

# **Not Quick, Not Easy**

**by**

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**AU || R**

*No such thing as a quick fix.*

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## Part I

Blaine has never spoken to his parents so much as when he ends up living with the Hummels. Not since he was a kid, anyway, before everyone realised - well, how 'wrong' he is, in so many ways. But on a Friday night Burt calls Blaine's dad, and they have a stilted exchange, and then Burt will pass the phone to Blaine, like Blaine knows what to do with it. His dad's on the other end. It's like holding a snake up to his ear.

He shuffles back on the sofa, wraps an arm around himself. "Hi Dad."

*"Blaine."*

Silence. What the hell Burt thinks they're going to say to each other Blaine has no idea. He stares at the ceiling for a while, says, "How's Mom?"

*"She's fine. She's busy."*

She always is busy. Always a new class, a new hobby, a new regime. If she sat still for five minutes she'd have to *think*, and god knows where that might lead. "How're you?"

*"I'm fine. Work. Golf."*

Which is not a sport, Dad, *dancing* is more masculine, at least I work up a sweat. *"And you?"* his father says, forced and polite, and Blaine thinks, When did you give up? When did you realise that I was never going to be what you wanted? Did you give up first or did I, did I read you right, did I *know*, did I make myself stop caring so it wouldn't hurt so much?

"I'm fine."

I got 100% on my last math test. Kurt taught me how to make tarte au citron. I did not break the arm of some freakish tall asshole jock who elbowed me in the head opening his locker. I dreamed about some vacation we took when I was maybe five, sand between my toes and the way the beach smells, and woke up in someone else's house. We made pots in art class, mine was woeful, Kurt is keeping his baking beans in it like I'm six or something.

Sometimes when he smiles at me I feel like the bottom fell out of me, I can't even explain it. Like he's the thing keeping me afloat.

His dad doesn't ask when he's coming home, and Blaine doesn't ask about coming home. He could do with another pair of shoes but he'll live without, he's not going back, not even when he knows they're not in the house. He doesn't even want to breathe in their air.

He shuffles a little, clenches and unclenches his teeth. "I should go help Kurt with dinner."

*"Of course."*

"Bye."

*"Goodbye, Blaine."*

He passes the phone back to Burt, gives a grimace and a shrug, he's *sorry*, he just can't fix this. He can't make himself like his father, he can't even make himself respect him. Burt just takes the phone with a long slow sigh, lifts it to his ear again. "Hey. He's doing fine, he's happy at school. Got a perfect score on his last math test."

Blaine rolls his eyes as he walks into the kitchen, and he can feel the heat rising on his face. Kurt tells his dad these things, and Burt acts pleased, and Blaine feels like something in him snapped in two, like something that was supposed to be hidden, contained, has broken open and is exposed and vulnerable and unbearably tender. In the kitchen Kurt and Carole both have aprons on, Carole chopping tomatoes for salad while Kurt stirs a pan with one hand and licks a splash of pasta sauce from his other wrist, and Blaine feels the heat run lower, makes himself meet Kurt's eyes and smile and not think about how easy sex is, the last simple thing left to him. "Hey. You need help?"

"Make the dressing? There's a lemon on the windowsill."

Blaine touches his waist as he passes him, feels the warm thrill of his body under his clothes. Finn walks into the room and opens the refrigerator and Kurt and Carole snap at once, *"Dinner's nearly ready."* and apparently this is what families are like. Blaine cuts a lemon open. It smells almost as sharp as salt spray.

\*

What Burt never says down the telephone is *What the hell is wrong with you?*, because it's not going to help. And because he has already said it, yelled it, when he drove Blaine home that morning and saw something like revulsion on the man's face when he looked at his son; he wanted to punch the bastard, understood absolutely why Blaine had done it. The man's supposed to be his goddamn father. When Burt lets himself imagine for half a second how Kurt would look if Burt ever expressed *that* to him, he needs to sit down or throw up or punch someone. The man wonders why his son runs off the rails and he looks at him like that. Jesus.

*"I have to apologise again for the inconvenience."* the man says.

"It's no inconvenience. Once you got two teenage boys you might as well have a pack of 'em for the chaos they cause. He's a good kid."

