling in love. He was pointing at a pearl drop pendant, the simple element hanging from a delicate silver chain. It really was nice, dainty yet beautiful and a good statement piece.

"It really is," I agreed as he waved for our sales girl to come over.

A smile adorned her face as she approached us. "Have you decided?" she questioned.

Wes answered in the affirmative, but in my head I knew my answer was a resounding *no*.

LATER THAT NIGHT

What are you up to tomorrow night? –K

Nothing? I thought we were going to hang out? –B

Of course we are! I was just confirming. ;) –K

But would you care if we had a couple of crashers on our party? –K

No? –B

How would you like to have dinner with Wes and Lauren? Then maybe we can all do something afterward as well? Wes brought it up while we were out shopping, so I wanted to see if you were okay with that. –K

That would be great. Tell me when and where and I'll meet you guys there. –B

Sounds good! I'll text you tomorrow. –K

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Sunday, December 2

BLAINE

The weather was, indeed, slightly warmer just as the weatherman had predicted. It was strange for New York to have temperatures over 50 degrees in December but I wasn't complaining. Rather than bundling up in my warmest of coats, I stood outside of Buona Notte in Little Italy in a canvas jacket over my plaid button up and jeans with cognac-colored boots kicking the sidewalk as I waited for my best friend from high school and his girlfriend, and *my boyfriend*.

Kurt decided for us to meet in Little Italy since Lauren was coming over from Brooklyn and it was one of the first stops off the Q in Manhattan. Not to mention the fact that good food was around every corner in this neighborhood and who didn't love a good plate of pasta?

The past week had been riddled with me lost in my thoughts yet trying to stay focused on work. Things were going well in the studio and I was becoming closer with Jeremy and the guys in the band. Most of the nights this week, we would all go to get food after we wrapped in the studio and it was nice to have something to distract me while Kurt worked.

I had only seen Kurt once this week – the week back from Thanksgiving being busy for both of us – so I was really thankful that he and I had an established date night to look forward to. I hadn't expected it to be crashed by Wes and Lauren, but I didn't really mind.

I was afraid to be left alone with Kurt if I was being honest. Well, that wasn't really true. I was afraid to be alone with Kurt in an Italian restaurant where re-imagining Lady and the Tramp was a possibility and things could come blurting out of my mouth in a moment of utter cuteness. If I was being truthful with myself, I still wasn't 100% sure about where my feelings lie but I knew enough that it was probably too early for me to admit aloud to Kurt exactly how much I thought about him.

The insecurities and doubts lingering from the few relationships I had were rearing to a head – and during the worst time of year. Christmas was generally a time where people seem to be in love everywhere you go. At least this year I actually had a boyfriend during the holiday season. But we were still new in our relationship so it was confusing to know exactly what the protocol was regarding the holidays.

I suppose that would be the case for most holidays; trying to figure out if you should have your new boyfriend as your +1 to parties, whether or not you mention them to the family on Christmas morning, what you should get them for Christmas.

Crap. What am I supposed to get Kurt for Christmas?

Ugh.

I groaned out loud as I thought about it. As if I didn't over-analyze things enough, now I had to add this to the list of things I needed to sort out sooner rather than later. And how would I even bring up the subject of exchanging presents with him? And was he going home to Ohio for the holidays? Should I propose that we meet up or something?

And here I thought having a boyfriend at Christmas would be nice for a change.

"Hey Blaine!" I heard Wes say as I quickly tried to fix a smile on my face. I was thankful for Wes' interruption primarily because my mind was about to go down a very negative path and I didn't want negativity to quell my date with Kurt, Wes and Lauren.

"Hey!" I exclaimed as I saw Wes and Kurt walking toward the restaurant. Wes was a step or two ahead of Kurt, effectively hiding my boyfriend behind him denying me a glance at him from afar. As Wes approached, he shook my hand and pulled himself in to clap me on the back – the official "bro hug."

He stepped back, leaving room for Kurt to give me a hug. "Hi," Kurt said with a small smile and I pulled him in quickly for a hug, eager to linger in his embrace and the warmth and radiance that was *Kurt*. I latched my arms around his shoulders and his went around my waist and I swear I could feel him pulling us closer at the hips. Not that I was complaining, but he needed to be careful with that because who knows what would... pop up. This was Kurt we were talking about and I already had a hard enough time resisting him. Situations like our hips flush together would not help. Especially not in the presence of his roommate and my high school friend. That would get uncomfortable quickly.

Instead of thinking about *that*, I focused on how he made me feel when I hugged him. The essence of Kurt was everywhere but I realized that hugging him made me happier than I could have thought. Who knew something so simple would make me feel so much? "I missed you," I uttered and immediately slunk back, afraid that my whispered musings would terrify him.

If they did he didn't let on, since he replied, "I missed you too." He quickly leaned in for a kiss on my lips and I reveled in the slightest touch of my lips against his. The kiss couldn't have lasted more than a second or two, but it was almost enough to sate me for the rest of the week. God, I couldn't get enough of his lips.

"We're just waiting on Lauren," Wes noted as Kurt and I separated ourselves from each other, still latched with our fingers finding their rightful place with the others as my palm warmed his.

I smiled as I looked down at our hands. "I'm okay waiting," I said.

"It shouldn't be too much longer. She just texted me and said she was on her way over here from the station, so it should be..."

"Less time than you'd think," Lauren said, interrupting her boyfriend. At the sound of her voice, Wes turned to her – giving Kurt and I a view of his profile – and the smile that adorned his face was enough to light the entire street. I don't think I'd ever seen Wes be so incredibly geekily happy in my life and it was rather adorable.

"They're so cute," Kurt whispered to me as Wes and Lauren hugged. I chuckled in agreement as Wes kissed Lauren on the cheek. Lauren's smile was about as bright as Wes' and she blushed as Wes' lips touched her cheek. It really was rather adorable for two grown adults to be so damn cute.

"Shall we go in?" Wes asked, reaching for the door. Lauren nodded and slid into the restaurant as Wes held open the door, Kurt and I following close behind.

Kurt and I squished a bit so we could both go through the wide door at the same time and I stilled as I felt the back of Kurt's hand swipe my thigh a little close to the crotch as he stepped ahead of me through the door.

"Sorry," he said blushing a bit as he realized his hand had come in contact with somewhere on my pants, probably not realizing that he had nearly touched me with the back of his hand *there*.

"It's okay," I replied quickly, and squeezed his hand reassuringly, trying to stave off the sensation of Kurt's hand against my leg.

"I saw that," Wes whispered in my ear as he walked past us, letting the door shut behind him. My ears immediately flushed pink and Wes chuckled softly.

I laughed in embarrassment, causing Kurt to turn toward me. "What you two up to?" he asked, curiosity getting the best of him.

Wes shrugged and I couldn't help but do the same – hoping Wes wouldn't point out that Kurt's mishap nearly ended with him unintentionally feeling me up with the back of his hand in front of the family of four that was waiting to be seated.

Kurt didn't press it further and simply rolled his eyes as we approached the hostess to be seated. She pulled out four menus and brought us to a cozy booth in the back of the restaurant; Lauren sliding in on one side with Wes following close behind, ensuring that Kurt and I were sitting on the same side of the booth as our menus were presented to us.

I shrugged off my coat and stowed it in the space between the wall and me. I noticed Kurt unbuttoning his own gray coat. "Do you want me to take it from you?" I asked.

"If you don't mind," he replied as he stood to take off his jacket, probably to make sure that he didn't accidentally hit me again since we had limited space in the booth.

When he stood up, I was granted a wonderful view and I couldn't help but hear Wes chuckle in the background as I took in the sight of Kurt. He was wearing fewer layers than normal – probably due to the warmer weather – and his fitted blue jeans held his light blue oxford in place with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. I couldn't see much of his arms, but what I could see was defined since the oxford was a bit more fitted than how most men wore this type of shirt. It also didn't hurt that I could see the muscles move rhythmically under his shirt, leaving my mind to wander in the many ways Kurt's muscles would move as he did most things, pick up a pen, fold his clothes, wrap his arms around me, touch his—

"Here you go," he said as he held the coat in front of me as he was back in his place in the booth.

"Uh, thanks," I uttered as I awkwardly shoved his folded coat on top of mine, willing my mind to retreat into less sexually charged places. The one annoying thing about being a guy is the way that our minds tend to go from zero to horny in seconds flat. Maybe it wasn't true for all guys, but it was certainly true for me. And dating Kurt had only made the problem a bit more... frequent. "What are you guys going to get?" I asked as I deferred attention away from the fact that I was just openly ogling my boyfriend in public. Wes snickered, which meant he had caught me, as Lauren and Kurt flipped open the menu to decide on their

meal for the evening. I was thankful he had been the only one to notice - that could have been embarrassing.