*"I wish you would let me send a cheque, to cover - necessities."*

"I don't want your money." I want you to give half a fuck about your son. "He's helping out. He makes himself useful."

*"I'm aware that he can be difficult."*

"He's a good kid." Burt says stubbornly, because he is, and he's going to keep on saying it until this guy figures it out.

There's a pause. *"I should let you get on with things. Unless you needed something."*

I don't need anything from you. *He* does. Burt rubs his eyes. "I'll call next week, let you know how he's doing. Call if - for anything. Just if you wanna talk to him."

*"Of course."* He won't. *"Goodnight."*

"Bye," Burt says, and takes too much pleasure in hanging up. He puts the phone back in its cradle, works his fists for a bit until he can make them go properly loose, then heads through to the kitchen where it's all noise and busyness and Kurt pouring the pasta into a colander Blaine's holding, eyes screwed up against the steam, and Finn eating straight out of the salad bowl, and Carole setting plates out. She looks up at him and smiles, and Burt walks over, touches her side, kisses the top of her head. Kurt's eyes are on Blaine's,

both of their hands around the colander for a second as Kurt takes it from him, both of them still before Blaine picks up a towel and Kurt pours the pasta into the pan of sauce. "I hope everyone's hungry and hasn't filled up on salad, *Finn*."

"Dude, you physically can't fill up on salad, it's a fact, it takes more calories to chew it."

"That's bulls-" Blaine stops, finishes wiping his hand and rehangs the towel with a little flick of his eyes to the ceiling. "That's a common misconception. Avocado in particular is surprisingly fattening."

"Oh god, don't say that," Carole says, and Kurt flicks her a glance and grin, and god, *god*, Burt is grateful for his family, every goddamn day. He doesn't know what he ever did to deserve them, he has no idea what he'd ever do without them. He won't let them go. He won't. He won't.

\*

It's not just that Blaine is a horny teenager and Kurt is just absurdly attractive, and willing, and flexible. It's just that when he's having sex with Kurt he feels so right, he feels cocooned in Kurt, all the rest of the world is happening to other people, the only thing happening to Blaine is Kurt. He wishes he could be doing it all the time, wishes he could just always be slippery and naked with him, hot slide of skin and Kurt's clutching hands and the way his breath bursts against Blaine's forehead. The smell of him, god. If Blaine can breathe him in then he knows he's safe.

The only window in which they can have sex, really, is between the end of school and Kurt's parents getting home on a night. This afternoon had been a limb-tangled slow rutting, Blaine holding onto Kurt's shoulder blades, arms hooked under Kurt's arms, while Kurt straddled his leg and dragged them by slow inches towards orgasm, and in the seconds before coming Blaine had thought - what Burt Hummel would think, if he knew, *did* he know, would he still want Blaine here, what would he . . . ?

But then Kurt leaned down and bit his shoulder to keep his own whimper in, and Blaine came bucking and shuddering up against him, and let himself slump back on Kurt's bed, too sensitive all over with orgasm, while Kurt took his teeth out of Blaine's flesh and licked the sweat off his collar bone. Blaine likes the animal side of him. He knows that no-one else gets this, it's only for Blaine, his easy naked stretching like a cat before he curls up against Blaine's side and purrs there, "Oh, laundry.", and yawns.

Thank god Kurt washes his own sheets.

On those innocently clean new bed sheets Blaine keeps his head stuffed between Kurt's shoulder and chest - essentially in his armpit but it's just *comfortable* - while Kurt skims his fingers, slowly, up and down the side of Blaine's neck, and his laptop is playing low music. Who knew that Blaine would like cuddling? Blaine still thinks he won't like it every time until he curls up with Kurt and Jesus it turns out it's almost too good to bear, being held like this. The long-limbed clasp of Kurt's entire body makes him feel small, and for the first time in his life, like that's a good thing.

He's woken up on this bed in the night before, Kurt asleep beside him on top of the covers, a blanket over them both. He hopes to god it was Carole who saw them and thought they were too 'cute' to disturb, any other alternative does not bear thinking about.

He murmurs, "Do you think your dad knows?"

"Knows what?" Kurt murmurs back, fingertips soft as moths testing the muscles to his jaw.

"That we're having sex."

Kurt's fingers still, and then he says, carefully, "I'm trying not to think about it."

It must be fairly obvious, Blaine thinks. He must know, he's not stupid. Six months previously Blaine would have made a point of making it obvious just to see how he'd react, just to see if he could make Burt hate him ('The noises your son makes when I finger him, Mr Hummel, he could make a fortune in the porn trade.') It's ridiculously easy to make people hate you, a great deal easier than letting them like you. And he needs Burt to like him, or at least not hate him, he needs it humiliatingly much. More than that he doesn't want Burt to hate him. He doesn't want to disappoint him, doesn't want to see that *look* on his face he's too familiar with already. And if the way to hurt him is by abusing Kurt - he can't ever do that. He can't ever, ever make Kurt feel like crap just to vent his own self-destructive tendencies. He hates how easily these things still come to him.

"He must know," Kurt says, slowly, and Blaine glances up at his screwed-up face. "I know that. But he can't . . . I mean, he can't *let* us share a bed, it's just, it's not the 'responsible' thing to do. I know that sounds stupid. It sounds stupid to me."

"Finn's been good about it."

Finn's been surprisingly good about it. Early on, when Blaine was more of a mess than he could let himself show, they played bedroom musical chairs some nights because god Blaine *needed* Kurt and Kurt knew it; while no-one has ever slept in Finn's bed but Finn, Kurt and Blaine have shared the skinny, squeaky airbed on the floor of his room more than once, while Finn's slept in Kurt's bed. It doesn't make for a great night's sleep, half on top of each other with numbed limbs, but it's worth it when you feel so vulnerable that you think it'd be easier if you packed a bag and risked the streets, to hear your boyfriend whisper in the dark for you to *please* not leave him. Blaine knows it's partially for Blaine's sake that Kurt makes himself so vulnerable. He also knows that it's meant, though, and he can't. He can't leave Kurt. Carrying Kurt's porcelain heart around with himself is a bit terrifying some days still, it's so fragile and Blaine has just had far too much practise at breaking things, but he still clutches at it like otherwise it might escape.

Boyfriend, boyfriend. Dumbest word in the whole fucking language. It sounds so *teenage* and this feels anything but, this feels -

"I think Finn's hoping we can repay the favour some day," Kurt murmurs, tilting his head down, forehead touching Blaine's. "If he and Quinn ever get around to admitting to themselves in public."

"Your glee club is weird about relationships."

"Our glee club, Blaine." Kurt says. "But yes, they really, really are."

Blaine slips a hand down Kurt's arm, traces the edge of a braid of warm leather on his wrist. This feels like Blaine's sanity. This feels like the only wedge keeping every part of Blaine from falling to pieces. This feels like Kurt holding Blaine's multiply-cracked heart close against himself, defensive as a she-wolf with it, glaring the world down, keeping it pressed warm against his own chest.

Kurt begins to grin. "I know it's the pattern in glee club, but I would never dump you for a cheerleader."

"It's the one thing I can rely on," Blaine says, and rubs his hip, and grins. "I would never dump *you* for a cheerleader. You're prettier than any of them."

"I am," Kurt says happily, and laughs as Blaine shifts up and rolls him onto his back again, taking his wrists - Kurt watches, amused and curious - and straddling his hips, holding him down onto the mattress. "What are you doing?"



"Why don't you stop me?"

"Because I don't know what you're doing. I might like it." Kurt tips his head to the side, looks at his own wrist held to the mattress by Blaine's hand. "What *are* you doing?"

"You could get me off you easy. You're at least as strong as I am, and you have a height advantage you could use if you wanted to. But you don't."

"But I know you wouldn't hurt me."

"But you don't when *anyone* does it."

Kurt's eyes are more dangerous on his now. "Not many people are given the opportunity to pin me to my own bed, Blaine."

He watches Kurt's face, thinks about following this through. Thinks about saying to him, There will be days when I'm not there. What are you going to do? Don't you care that I *need* you? But there's something on Kurt's face too, which must mean that Blaine's letting too much of it show. Kurt says, gentle and firm, "No-one is going to hurt me."