...

The evening passed by quickly and slowly at the same time, if that's possible. The conversation was cheery but filled with nostalgic moments and lots of "remember that time when," and "oh have you heard from so-and-so" sporadically thrown in. Lauren and Wes seemed to have a comfortable banter established between them as they sat nestled against each other in the booth. Wes' arm was draped lazily on top of the booth behind Lauren with his hand drooping softly at Lauren's shoulder, grazing her shirt with his fingertips. They weren't facing each other but every so often when the other was talking, they would look at them and smile. You could tell just by looking at them that they were a couple and they were very much into each other. It really was sweet.

Kurt and I were seated closely but the lingering touches our friends had wasn't mirrored with our actions. Kurt sat with his legs crossed under the table and his left hand slotted between us with his pinky heating the side of my thigh with its presence. I sat with my left hand holding my head up and my right in my lap after the meal had concluded. I still loved holding hands with Kurt, but wasn't feeling bold enough to reach out and grab his hand next to mine in the seat.

In my mind I was afraid that I was going to push him away by being too clingy and one way to do that would be by us holding hands or being overly handsy. Kurt didn't seem to be really into PDA in general aside from hand holding and kissing on occasion, but so far he hadn't been the kind of guy to want a lot of physical touch. He didn't seem uncomfortable with it per se but he had never really been the one to initiate it in public.

It was true that he and I had held hands before, had kissed plenty of times and had hugged more times than I could remember. But so few of these things were done in public and hardly any of them occurred in the presence of another couple. The only other time it had been remotely like that was at Santana and Brittany's engagement party. I think the main reason I felt so bold there was because Santana made me confront the issue, and I was also feeling the love from one of my favorite couples radiating through my actions.

The conversation Wes had started – something about a new café that he and Lauren had found last week – was abruptly cut short when Wes jumped in his seat. Quirking my brow at his reaction, I realized that his

phone vibrating in his pocket had startled him. He glanced at the screen and looked at us – but mostly Lauren – apologetically. "I'm sorry, but this is one of the partners and I'm assisting him on a case that he's presenting on Monday and I guess he—"

"Well, answer the phone then," Lauren interrupted. He smiled and stood up from the table, quietly dismissing himself to step outside to talk to his boss.

As Wes jogged outside with the phone to his ear, Kurt also stood from the table. "I'll take this opportunity to powder my nose so to speak," he chuckled as he made his way toward the other side of the restaurant where the bathrooms were.

I smiled as I watched his retreating form. It didn't matter what Kurt was doing, I couldn't help but be captivated by him.

"So, Blaine," Lauren said, effectively shifting my attention to her. "How have you been?"

"Good," I replied. "Busy, but good. How about you? Do you miss working at The Bell House?"

She shook her head. "Nah. I knew it was a temporary thing anyway, though I do miss getting free drinks on the regular."

I chuckled. "I can understand that."

She snorted. "Please, as if you ever paid for a drink on my watch."

"Well *now* I have to pay for drinks!" I exclaimed, causing Lauren to giggle. "But I guess you leaving was worth it to see you so happy."

"Yeah," she said dreamily, her eyes glazed over, as she seemed to be lost in her thoughts.

I looked out to Wes who was still chatting on the phone outside, but who had snuck a look at his girlfriend through the window, a smile spreading across his face. His eyes shifted toward me and I winked, causing him to blush furiously and shuffle a bit down the sidewalk to avoid my stare.

I chuckled as I turned back to Lauren who was still in La-La Land. "You guys are really happy aren't you?"

She smiled. "Me and Wes?" I nodded; who else would I have been talking about? "Yeah. We haven't been together long but I know that he's just... really great. And he's made me feel more... just more. More than I have about any guys I have in the past." She paused to take a sip of her drink. "I didn't date a lot, but I've never felt this giddy and giggly about any guys in the past – crushes, dates, boyfriends or otherwise. I think..." she started, looking hesitantly at the door. She leaned in closer and I did the same. "I think I love him."

"Have you told him?" immediately popped out of my mouth, slightly afraid that I had crossed some sort of boundary since Lauren and I weren't exactly good friends.

She shook her head furiously. "No, definitely not. I haven't dated in forever; I don't know how that works. But I'm afraid to scare him off by saying something like that when we've only known each other for a month or so."

"I hear that," I uttered, barely above a whisper.

"What does that mean?" she asked.

I sighed. "I'm afraid of scaring guys... well, Kurt... off by being too, I don't know, forthcoming? Is that even the right word? It's happened before." She looked at me curiously, so I elaborated. "I tend to come on... strong I guess. With guys – especially gay guys, from my experience – commitment is not something that comes easy for us. But I'm not like most guys in that respect. I tend to be affectionate and want to commit earlier than most would. At least that's my past experience. And I really don't want to mess things up with Kurt because he's so..." I didn't want to elaborate but Lauren just nodded in agreement, as if I didn't need to explain further. "I don't want to make him uncomfortable or come off too strong. But how you feel so much more with Wes, that's how I feel with him."

She smiled at my admission, but I just shifted uncomfortably in my seat. I hadn't even admitted all of this aloud to anyone, and here I was sharing it with Lauren. "I don't know why I told you that," I admitted.

She laughed. "It's the bartender in me lingering even though I don't do that anymore. I make people feel comfortable I guess."

I snorted. "I guess."

"I don't know much about Kurt and how he is in relationships, but I can tell you what I know about him from high school and what I've witnessed now." I looked at her, encouraging her to continue. "Kurt was always different than other guys in high school. He was feisty and curt on occasion, but deep down he was incredibly affectionate and caring. That has only increased as he's grown from what I can tell. He always has a kind word for anyone who deserves it and he does his best to seek out the best in everyone. It's hard when people are total assholes, but Kurt will still defend and protect them even if they don't always deserve it. Kurt is very intentional with everything he does and says and he doesn't take anything lightly, but everything he does, he does it for a reason. And I'm sure there's a reason that he started going out with you and the fact that he refers to you as his boyfriend." I blushed as she admitted that he had called me his boyfriend. Sometimes I feel so undeserving of such a wonderful title as Kurt Hummel's boyfriend, but I'll take it.

"So you said that you're not like most guys when it comes to relationships. From what I've witnessed, neither is Kurt." I smiled. Kurt definitely wasn't like most guys – which is the reason I was falling for him so quickly. "But he's worth whatever you're feeling." I nodded in agreement, Kurt was worth so much more than I could fathom.

But I wasn't expecting the next thing she said.

"Do you love him?"

I stared at her, slightly stunned. I felt my mouth open and shut without a sound, but before I knew it, my heart was starting to speak before my brain could stop it. "I—"

KURT

"Sorry about abandoning you guys like that," I said as I approached the table. Blaine and Lauren jumped slightly at my presence, but I realized I had just interrupted their conversation. That probably accounted for the abrupt halt to their conversation. "And I'm sorry about interrupting," I directed at Blaine since he was the one speaking as I arrived at the table. "What did I miss?"

"Blaine and I were just talking about the warmer weather," Lauren stated. I looked over to Blaine who silently nodded his head in agreement.

"You sure like to talk about the weather," I said as I nudged Blaine's shoulder. He chuckled delicately and looked up at me, his eyes giving off a softness that I hadn't seen before. I knew Blaine's eyes were stunning but they somehow gave off a different vibe than they had whenever I glanced at him before tonight.

"I can't help it," he said. "Having warmer weather in December is practically unheard of."

I giggled. "You're lucky I like you, otherwise I would think you were always trying to make small talk with everyone about boring things like the weather."

He gave a small smile and averted his eyes to the table. He had been acting somewhat shy all night and I didn't quite understand why. He might have been stressed about work or our double date so he was probably just thinking a lot about something. He didn't even hold my hand when we were eating. Not that I needed him to or anything, it just seemed unlike him. I couldn't quite read his every move but I knew that he really liked physical affection.

I liked physical affection too, but I was still a little leery of PDA after dating William and growing up in Ohio. Some things just become engrained I guess.

I wasn't going to question the lack of his hand in mine, but I did miss it. I missed him being affectionate; hugging me with his arm lying on the small of my back more than I expected to. It was nice; it made me feel wanted and cared for in a way I hadn't experienced before. And seeing Lauren and Wes with their small touches made me jealous.