Blaine sits back. "Someone might try."

Kurt just lays where Blaine put him, looking up at him, sort of sad. "My hitting them back wouldn't make them become a better person, Blaine."

"It might make you feel better."

"Did it make you feel better?"

"Depends on the person. Depends on the punch." Blaine catches his eye, lets the grin escape, and Kurt rolls his eyes. Blaine flumps back onto him and Kurt laughs, smacks him in the shoulder, puts his arms around him, hisses into his hair, "*When* am I ever supposed to take you seriously."

"There is far too much serious in the world." Blaine rubs his cheek against Kurt's collarbone. "And you're just - I don't even have the words, when you smile."

There's a little pause, and Kurt's hand settles into Blaine's hair. "You make me smile a lot."

"I know. I'm very self-centred."

"No you're not," Kurt says, and strokes his hair.

\*

Finn minds having Blaine in his room a lot less than Blaine at least thinks. Blaine's shoulders keep at a permanent pitch of uncomfortable apology the whole time he's in there, but he does literally only use Finn's bedroom to sleep in - he uses the bathroom to change, and hangs out in Kurt's room, and knocks before he comes in every time. And it's got to suck in ways Finn can't even imagine, your parents like, not wanting you in the house. Finn doesn't know why they picked now to not want Blaine in the house. All the crap Blaine's done but it's Blaine mellowing right out under Kurt's influence that makes him too much for them?

And Kurt said, sounding so sad and so tired, "*Think*, Finn." and left him to think about it. And when he did sort of get it it was even worse. Blaine as an unpredictable and occasionally dangerous mess is manageable. Blaine mostly behaving but hopelessly in love with another boy is unacceptable. And Finn feels about *this* big, about as big as a bean, on the inside, for thinking about it. He knows he hasn't always been the best friend to Kurt around stuff like this, but he just never realised how much it matters to guys like Kurt and Blaine to have friends on their side, because there are still so many people who really, seriously aren't on their side. It shouldn't mean so much just to have friends who don't care about it, but it does, and the world makes Finn feel young, sometimes.

Plus Finn owes Kurt, and he knows it. The entire school knows now what happened in that locked choir room, it's not the sort of secret that can be contained at McKinley, and Finn just - he just didn't know. He thought Kurt was getting shoved around a bit, and a lot less than Finn would get if he pissed Karofsky off and got whumped for it on the football field. He didn't *know*. He didn't even know that guys could like, do that, with other guys, if they didn't want to, the way douchebags do to girls who don't want to. And Puck gave him the *what the fuck* face and said, "Think, Hudson." and Finn tried to think about how it would work, and then felt so sick.

"Oh - no, like, like - *that*?"

"No, man, I wouldn't worry about it, he was probably trying to take Kurt to dinner in a really forceful way, *damn* you're stupid sometimes."

"But he didn't - is Kurt alright? He didn't - how far did he -"

"You ask him. He's your brother."

Finn doesn't ask him. Kurt mostly acted *icy* about it all, kept his head up and moved around the school in a constant seethe of self-contained contempt for every glance he got for those two weeks before Blaine came back, always with someone at his side absorbing the looks and whispers with him. Everyone knows that the football team blames Kurt for whatever Karofsky did, like Kurt's contagious, like Kurt *wanted* that to happen, and the glee club have at least learned their lesson about keeping an eye on him when Blaine's not there. Now he has Blaine attached to his side like a guard dog again he acts like he doesn't care. Maybe he doesn't care. He doesn't care about a whole bunch of stuff now he has Blaine.

Finn's just shutting his laptop down, yawning, when there are two knocks at the door. He calls, "C'min," because Blaine doesn't unless he does. The door opens, slowly, apologetically, and Blaine gives him an awkward smile and closes it behind himself. There's the airbed against the wall and three boxes, and that's it for Blaine's stuff. He really doesn't take up much room. Like, literally.

While Finn climbs onto his bed Blaine turns on the lamp on the floor, picks up a really fantastically battered paperback, and lays out on the airbed, holding the book over his face, chewing his bottom lip inwards as he reads. Finn, who's never read much - Kurt lends him books sometimes but Kurt can always tell that he hasn't read them when he hands them back ("What was your favourite part?" "Um, the middle? The middle was good." "The middle." ". . . it was good?"), Finn's always sort of impressed when people read for fun.

"Good book?"

Blaine tilts the book back to look across at him. His smile twitches. "I had the time to pick up like, five books, and they turned out to all be Terry Pratchetts. I'm not complaining." He shrugs a little. "I'd kill for my *Hellboys* right now though."

"I saw that movie."

"Satan for a father, I can relate." Blaine murmurs, and tilts the book back so he can read.

"... how's Kurt?"

"Kurt's fine," Blaine murmurs into the book. "Kurt has turned his life into an aesthetic meditation on being fine."

Finn has no idea what that means. Presumably it's good. "Um. You okay?"

Blaine tilts the book down again, and gives him a look. It's not a mean look or anything, it doesn't overtly mock what a stupid question that is, the tilt of his eyebrows is just sympathetic enough to say, Well, you think about that one. "How're you, Finn?"

"I'm. You know. Awesome."

Quinn is constantly at him like a woodpecker sitting on his shoulder and drilling his head, but making out with her is still like oh *god* so what's he going to do? The football team is halfway to dissolving entirely, since they blame Finn and the other glee guys for sheltering Kurt, Kurt the life-wrecker, Kurt who turns guys gay. And Kurt doesn't need Finn anymore. Finn failed one time too often, and Kurt's got Blaine now. Finn never noticed how nice it was when Kurt looked at Finn like he was special until Kurt doesn't anymore, now Blaine gets that look, every time. It's not even like, a love thing. It's just admiration. Finn could use people acting like he's something, because when Quinn gets on him like this, when Rachel walks around looking like a puppy he kicked in the eyes, when everyone's acting like Sam's a better Finn than Finn ever was - yeah. He could use one of those looks from Kurt right now.

"Awesome," Blaine murmurs, possibly in agreement, possibly no longer listening, and turns a page.

\*

His phone's alarm wakes him at seven. He wakes confused every time, no idea where he is, then with every idea where he is, and he shuts it off before it can wake Finn. Finn snores on. It takes a lot to wake Finn.

Blaine pads into the bathroom with clothes, and he can already hear Burt Hummel moving around downstairs. On Saturdays he helps out at the garage, partly to be helpful but mostly because he feels what

he owes painfully. At first Kurt had always taken shifts with him too to teach him on the job, but they do have a slight habit of distracting each other, and Burt won't stand for anyone in the garage being weird towards his son; it's kind of hard for them not to be weird towards his son when another boy's got his hand down the sleeve of his coveralls, so they work separate days now. It's not so bad. Blaine learns quickly, dissects each engine in his mind, doesn't mind the grease and sweat, likes making things work again.

By the time Blaine's downstairs Kurt's already up, already dressed and immaculate at twenty past seven on a Saturday morning, making smoothies. He smiles at Blaine, says, "What do you want for breakfast? I could make French toast."

"He gets French toast, I get mashed fruit." Burt mutters from the table, and Kurt puts a glass in front of him, says, "There's a spoonful of yoghurt in it." like Burt is so ungrateful. "Or did you want cereal?"

"You don't have to be up," Blaine points out, but Kurt just shrugs his smile.

"It looked like a nice day, I didn't want to waste it in bed. I thought I'd make my guys some breakfast and then head out for some shopping, we need brown rice for dinner. Did you want me to pick anything up?"

"I'm fine," Blaine murmurs, and Kurt takes eggs from the fridge.

"French toast?"

Blaine quirks a little smile. Kurt returns it, warm and hopeful, until it grows on Blaine's face too.

It's a quiet morning in the garage, there's not really enough for the normal team to do even without Blaine there to take care of the easy things. He tidies tools for Burt, says, "Kind of makes you wish for a pile-up, huh?"

"Not particularly," Burt says, and Blaine gives him the apologetic grin. Burt sighs. "You might as well call it a day, kid. Go find Kurt or something."

"I want to help."

"I know. So help Kurt, he always picks up more than he can really carry."

Blaine wonders if Burt means when Kurt is shopping or just Kurt, generally. "I-" He hears the sound of his phone in the office, and they both look across at the door.