Their adoration for each other was palpable in everything they did and it was sickeningly sweet. But if two people were deserving of love, it was Wes and Lauren.

And yes, it was love. Even if they hadn't admitted it to each other I was privy to their feelings for the other. Lauren hadn't told me yet but I could read the girl like a book. She tended to be emotionally reserved like I was, which only meant that I could understand what she was feeling more than she realized. The way she smiled at Wes all the time, how she mentioned him in our conversations even when he wasn't involved in the slightest, the way she would squirm when he would text or call her; it was a sight to be seen. Given that Wes was thinking about getting her a ring and had told me so, I knew the same was true for him.

I had spent the last day thinking about what I felt about Blaine. The sweet man that was sitting next to me in the booth was a truly wonderful guy and I knew that even though we had only been together for a

month, that I already cared about him more than I had with any other guy. He wasn't afraid to show me how much he cared in return and that was new for me.

The questions I thought about when Wes and I were shopping had lingered overnight, but somehow things seemed to make a little more sense when I was actually *with* Blaine. I didn't necessarily have a way to categorize what it was that I felt – that much hadn't changed – but I knew that when I was with him in person, I just *craved* him. I wanted to feel his hand, the reassuring presence of his warmth next to me, the musical sound of his laughter mixing with mine.

So, yes, attraction was at the root of what I felt for Blaine. I mean – hello! – the man is *hot*; no one could disagree. But it was more than that; I knew that now. It wasn't just lust. It wasn't just friendship. It wasn't just attraction. It was *more*.

Maybe it was "the L-word." But I didn't want to say it until I was really sure. I didn't even want to say the word to myself until I knew. I was still hoping it would hit me like a bolt of lightning and I would just know for sure, but until then I just knew Blaine was *more*.

"Earth to Kurt," Wes said as he shook the table in front of me. Apparently I had zoned out and missed the fact that my roommate had rejoined the group.

"Sorry," I said, mind returning to the group. I looked over at Blaine who had a puzzled look on his face. I reached out to the hand in his lap and reassuringly took it in my own and smiled at him. He beamed in reply and I knew that I had done the right thing. Seeing that dazzling smile on his face made me feel like goo on the inside and I definitely could get used to the feeling.

"The check has been taken care of, so how about we blow this Popsicle stand," Wes suggested.

"Please tell me you did not pay for everyone," I said, glaring at him.

He shrugged in reply and Blaine laughed. "He still does that?" my boyfriend questioned.

I nodded. Apparently he had done this in high school too based on Blaine's reaction. "It's annoying how he's like a ninja and assumes that he needs to pay for the check when clearly we can fend for ourselves."

"I can't vouch for you gentlemen, but I expect to be pampered," Lauren rebutted.

"I can manage that," Wes said softly, causing Lauren to blush and Blaine and I cooed over them. They shifted slightly with discomfort at our attention to their cuteness, but they got over it quickly when I pulled Blaine out of the booth by our joined hand.

"You guys are pretty cute too," Lauren decided as she grabbed her purse and jacket from the booth.

Blaine had our coats in his hand and he relinquished my hand to help me into my jacket. The gentlemanly gesture was adorable and slightly over the top in my opinion, but I loved it. He quickly shoved his jacket on and replaced his hand in mine again. I smiled as I looked down at our hands and looked back up at him, seeing a grin of his own shining on his face.

"I suppose we are," I noted as we left the restaurant hand-in-hand.

I may not have been ready to say - or acknowledge - those three words yet but if things continued this way and I kept feeling this strongly about Blaine, I knew I would be soon.

Very soon.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Monday, December 3

I just got an embarrassingly large flower arrangement at my apartment. –K

My, my. Why would that be? –B

I have no idea, but apparently some weirdo is pretty happy to have spent a month in my presence. –K

Man, that guy is really lucky. –B

He really is. –K

And the guy he's gushing over is so humble. –B

Of course he is. –K

But seriously. Happy one month, Blaine. The flowers were really sweet. –K

I tried. I hope they're okay. –B

They're beautiful. And quite festive. Poinsettias are underappreciated in my opinion. –K

Agreed. And I figured those were better than roses. They're too predictable and you, dear sir, are anything but predictable. –B

I hope you're okay with that. –K

More than okay. –B

...

I'm pretty sure I'm going to get fat now. –B

Why's that? –K

Apparently some hottie left me a giant basket of cookies for me at reception and I have now eaten 8 of them.
-B

Blaine! I just dropped them off! -K

So they're from you?! ;) I know, but they smelled really good and I didn't want the guys to see me with them so I ate some. -B

Why didn't you want them to see your cookies? -K

Because I don't want to share. -B

Haha. Didn't your parents tell you that sharing is caring? -K

I don't share. Not when it comes to you. -B

Or cookies. -B

:) So I guess you liked them? -K

They're spectacular. Did you make these? -B

I did. They're my signature white chocolate macadamia nut cookies. I only make them on special occasions. Today seemed appropriate. -K

You just wanted to outdo my flowers didn't you. -B

These were baking well before I got your flowers, but I think I did all right. -K

Definitely. My weakness may be pie, but cookies are a close second. Well, third really. -B

Third weakness? If pie is one, how are cookies third? -K

Pies are second, cookies are third. -B

What's number one? -K

You'll find out some day. -B

Spoilsport. -K

Voice Message Received at 8:07pm

"Hey Blaine. It's Jeremy. The guys and I are headed out for the night and we're going to grab some dinner but you disappeared after your phone call so I hope everything is all right. Zach and the guys seem bummed that you don't appear to be joining us tonight, but we'll see you tomorrow. Either way, hope everything is cool and have a good night!"

Voice Message Received at 9:39pm

"Kurt, it's San. I just wanted to make sure you and Blaine were still alive. I saw him practically running out of the studio off somewhere with a dopey grin on his face and I figured you had something to do with it. If you're with him, can you tell him to call me? His baby band that he's working with keeps calling to make sure he's alive but he has his phone off so I can't get ahold of him. They're driving me crazy and I need to get them off my back. Hope you two are having fun. Let me know if I need to send over condoms. Adios."

Voice Message Received at 11:23pm

"Kurt, it's Blaine. You just left my apartment and I think you have your phone turned off which means that you're going to get this incredibly cheesy message. I just wanted to say tonight was great, *really* great. And this past month with you has been wonderful. I still can't believe you wanted to go to Cosi for our one-month anniversary but I'm glad we went in the end. Those s'mores were good! Anyway, sorry to ramble on your voicemail but I had a really great time and thank you for being willing to spend the last month with me sticking around. I-I... I'll talk to you later. Bye."

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 4

Voice Message Received at 12:15am

"Lauren, it's Kurt. Oh my GOD tonight was amazing. I'm sorry that I'm calling you so late, I know you're probably sleeping or something but I had to gush to someone and since you're my girl, I thought I'd try to see if you were awake. Also, have I mentioned that Blaine is the sweetest guy ever? And also how he's the best kisser? Seriously, the BEST. And when I dropped him off at his apartment tonight we totally ended up drinking a bottle of wine, spent forever making out and I am fairly sure I have a massive hickey. Is it weird that I'm not embarrassed by that? Because I'm so not.

And I almost started to undo his shirt but his freaking phone rang and totally ruined the moment. Which is okay I guess since I needed to go and he has to work at 9 tomorrow, but god, making out with him is... yum. And it was his band trying to get ahold of him because he didn't go out with them for dinner. Obviously he was doing something better! I mean, not doing... he and I weren't... God, how long is this voicemail? I think I am still feeling the adrenaline and alcohol and I'm talking too much. Hope you enjoy this little message and I suppose we can have a full debrief about this tomorrow. Mwah!"

Voice Message Received at 10:02am

"Kurt, Lauren here. Do you realize that you left me one of the longest voicemails in my life? Either way I was cracking up almost the entire message and I honestly hope you remember leaving it for me. I can't wait to hear more about how you have a 'massive hickey' and I wonder if you have a matching set since I'd guess that you'd try to reciprocate on your little necking session. Let's be sure to chat tonight."

Voice Message Received at 6:13pm

"Blaine, you seriously are making me look bad. Lauren called me to tell me all about how sweet and adorable you were with Kurt for your anniversary and now I feel like I'm paling in comparison as a boyfriend. You're lucky we're friends otherwise I'd be pissed.

Oh, and Kurt has been as high as a kite since yesterday so whatever you did, good job. And nice job on that hickey – or at least I imagine there's one there since Kurt is wearing a scarf and it's way too warm for one. As his quasi-brother I should be chastising you. But as your bro, have a virtual high five. Later, man."