"Probably him now, checking if it makes a difference if we switch from skim milk to just water," Burt mutters, and waves a hand. "Go. Have a Saturday. See you tonight."

". . . thanks," Blaine says, gratitude is such an awkward emotion to deal with, and wipes his hands on his coveralls as he heads into the office. He slips his cell from his jacket pocket and stops when he sees the caller. Answering it doesn't occur to him for a few seconds, he just stares, and then he thinks that something really, really bad must have happened for her to call, and picks up. "Hi, Mom."

"Hi," she says softly, her voice low, and he hasn't heard it at all in three weeks and his throat feels strange. *"Are you in the middle of anything?"*

"No, just - just finishing something up. Is everything okay?"

*"I can't just call because I want to speak to my son,"* she says, and he hears a chink, and something pouring, and thinks of the boxes and boxes of crazy herbal teas she drinks, every colour of the rainbow, every herb and fruit known to humanity. She swallows. *"How are you, Blaine?"*

"I'm fine. You know." He looks out of the windows of the office at Burt talking to one of the guys, rubbing the back of his neck, then turns so no-one will be able to see his face and puts his free arm around himself. "I'm good. Um, I don't want this to sound like an accusation, honestly, but Mom, why *are* you calling? You haven't exactly gone out of your way to stay in contact so far."

A little too deep, *"Neither have you."*

He grits his teeth and doesn't snap, *You're my Mom. You let him - you didn't try - you have to come after me, that's fair, isn't it-?*, he just says slowly, "I assumed you didn't want to hear from me. I know Dad doesn't."

*"Don't - of course we do. Of course we do, he's just - he's angry, Blaine, and - and struggling -"*

"Angry with what? No, Jesus, don't answer that question. Mom - what, why are you calling? Do you want something or not?"

Silence for a while. He thinks about the steam wavering over her tea, in that big earthy green-glazed mug she loves so much. *"I went to Marisa Herd's daughter's baby shower this morning. Do you remember Sammie Herd, she used to babysit when you were small? She's having a little boy. Due in a month."*

"... good for her?"

*"I just."* He hears the heavy sound of the mug being put down, and she sniffs. *"I just kept thinking about when you were a baby. You were the sweetest little thing, you just smiled at everyone, you were the most perfect-"*

He rubs his eyes, says, "Mom."

*"You used to like to walk my shoes over the carpet on your hands, and you would always help with the zipper on my dress -"*

"And what, where are we going with this? These are the things that made me gay and you're sorry you did that to me, what?"

*"Blaine,"* and okay, she's crying now, and Blaine feels the hot furious guilt in his stomach for making her cry (again, and again). *"I just - it doesn't mean we don't love you, it just - we haven't been able to adjust, there's just so much else, all the trouble you've been in, all those bad friends-"*

"They were never 'friends', Mom."

*"Please don't be so angry just because it's difficult for us, please. Blaine, we're trying."*

"No - *he's* not, don't even pretend like he is, don't even - he was happier when I was in *juvie* than he is now that I'm - I'm *trying* and I'm seeing Kurt. He'd be happier if I'd kept on fucking up until it got me killed than he is now."

*"Don't ever say that, don't ever even joke about-"*

"Do you think I'm joking? Mom I am - trying, okay, I am *trying*, I want to have a life, I want to have one with *him*. I'm not - that's not negotiable. Me and Kurt. I'm not not seeing him. Why can't you two see that he's the best thing that ever happened to me? Every way I'm better it's because of *him*-"

*"I don't think you know how much he's trying. I don't think you know how much it hurts him."*

"I don't think you know what it's like to come out to your parents and see that look on their faces."

*"Blaine, please, please, we just - it was a shock, and we are trying-"*

"You know what, Mom, just -" He hunches his head down, can't believe he's saying these things out loud, he never knows what he's going to do next but it doesn't usually involve *dismantling* a shield, "- just, the things I needed from my parents, I didn't get them, okay, and excuse me for acting like a dick for a few years because of that, but now I'm *trying* and being around Dad again is just - it's just poisonous, I can't do it, I can't rein myself in when I can feel him thinking that shit about me. So I don't know if you want me to say I'm sorry that I'm such a terrible son that I can't forgive you for making me feel like really you wanted someone else, but clearly I'm a selfish brat like that."