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 8

KURT

With Christmas around the corner, our performances at work were becoming a little more sporadic with the holiday hours kicking in. This meant that our evening shows started later, which brought both good and bad things with it. The good thing was that I could spend more time with Blaine before shows. The bad thing was that I couldn't talk to him afterward since we wouldn't be done for the night until after midnight and Blaine needed to keep up his sleeping schedule. He had been really busy with work lately and I knew he really enjoyed his work, but it was also taxing.

With the weird hours and our mismatched schedules, I wanted to surprise Blaine with an impromptu lunch at his apartment. I figured he and I could decide on what to eat and go to the store and grab everything before making the meal together. I partially wanted to go with this route because I wasn't sure what Blaine would want to eat since the warmer weather eliminated the need for soups or hearty meals, but I also wanted to make Blaine actually use his kitchen. He had a perfectly good refrigerator and stove yet I don't think he'd used it in years.

I arrived at Blaine's apartment at 11 with the hopes of surprising him. I buzzed the intercom, but got no reply. After another three times, I concluded that Blaine wasn't home.

Weird. Maybe he's running errands or something.

I sighed and realized I should have probably called before making the trek to his apartment but thought it would be better if he didn't suspect anything. I reluctantly grabbed my phone from my pocket and went to my favorites and clicked on Blaine's name.

Yes, he had been upgraded to my favorites – primarily because I called him every day. Seriously, if you looked at my call log I either called him or... nope, just him.

I pressed the received to my ear as the ringing began. After two rings, I was met with a rather unexpected sound.

"Huh-hello?" Blaine said, out of breath.

"B-Blaine?"

"Oh... uhhh, hi Kurt," Blaine nearly moaned.

Dear Jesus, what was he doing? I thought to myself.

"I-I'm sorry, did I catch you at a bad time? You seem like you're in the middle of something."

"Oh, uh, no," he replied, sounding a bit more composed. "Sorry, I was running in the park but I'm on my way back to my apartment. I usually run the whole way back but I suppose I should walk if I'm talking to you."

I laughed. "You couldn't resist this weather, could you?"

He chuckled. "Definitely not. It's 58 degrees in December. I don't think that's happened the entire time I've lived in New York."

"It certainly is rare," I concurred. "So you're on your way back to your apartment?"

"Yeah, I should be there in a minute or two." He paused and took a deep breath, as if regaining his normal lung function. "What are you up to?"

"I'm just enjoying the weather as well, though I'm definitely not running right now," I conceded, not willing to admit that I was standing outside of his apartment.

"I don't blame you. Between the run and the weather, I'm feeling incredible today."

I giggled. "Well that's good." I heard the faint sound of a car honking in the background on Blaine's end; Blaine must be on his block now since I could hear the car in question honking down the street from where I was standing.

I decided to sit on the stoop outside of his apartment and wait – hiding me from his view. I didn't want to spoil the surprise by having him see me before he was walking up to his apartment; I was a man who needed an entrance. Besides, I loved seeing Blaine's surprised face, it was cute.

"I'm about to walk into my building, so can I call you—" I heard him say down the sidewalk before I ended the call. "—After I'm in my apartment?" he questioned into his receiver even though I'd hung up and could hear and see him in person.

"Of course," I said as I could hear Blaine stepping closer to where I was hidden. I still couldn't see him and I wanted to stay seated until he was standing in front of me.

His steps hurried a bit since I think he realized that my voice wasn't coming through the phone anymore but he couldn't figure out where I was coming from. "Kurt?" he asked but I remained seated in my spot.

I shoved my phone in my pocket and looked up and saw Blaine's running shoes in front of me. "So you found—" I said before my voice died in my throat.

Oh. Sweet. God.

Blaine was not wearing a shirt.

I repeat, Blaine Anderson, my exceptionally sexy and apparently incredibly toned boyfriend, is not wearing a shirt. His abs were defined but not overly muscular and were set perfectly nestled between the light patches of body hair that lay on his chest and the sliver that seemed to dip below his shorts. Despite the fact that it was winter, Blaine seemed to maintain a sort of glowing tan that I was somewhat envious of.

But the best parts about shirtless Blaine obviously were his abs. And the way that his hipbones gave a perfect v-shaped line that would lead all the way down to his...

Holy shit. Holy shit.

If Blaine had not turned me on in the past, he *definitely* did now.

God, I was gay; so *astoundingly* gay.

And I think I'm drooling. Okay, okay. Pay attention. Blaine is saying something.

"—Can't believe you're here, it's a nice surprise," I heard Blaine say. I hadn't really processed whatever he was talking about nor had my eyes gazed further north than the incredible abs in front of me. I knew he was in good shape – that much I could tell from hugging him and from our make out session on Monday. But seeing it in person and so close to me was something else.

Instead of agree with whatever he was talking about, I surged forward as I stood and wrapped my arms around his shoulders and gave him an unrestrained, open-mouthed kiss. I could feel Blaine's shoulders tense under my grasp, but he retaliated with his own heated kiss.

I didn't even care that he was probably feeling sweaty but he was so *hot*. And even though he'd spent who knows how long running, he still managed to smell pretty good. Once he wrapped his arms around my waist, I wasted no time and practically shoved my tongue into his mouth. It probably was a bit too forceful and some of the drool I had from seeing Blaine like that probably transferred bit, so it was probably a really wet kiss but I didn't care.

This man was my boyfriend and I needed him to know how much I appreciated him, *all* of him.

I shoved Blaine against the brick railing for the stairs and I heard Blaine groan at the way his back was grating against the brick wall, but that only made me push harder.

Our tongues mixed and I was clutching onto his slightly wild hair as I struggled to breathe through my nose why sucking lightly on his tongue. I could feel Blaine's hands clutching onto my un-tucked shirt and I could feel the whisper of a finger on the skin of my back which had become exposed with Blaine's tugging. His skin on mine set me on fire and I tugged a little harder on his hair, causing an illicit moan to come from my boyfriend's mouth.

The jingling of keys behind me made me realize that we still were in public but I didn't want someone walking into their apartment to ruin the moment we were having. I suppose it didn't need to end – it just needed to move locations, locations that were much more *private*.

I detached my lips from his in order to allow my mouth to go exploring on his neck. He gasped as my lips grazed his cheek, then the spot on his jaw just under his ear. I smiled as I looked down and saw the lingering mark I had made on Monday night – it was small and slightly faded – but I felt a sense of pride putting it there and knowing the noises he made that night were coming from him now. I kissed a trail to the faded mark and whispered, "let's go inside," while he nodded profusely against my shoulder and started digging in the pocket of his basketball shorts for his keys.

I stepped back to let him pull his keys out only to be in awe of the sight in front of me. I figured his appearance had gotten a bit jostled around while he was running, but I was fairly certain the crazy hair and reddened lips had to do more with me than his exercise routine. This unkempt version of Blaine was somehow even hotter than shirtless Blaine and it took all of my restraint to not attach myself to his face again.

He finally unearthed his keys and he calmly advanced to the door to unlock it. I heard the lock click and he pushed the door in and held it open for me to walk through. I nodded in thanks as I swept past him only to feel his arm latching around my waist and I felt a wet kiss on my neck where my t-shirt left my skin exposed. I moaned softly as he pushed us toward the elevator and he used his other arm to reach forward and push the elevator button three times, as if the motion would help it arrive sooner.

Perhaps it was luck or Blaine's persistent pushing but as soon as he pushed the button, the elevator opened and our legs moved in sync into the elevator. Blaine turned toward the buttons inside and pushed the one for his floor, his hair tickling the back of my neck as he moved.

I giggled at the contact but spun around to face Blaine once the door was closed and resumed kissing his neck. He tilted his head to the side and opened up the wide expanse of skin, which I quickly took into my lips as I planted kisses on all the skin I could find.

"Kurt..." he whispered as I found a particularly sensitive spot on his neck. One of my hands found its rightful place in his hair while the other skimmed the skin on his chest and neck. His hands lingered on my hips, tugging at the bottom of my shirt as if it were his lifeline while twisting the cotton around his finger.

The elevator dinged as it opened and removed us from our trance as I relinquished my hold on Blaine's neck in order to make our way toward his apartment. It felt like night and day as the warmth of Blaine's body left mine and our only connection point was through our linked hands.

Once we left the elevator, it felt like something had shifted. The heat and lust that was evident downstairs and even in the elevator had dissipated slightly – though some of the tension was still there. But he wasn't reaching out to touch my or maintain contact aside from our fingers. It was as if he was stilling himself for something as he walked down the hall with his eyebrows gathered, one hand rubbing his neck and the other holding my hand.

And I wasn't pushing physical contact either. Every part of my body was rebelling against me; eager for me to push myself against Blaine so he could feel how much every muscle and appendage *wanted* him. But somehow our arrival onto his floor made the situation more real; that we could make out without time limits and just let things progress.

Yes, we had made out in his apartment earlier this week and it was divine. But deep down we both knew that Blaine had to get ready for work the next morning and I still needed to go home and I hated trying to flag down a cab late at night.

But that wasn't the case today. We could make out for hours... or not make out for hours and let things go further. I definitely wanted things to go further, I was practically crying at how much I was restraining myself right now. Yet deep down, a part of me was still really nervous about it. I had some sexual experience but I was still nervous about engaging in sex since I'd only had sex with one guy and it didn't even happen that often.

He took a deep breath as he stood in front of his apartment door and struggled to open the door. I took the opportunity with the space between us to gawk at his silhouette – I still couldn't believe that this guy was my boyfriend.

He pushed open the door and gestured for me to walk ahead of him. I took a few steps into his apartment and I heard the door close behind him. I turned toward him, ready to advance and start kissing him again as if it was second nature, but Blaine stopped me.

"One second," he said as he ducked past the divider in his studio toward where his bed was. I stood awkwardly just inside the door by where his kitchen was, not sure what to do. Should I follow him into his bedroom area? Should I sit on the couch?

I had my answer in a moment as Blaine emerged from his sleeping space with a t-shirt on. I immediately frowned at the sight, not wanting to give up my spectacular view.

"We need to talk," he stated plainly as he motioned toward the couch. I'm fairly certain my eyes were bugging out of their sockets as I dwelled over where this could possibly be heading. Was I a bad kisser and he wanted to break it off? Was I being too forceful? I could understand if I had surprised him – the same thing had happened to me once. But the circumstances here were totally different than what happened to me at McKinley.

"Oh god," I muttered and cautiously moved toward the couch.

Blaine looked at me with questioning eyes before his own bulged with surprise. "Oh, god, no. It's nothing like that. I'm not breaking up with you or anything."

"Oh thank god," I breathed as I relaxed a bit into the couch. "I thought I was a bad kisser or something and this was your way of being nice and stopping me."

He grinned. "You're definitely not a bad kisser, at all. It's not possible." I laughed. "But it is about kissing. Well, sort of."

I looked at him, confused. "What do you mean?"

He sighed as he sat next to me and grabbed my hands and pulled them between us. "God, this is so awkward," he resigned as he let out a soft chuckle.

"You saying that out loud is definitely not helping," I noted.

"Okay, okay." After another deep breath, he continued. "I know we haven't been together long, but I just wanted to talk to you about being more... physical."

"Okay..."

"I can't lie, what happened downstairs was really hot. Like, incredibly hot." I giggled as he persisted. "But I didn't want it to go any further - at least not now; not today. Which is why I had to stop it once we got on the floor. I knew otherwise one thing would lead to another and I didn't want that."

"That's fine with me, and I'm really sorry if—"

"Kurt, stop," he insisted. "I want to hear what you have to say – really – but I need to think this out since it just kind of came to me while I was on my run today and what happened now kind of reinforced that. I want to spew it all out and then hear your opinion." I nodded in agreement and he continued.

"I'm not incredibly... experienced when it comes to physical stuff. I'm a really tactile person, but I'm also the kind of person that once I cross a certain physical threshold, it's hard for me to hold back. But it's not because I don't have willpower and can't restrain myself, but it's because I only do those things when it means something; it's the only time I've ever progressed things physically in the past.

"I can count on two hands the number of people I've kissed and I'm proud of that. I've just been really insistent that anything... sexual... means something, because I don't just go down that path without it

leading to something more. I don't want you to think that you somehow owe me something in order for that kind of stuff to happen, but I wanted to let you know that I just... can't."

He looked down at his feet as he finished speaking and I was blown away. It really took guts to be so bold like that. And for a guy – gay or not – to put the breaks on sex was practically unheard of. But I really respected him for valuing himself – *all* of himself – in the way that he did. It was something a wise mechanic from Lima, Ohio had always wanted for me and something I had forgotten a little along the way.

I squeezed our joined hands and Blaine looked into my eyes; his were full of doubt and fear and I hoped mine were full of kindness and were no longer full of lust – although not all of me had forgotten that I was very turned on from our earlier session. "I want it to mean something too," I agreed, and I truly did. "I'm sorry if I got a little... out of hand. I think it was a mixture of me not seeing you since Monday and the fact that, well, you're really hot..." He guffawed at that, "but I won't do that again."

"It's not that I don't want you to stop, Kurt," Blaine admitted. "I mean, I do for right now. But I *definitely* want to. God, I want to – but not today and not like this. I just... know my heart needs it to be this way."

My two heads were in disagreement on Blaine's statement to wait, but my heart agreed – now was not the time. "You're right." His shoulders relaxed slightly and he seemed much more at ease now that the discussion was out of the way. "But I can still kiss you, right?" I asked.

Blaine roared with laughter. "Of course! I certainly don't want that to stop. But let's just... keep things relatively PG-13 for the time being."

"PG-13? Really? What does that even mean? And why are we defining ourselves by MPAA standards?"

He chuckled. "How about no hands below the belt?" I nodded in agreement, though that definitely meant that I would be taking care of myself for a little while longer. It wasn't something I was ashamed of, but it was something most male twenty-somethings would hope to have "handled" by someone else by that point in their lives.

But I would wait – I *could* wait, as long as Blaine was at the finish line.

God, when did my brain become so cheesy?

"Come here," I said as I leaned back on his couch. Blaine scooted over and rested his head on my shoulder and I dropped mine to lie on top of his. Our still joined hands were woven tightly between us and I took in a deep breath, taking in the scene that I was a part of.

"Why'd you come over anyway?" he questioned softly as he lazily drew shapes on the back of my hand with his thumb.

"Oh, I totally forgot." He snorted when I admitted it and I couldn't help but roll my eyes. "I have a show tonight at 8, but I thought we could spend some time together before then – maybe make lunch and just have a lazy Saturday? I know you've been really busy and things are getting hectic with the holidays, so I thought I'd optimize the time now."

"That sounds really nice," he said.

As soon as he said it, his stomach grumbled and I couldn't help but laugh. "I think your stomach agrees."

He chuckled. "Sorry, I didn't have much for breakfast and the run took a bit out of me, so I'm hungrier than I thought I was."

"No need to apologize. We can go to the store right now and decide on the menu and have everything made and devoured within the hour so you won't wither away," I joked.

"That would be great, but can I take a shower first? I feel like I smell."

I giggled. "I didn't think you smelled, but okay."

At Blaine's mention of a shower, my mind started to wander. It was going down a really nice path, but one that was not in the PG-13 realm we were trying to keep our relationship in. I realized that thinking about him taking a shower was not exactly helping my desire to uphold his request to not progress things physically. I can't help it that I'm clearly an abs man and I was still reeling a bit from earlier. I needed to take a break from him – just to clear my head... the one attached to my neck, that is.

"How about this," I proposed. "Why don't you take... a shower... and I'll go grab coffee and we can meet at the market that's down the block from here and pick out a menu for tonight?"

"That would be great," he said as he sat up from his seat. He turned and gave me a kiss on the cheek and stood and I quickly stood as well. I was also getting hungry now that it was nearly noon and my internal clock sometimes demanded that I eat at regular intervals or else I become crabby.

Blaine made it to the door a few steps ahead of me, so he held it open as he waited for me to collect my keys that I had left on the small table by the door. "How long do you think you'll need? I don't want to loiter around the grocery store – I swear, they think I'm trying to steal something every time I'm in there for more than 3 minutes."

He laughed. "15 minutes should be enough. By the time you get your coffee, I should make it there just around the time you'd get there so I'll help keep you safe from their prying eyes."

"Sounds good," I said, turning to leave the door.

"No sir," Blaine said as I stepped into the hallway. I turned back around with questioning eyes.

"What?"

"You forgot something."

I padded myself to check for my keys, wallet, and cell phone. "No I didn't."

"Yes you did," he said with a grin as he stepped forward and gave me a kiss on the lips. He lingered for a few seconds – just long enough for me to get lost in the feeling of his lips – before the pressure released and he was standing close to me. "Now you've got everything," he whispered.

I blinked my eyes open to see Blaine's cheerful smile lighting up the hallway. "You're such a cornball," I said as I rolled my eyes.

"You love it," he teased.

"Mmmhmm," I said as I walked down the hall, not willing myself to turn back and look at my boyfriend – afraid that doing so would cause me to linger longer than I had already. "15 minutes!" I exclaimed as I pushed the button for the elevator.

"Yes dear," he replied as he shut his door.

...

"Nonfat caramel latte for Kurt," the barista bellowed as I was playing with my phone. I slipped the phone into my pocket and took the warm drink into my hands. I probably could have gotten something seasonal with cinnamon or gingerbread, but the warm weather was screwing with my mind's ability to partake in the festive drinks.

I grabbed the coffee from the counter and shuffled over to sweeten my brew even more. While I stirred in more Splenda, I thought about a lot of things – but mostly Blaine. I must have done something amazing karma-wise to luck out with a guy like Blaine. And it wasn't just because he was attractive, though he had proven that was the case. But he was more than that.

He was incredibly kind, he was intelligent and passionate, he wore his heart on his sleeve and was honest to a fault, and he was a great friend and confidant. It wasn't just like I hit the jackpot with the way he looked; I hit the jackpot with all of him.

I knew him talking to me about how he hoped to progress things physically had been awkward for him, but I was really thankful for it. In my past relationships we hadn't taken the time to talk about what we wanted – physically or otherwise – and we just went with a "let's see where this leads" attitude. That frame of thinking hadn't gone over well in the long run, but in looking back, it might have been because we weren't forced to be honest with each other.

I liked the honesty that being in a relationship with Blaine seemed to promise; it felt like we were in a real, adult relationship rather than being a high school romance or a blindsided college fling. It was real; we were real. And we had the potential to be something greater someday.

That thought alone was kind of daunting but at the same time I wanted it more than anything. In my online profile, I'd spoken about how I wanted a partnership and that was definitely true. But I think deep down, I never really thought it would happen for me. But how that I was in something – a new something, but something – that promised something fantastic, the idea of partnership for forever really appealed to me. Especially if it was with a guy like Blaine.

Who knows - this time, I could have found The One.

I let the thought of Blaine and calling him my partner ruminate as I took the two coffees in my hand and headed toward the store.

BLAINE

I was thankful that Kurt suggested that we meet up at the grocery store. I needed a few moments to compose myself – and to shower, of course.

Kurt had really surprised me today in more ways than one. The fact that he showed up at my door for an impromptu lunch was incredibly sweet, but the fact that Kurt had been so... forward... really surprised me. I certainly wasn't complaining; Kurt taking charge like that was incredibly hot.

But in the end I was glad that I stopped things before we started really going at it with each other. Holding myself back was probably the hardest thing I'd done in a long time – no pun intended – but knowing how attached I got emotionally once I had sex with someone made me take a pause and step back.

Trying to convey that to Kurt was terrifying. A guy that wasn't wanting to have sex right away probably made me seem a little weird, but in the end he ended up being incredibly understanding and even agreed with me that this was the best route for us.

Could he be any more perfect?

I took the 15 minutes I had promised Kurt to shower quickly and mentally force back images of Kurt taking control of my lips and how I had inadvertently discovered that Kurt was pretty muscular under those shirts of his.

After I re-dressed and brushed my teeth for good measure, I was out the door in exactly 13 minutes and jetted down to the store to meet up with Kurt. When I walked up outside, Kurt was holding a two cups of coffee, one of which he extended out to me as I approached.

"I grabbed you one as well since I figured you probably could use the caffeine boost as well," he said before he took a sip from his own coffee.

"Thanks," I said as I held my coffee to my lips and took a gulp. I was surprised. "How did you know that I like the cinnamon blend?"

He shrugged. "I took a guess. Since it's the holidays, I thought you might enjoy one of their seasonal blends. I also felt weird not ordering a holiday-themed drink for myself, so I ordered one for you instead."

"Well, you got it dead on – it's my favorite. Other than the pumpkin spice, of course."

"Of course," he said with a wink. He took another sip before discarding the empty cup into the waste bin. "So, did you think of what you might want for lunch?"

"Not really. I'll leave it up to you since you're the chef here," I chuckled.

"Oh no, sir. We are going to make whatever we have together. And you're going to finally use that kitchen of yours."

"We should probably take pictures and send them to my mom – she'd never believe that I actually cooked using an oven rather than a George Foreman."

"Photographic evidence can be arranged," he said with a wink. He grabbed my hand and linked his fingers with mine. "Come on, I'm starving."

...

After walking around the store for a few minutes, we decided on a caprese salad with grilled chicken. It was probably more of a spring or summer dish, but this weather threw off the traditional winter menu either of us would have normally gone with.

Kurt had taken charge once we got into the store – mainly because apparently I wasn't very good at picking out produce – and I was happy to fall in line and learn from him about the many tip and secrets to picking out the best of the bunch. He tugged me along as he explained everything to me, and I couldn't help but be mesmerized by him. We walked around the store as Kurt chatted about how to find the best deals and the importance of becoming friends with the grocers since they would tend to lead you toward the hidden gems in the store.

"Blaine, can you go check out the cheeses and see if they have a mozzarella we can work with?"

"Of course," I said, squeezing Kurt's hand to release our grasp. Rather than let go, he pulled me a bit closer and gave me a light peck on the cheek. I flushed at the contact but disentangled my hand from his and proceeded to the dairy section.

After about a minute of looking around – remembering what Kurt said about how to pick the best cheese – I meandered back to the produce section to see my boyfriend deep in thought over the selection of spinach. He held two bundles in his hand and was looking intensely at the leaves as he fanned them out in front of him.

I didn't want to interrupt him so I just stood back and watched him, as he seemed to whisper to himself about the produce in his hand. How did he take something so... boring and make it into a learning experience? How did he make everything he touched seem to glow? Whether it was looking for food in the grocery store or the way that he seemed to make everyone smile, he was a perplexing and incredible guy.

He stuck his tongue out a bit and licked his lips as he laid down one of the bundles and put the other in the basket. The motion caused my breath to hitch; the slight red peeking out between his lush lips seemed to short my brain. It was cute – how his tongue mimicked that of a kitten with its little licks to moisten his lips – but it was also somehow incredibly hot as well.

Apparently the noise from my held breath caused Kurt's attention to focus on me. Once he saw me, the smile on his face brightened the entire store. "What are you looking at?" he joked as he moved down toward the tomatoes.

I smiled in return but soon my feet stopped moving as a realization crossed my mind.

I'm looking at the man I love; my brain seemed to answer in response to Kurt's question.

I nearly choked at the thought.

I love Kurt.

I was *in love* with Kurt.

And I realized that I was in love with him as he picked out spinach. At the grocery store. Wasn't I supposed to realize I was in love with him over some incredibly romantic dinner at a fancy restaurant after some

sort of mind-blowing show or something? The fact that I realized I was in love with Kurt over something so mundane made the situation rather hilarious.

I started laughing, understanding that I seemed like a crazy person for breaking into uncontrollable giggles in the middle of the store, but I didn't care. I knew I was developing those feelings before, but now they were set in stone.

I love Kurt. I was in love with my boyfriend.

"What's so funny?" Kurt questioned, looking slightly uncomfortable at my laughter.

I walked over to him and wrapped my arm around his waist and kissed his jaw. "Nothing. Just thinking of something funny," I replied.

"You're ridiculous," he said as he rolled his eyes, but wrapped his own arm around my back. "Come on, just a few more things then we can head home."

His statement brought a huge smile on my face for two reasons. One, he just referred to my apartment as home. Sure, he probably didn't mean for it to slip, but it was nice for him to refer to my apartment as somewhere that he would call home.

But the second reason it brought a smile to my face is that someday, I hoped he would actually call it home. Maybe not that apartment, but somewhere that we lived – together. One where we could spend rainy afternoons in watching trashy TV and eating takeout, or days preparing for dinner parties for friends, or nights spent in between the sheets – whispering sweet nothings to each other after we were sated for the night.

I wanted it all with him. And hopefully – if he loved me in return – we could one day have it all. Together.

CHAPTER FORTY

Tuesday, December 11

BLAINE

The break in the cold weather had been perfect – only made more wonderful by spending most of Saturday and Sunday with Kurt enjoying being outside together.

Unfortunately, as expected, the cold weather had come back and I had been unprepared. Sunday night, the cold front came sweeping back through – bringing 6 inches of snow along with it – and giving me a nasty cold. It really was my fault for not checking the weather and sleeping with my windows open, but it had been two days and I was showing no signs of improvement.

I had called Clark Monday morning and he seemed genuinely surprised since I hadn't called in sick since I first started working at Rialto. He realized I wasn't kidding when I practically started hacking over the phone, so he said he would pass the message along to Jeremy and that he would personally run by the studio if they had any issues.

I had also received a call from Santana, who noticed my absence from work. When I started sneezing into the phone, I heard her muttering of "disinfectant" and "contracting diseases through the phone" and she swiftly hung up. I was too exhausted and gross to even think about what she had said or be offended that she had hung up on me, so I just left it to the fact that Santana was just being her ridiculous self.

I had quarantined myself in my apartment and tried to sleep on the first day. After the first day in bed, I decided to move to the couch and try to at least watch some TV or do something other than stare at the ceiling while wiping my nose for hours on end, but it was fruitless. I felt like a softball had taken residence in my nasal passages, my head felt heavy, and I couldn't sleep due to either coughing or not being able to breathe.

I hadn't been this sick in years but it looked like I was down for the count with the plague of the century.

And I was miserable.

And to top it off, it looked like I might miss our company Christmas party. I had decided to bite the bullet and ask Kurt to come as my plus one to the party on Sunday night but if I didn't get better soon, the party wasn't going to happen. And I was really looking forward to having a +1 for the first time... ever.

I grabbed the comforter I had pulled from my bed and trudged into the kitchen – hoping there was a bit of hot water left to make myself some tea. My mom had advised that I start drinking TheraFlu like it was going out of style, but it didn't seem to help much. It didn't really hurt any either so I figured the plan wasn't totally flawed at this point.

I pulled out the packet and dumped it into the nearest mug – hoping it was a clean one since I was too congested to smell it and see if that was the case – and poured the last bit of water from the kettle into the mug when my phone started going off.

I groaned as I slowly grabbed hold of the comforter tugged around my neck and waddled back to the couch with my mug in hand. I wasn't in any rush to answer the phone since I probably wouldn't be able to hear much from the person on the other end, so I figured I should get comfortable before I called them back.

The second I plopped down on the couch and adjusted the warm mug in my hands; my phone started going off again. I looked down at the screen and managed a small smile – before hacking again.

"Uh'lo? Kurt?"

"Blaine? Are you okay? Sorry to call you multiple times but you didn't answer my text messages and I hadn't heard from you in a while so I was worried," Kurt rushed.

"Sorry, I been'd sick," I said, stuffy nose obvious from my mispronunciation.

"Oh, honey, I'm so sorry. You sound awful."

"Well t'anks for cheering a guy up, Kurd," I attempted before another coughing fit interjected my crack at humor.

He giggled on the other end. "Glad to see you're still in good spirits despite the fact that you sound horrible. Do you need anything? I hate to imagine you sitting in your apartment alone while you're sick."

"I'b fine. I don' wan' you to get sick doo," I coughed.

"I'll be fine. I've managed to not get sick from Wes' grossness for years, I think I can manage not to get sick from you too." I smiled at that, imagining Kurt ferociously spraying down their apartment at Wes' first sign of sickness. That seemed like something Kurt would do. And it was adorable. "Do you have enough medicine? I can also get you some orange juice or cough drops..."

"I'be fine," I retorted. "I don' habe medicine, but I don' need id. I been sick 'fore."

"Ugh, I swear guys are the worst when they're sick," he replied.

"You're a guy, doo! Are you dis bad whed you're sick?" I chuckled.

"I at least take medicine, unlike *some* guys I know," he said with a snort. "But seriously Blaine, I'm going to come by and bring you some things, okay?"

"Kurd, you don' hab to—"

"I won't take no for an answer, Blaine. So when I buzz you to let me in, don't turn me away."

"Otay," I uttered. "See you sood."

Kurt giggled. "Bye sickie."

I groaned as I dropped the phone onto the couch and huddled up closer in my blanket. I looked around my apartment; it was as if a hurricane of tissues and coffee mugs had come through. I didn't have the energy to clean everything up, but I didn't want Kurt to see my place looking like a total disaster.

I took a small grocery bag that I had left over from Duane Reade and started shoving used tissues in it between coughing fits. I hobbled to the kitchen to throw away the offensive tissues and started to dump the empty mugs that were scattered throughout the kitchen into the sink. I would have shoved them into the dishwasher, but bending over to open the door caused my nose to leak – which was both disgusting and uncomfortable – so I just hoped Kurt wouldn't mind this one time.

After looking around one last time and deeming it worthy of someone else's eyes, I trudged back over to the couch and turned the TV on. I relaxed my eyes for what felt like just a moment before I heard the buzzer beckoning from the kitchen.

I dragged myself over to the receiver and pushed the button.

"Kurd?" I questioned.

"Yeah, can you let me in? It's freezing!" he replied.

I pushed the button to open the door and leaned against the doorframe while I waited for him to arrive to my apartment. Making my way back over to the couch and then back to the door to let Kurt in would require too much effort, so I figured waiting here in a somewhat comfortable leaning position would suffice.

What felt like seconds later, I heard a soft rap at the door. I slowly backed away from the door that I was leaning against and opened it to see my smiling boyfriend's face on the other side.

KURT

I tried to knock on the door as lightly as possible in case Blaine had a headache, but I could hear stirring on the other side as I juggled the bag and container in my hands. The moment he opened the door I smiled at the sight of him, but immediately my smile switched to a look of concern.

Blaine looked terrible – and I didn't think that was possible.

His eyes were red-rimmed; his nose was as red as Rudolph's, and his hair was like a rat's nest on top of his head. His eyes were cracked open – as if it was painful for him to keep them open – and he leaned against the doorframe, nearly pushing all of his weight against it.

"Hi," he rasped.

"Oh, Blaine," was all I could manage as I took in the sight of my truly sick boyfriend.

"Cub id," he said and I giggled internally at how his words sounded slightly like a little kid trying to speak for the first time. He sniffled before he started talking again. "Sorry thad id's a mess."

"It's fine," I replied. I took in Blaine's apartment and it was slightly untidy compared to the other times I'd seen it, but it was understandable. I saw a bag on top of his trash can filled with tissues and I felt a mixture of grossed out and a hinge of adoration for Blaine; grossed out because God knows what kinds of germs those things had on them, but found it adorable that Blaine probably tried to tidy up his apartment just because I was coming over.

I laid my coat on the back of one of his kitchen chairs and placed my scarf and messenger bag with it. After laying down my things, I peered into the bag that I'd just filled at the pharmacy. "I brought some tea, NyQuil, Mucinex, Vapo Rub, cough drops, more tissues, and a batch of soup," I said as I gestured to the bag in my hands.

Blaine tried to laugh before a cough caught in his throat. "Geez, dib you buy the whole store?" he asked.

"Hardly, but I figured you were probably totally out of supplies since you said you didn't have any medicine around here," I replied as I started opening cabinets looking for a bowl for the soup. "Why don't you have a seat on the couch and I'll bring over your soup?"

"Otay," he said as he shuffled toward the couch. He looked rather pathetic as I saw his figure walk away. He was slouched over and I thought I heard his back crack a little bit as he walked; he was the epitome of miserable.

I made use of myself in the kitchen as I heard Blaine growl as he plopped down on the couch. *My poor boyfriend*, I thought to myself as I poured the warm chicken noodle soup into a bowl I'd found in Blaine's cabinet. I grabbed a spoon from the drawer and wrapped the bowl in a paper towel and walked over to the couch.

Blaine was the sorriest sight I'd ever seen. And that's saying a lot considering Wes was the most abhorrent sick person on the face of the planet. Blaine was leaned over on the couch with his feet firmly planted on the ground with his eyes closed and his mouth open with a slight rasp coming from his mouth as he breathed.

"Blaine?"

"Whud?" he groaned as he attempted to sit up, only to struggle at the task.

"Here, let me help you," I said as I grabbed his arm to pull him up into a seated position.

Once he was seated – with his head leaning back against the back of the couch – his eyes flicked open.

"T'anks," he said. "You don' habe to do dis. You really could ged sick."

I waved him off. "I'll be fine. I took some extra Emergen-C just in case though," I chuckled.

"Good," he breathed, small smile on his lips. I gazed at him for a minute before realizing he probably didn't want me to just stare at him all day – though looking at sick Blaine was kind of adorable.

"Here's your soup," I said, extending him the bowl in my hands. "Can you manage to hold it yourself?"

"I'b nod an inbalid, Kurd," he joked, swiping the bowl from my grasp.

"Okay, okay," I resigned, exaggerating the faux frustration in my tone.

"Could you do 'be a fabor?" he asked. I nodded. "Could you ged some crackers oud of the cabined – I like to crush dem and put dem on tob of my soup. My mob and dad always used to do dat for 'be whed I was sick as a kid. "

I chuckled at this endearing attribute. "Of course," I replied as I journeyed to the kitchen to find the crackers.

Once I found them and brought them back to him, I noticed he had eaten a few spoonfuls of the soup, but also managed to spill some on his shirt and had closed his eyes again. "Blaine?" I asked softly, earning no response from Blaine. "Honey? Blaine?" The term of endearment – one that had slipped out a few times by now – seemed to awaken him as he sat up and focused on the broth in front of him. "Here are your crackers," I said, handing them over to him to do as he pleases. "I hope this magic your parents did with the crackers will help you feel better soon."

He smiled as he took a couple of crackers from the pack and crunched them up, piling them onto his soup and stirring them in. "You're doin' jus' fide ad my nurse," he hummed as he brought the soup to his mouth.

I snorted, thinking that I was nothing like the only nurse I was familiar with. Carole would be proud at my efforts, though. "While you eat, I'm going to get the medicine ready. Is that okay?" He nodded as I pulled the bag from the coffee table in front of us. I pulled out the contents and laid them all out on the table. "I know it's the daytime, but I really think you could use some sleep. How about you take some NyQuil and get some sleep before starting with the rest of these meds?"

Blaine woozily nodded as he brought another spoonful to his lips. "I debinitely need to sleeb," he agreed. "I couldn't sleeb last night – I kept coughing and had a hard tibe breathing."

"I'm sorry," I said as I gingerly touched his forearm; hoping the slight contact would bring some comfort to him since hugging or kissing was out of the question. Blaine took in one last bit of soup before putting the bowl down, noting the soup was gone.

"Here, let me take that," I said, taking the bowl from him and going into the kitchen. I rinsed out the bowl and put it – along with a few mugs from the sink – into the nearly empty dishwasher that was slightly ajar.

"You don' habe to clean up, Kurd," he called from his place on the couch.

"It's fine, Blaine. I'm not doing any heavy lifting," I called back. I grabbed a clean spoon from the drawer and came back to the couch to see a slightly less pathetic-looking Blaine sitting up. The soup must've helped a little bit since he looked less like death. "For the NyQuil," I said, handing him the spoon.

"T'anks," he replied and popped open the cap on the bottle. "Norbally I don' take dis because it makes me feel kind of crazy, bud I need to sleeb."

"I understand," I said. After Blaine took the medicine, I started to pick up the discarded NyQuil box and the empty grocery bag, taking the items to the kitchen to throw away. After realizing I had nothing left to do now that I'd brought the items to Blaine, I started packing up my bag and grabbed my coat that I'd taken off upon entering his building. "Do you need anything else? I think I'll head out to let you sleep," I asked, looping the scarf around my neck.

"You don' habe to leabe," Blaine said, now standing near the wall that separated the living room from the kitchen. He was still leaning against the wall and still looked pitiful, but the fact that he was standing gave me a little hope that he might feel better sooner rather than later. "Cub on, why don' we watch somethin' for a liddle while. I'd lub some company."

"Okay," I said, untangling my scarf and putting my coat and bag back in their place on the chair. "What should we watch?" I asked as I made my way to the couch, Blaine following in-step.

"Clueless is on Nedflix and I'b always good for dat moo-bie."

"Done," I said as he grabbed the remote and started the movie.

I wasn't sure what to do physically with us in such close proximity on the couch. It wasn't that I didn't want to reach out and touch him or lay my head on his shoulder, but I knew getting sick was not on my agenda – especially not with the holidays just around the corner.

Rather than worry about the physical contact or how I could potentially get sick, I lightly laid my hand on his arm and pulled his arm onto my leg. He looked at me hesitantly but I simply grinned in return, causing him to lightly rub his hand on my leg. Though the contact was minimal it was a nice reassurance.

We sat and watched the movie for a while and before long, I could hear Blaine's breathing even out and the scratching in his throat became a bit more pronounced. I looked over and saw Blaine lying against the back of the couch with his mouth slightly ajar and his hand still firmly placed on my leg. Normally I would think his behavior was a bit barbaric and a little too reminiscent of how Finn would end up after watching football on Thanksgiving afternoon, but somehow Blaine made it look charming.

I peeked at my watch – it was now just after 2 – and I knew that my window of opportunity to spend time with Blaine was closing since I had to be to work by 4. I took one last look at my adorably passed out boyfriend before giving him a little nudge on the shoulder.

"Blaine? I think you should go to bed," I stated. Blaine grumbled in response, but droopily took his comforter that was lying on the couch next to him and pulled it to his chest. He moved to lie down – using me as a pillow – before I pushed his shoulders forward, causing him to sit up. "No, Blaine," I chuckled. "In your actual bed. Not on the couch."

"M comfy," he whispered.

"No sir, to bed with you," I said sitting up and lightly pulling on his arm to get him to stand. He groaned as he stood and I soon found myself bearing most of his weight as he struggled to stand. I wrapped my arm around his waist as he clutched onto my shoulder for balance. If it was anyone else, I probably would have been annoyed at the dead weight, but with Blaine it was – of course – endearing.

Blaine and I finally made it past the divider in his studio toward the area that housed his bed and closet. It was the first time I'd seen his bedroom area – the bookshelf that served as a room divider had obstructed my view in the past – and I couldn't help but look around a little bit.

A vintage print of New York City was on the same wall as the window and behind his bed was a large photograph of the Brooklyn Bridge – coincidentally the same one that was the background on his Twitter page. His bed was covered in gray sheets and his comforter provided a nice contrast with its dark blue hue. He also had a few more photos of his family and friends on the small side table next to his bed – all in coordinating red frames.

I was slightly impressed at his ability to make the room go together without making it too matchy-matchy, something most men failed at, but it was just one more thing on the laundry list of things that Blaine was amazing at, apparently.

I laid him down on the bed and he groaned as his face hit the soft mattress. He somewhat quickly crawled up to where his pillows were and let out a moan as the fabric hit his face. Normally I would be slightly turned on at the sound of a man - well, the sound of Blaine - moaning on a bed, but considering that Blaine immediately started coughing after his face made contact, my libido remained in check.

I pulled the comforter up around his shoulders and did my best to cover his body with the blanket, hoping it would help him settle as his coughing subsided. He stilled after a moment and seemed to be calmed by the comforter's warmth as I tucked the last bit in under his chin.

I leaned in and gave his unruly hair a kiss. "I hope you feel better Blaine," I whispered before stepping back.

"T'anks Kurd," he replied, the only sign of his conscious state.

I stepped back to make my way past the divider when I heard Blaine weakly mutter something. Afraid he needed something, I turned back and leaned in again. "What is it Blaine?" I questioned as I stepped in closer.

"I lub you," he slurred before turning over to face the window.

I stood back, shock likely obvious on my face.

He didn't...

Did he just...

What just...

I stepped out of the bedroom area, stunned. His words had been slightly slurred, but the sentiment was unmistakable. He couldn't have meant to say anything else; there were no excuses about olive juice or anything like that.

Blaine just said that he loved me...

...while on strong medication that he said made him crazy.

I wasn't sure if I should be overjoyed, nervous, or scared. Overjoyed because it meant that for the first time in my life, a man had admitted that he loved me; nervous because what if he hadn't meant to say it - whether it was now or ever; and scared because that put things into perspective for me - and for us.

I knew Blaine had feelings for me - he had admitted as much to me in the past without really admitting that he loved me; but he had said that somehow our relationship felt different to him. I agreed with him since it really *did* feel different. But him saying it aloud made things more real somehow.

Blaine's three words made me have to confront the things I had been trying to sweep under the rug for the past few days. I was normally a very emotionally reserved guy, so admitting to any type of feelings was not something that I took lightly. And the things I was feeling for Blaine had been churning since I first met him - if I was being honest with myself - but had truly come to a head in the past few days as our conversations had gotten deeper and our time spent together had become prolonged and more intimate. And not even intimate in a sexual way - but intimate in that we were really getting to know each other in a way I hadn't let someone in for a long time.

I let the thoughts fester as I collected my belongings and got ready to embark on my journey into the cold. I walked over to take one last look at my conked-out boyfriend and smiled. He was like a giant starfish on his bed with his face toward the window and the light coming through the blinds softly illuminating his face.

And in that moment, gazing at the horribly sick Blaine, I said the thing I'd been thinking but was too afraid to say – knowing he couldn't hear me and wouldn't remember the next day even if he could understand me.

"I love you, too."