*"Blaine-"*

He could choke on these words, because he'd never believed this before now, before he actually saw it, every day in the Hummel household. "The thing is, it's supposed to be unconditional. Do you know what it's like to realise your parents have *conditions* and you don't meet them?"

*"Blaine, please-"*

"Mom, I have to go. This isn't helping, this won't help. I have to go."

*"I love you, you're my baby, I love you."*

"One down," he says bitterly. "I'm not holding my breath waiting for him to say it too." She's still crying and he thinks about Kurt, who looks young and quiet and alone when he talks about his mother, and how it's stupid that emotions make your body feel all wrong. He says roughly, "I love you too, Mom." and hangs up.

So.

He puts his phone back into his jacket pocket, changes out of his coveralls, shrugs the jacket on and heads back out through the garage, making himself smile at Burt as he goes. "Thanks, Mr Hummel."



"Burt. I'll see you later, kid."

"Burt." He keeps forgetting that. Stupid that the drummed-in manners his parents gave him linger longer than any feeling of actually being cared for. "See you."

Outside, he's just taking his cell out when it starts chiming and vibrating, and the smile wavers more genuine when he sees the caller, picks up. "Hey, I was just going to call you. Where are you now?"

*"Hey Blaine. Long time no see."*

Every muscle goes cold and oddly sick; that's not Kurt's voice. "What - who the hell-"

*"You don't remember me, I'm hurt. Guys, he's forgotten us, can you believe that? We're all real upset here, little man."*

He knows that voice, standing silent and very still outside Kurt's dad's garage. He knows that voice, and he knows who the 'guys' are, or at least the collection of guys it could refer to, depending on who's in jail or juvie and who's actually free to be there right now. He makes himself breathe, slowly, through his nose, and says as flatly as he can, "Where's Kurt?"

*"Riiight next to me, don't you worry about his pretty little head, he's having fun with us, aren't you kid?"*

"Put Kurt on. If you've - put Kurt on."

*"Okay, Blaine, do you need me to explain this situation to you? We have your little boyfriend, so, the way around it works is, we give the orders."*

His voice comes out like grating stone from how hard his teeth have clenched. "Put Kurt on."

*"God, lovebirds, can't stand half an hour apart. Here."* There's some shifting and noise on the line, and then a voice that Blaine knows low on the edge of sleep, startled with orgasm, choked through crying, bubbling over laughter, and sweet and clear and strong in song like a miracle; it comes now very quiet, a very little stuttered. *"Hi, Blaine."*

Blaine's walking up and down in front of the garage now, not aware that he's doing it. "Are you okay? Where are you? Are you alright?"

*"I'm fine," very softly. "I'm - I'm alright. I don't know where I am." Blaine hears him swallow. "They brought me here in the trunk."*

Oh god, Blaine is seriously going to kill someone over this, he knows he can't control it, when he sees these guys this is all going to go really Reservoir Dogs and Blaine will fucking *kill* someone for this. *"I'm sorry,"* Kurt says, his voice wavering, and Blaine whispers, "It's okay it's okay *I'm* sorry oh god, Kurt, I'm sorry-"

Kurt's breath pulls in, keeps for a little second, rushes out on, *"Blaine, call the police-"*

More noise on the line and then laughter. *"Hey, now that would be a really, really bad idea, wouldn't it, Blaine? That would be the worst idea, you're not going to do that. Say it out loud for me. You are not going to call the cops."*

"Where the fuck are you, Petersen?"

*"Juvie didn't improve your manners much, did it?"*

"Where the fuck are you? What are you - just let him go, he's got nothing to do with anything, he is not a part of your fucked-up world-"

*"He is since he started fucking you. Look, you know why we want to see you, little man. So how about you head to the corner outside the gym in the next half hour, and someone comes to pick you up, and you give us a present and you get your little boyfriend back, more or less intact?"*

"If you hurt him - I seriously, Jake, if you hurt him, I -"

*"What are you gonna do, seriously, Blaine, what? Find a stepladder and hit me? You got half an hour. Don't be late. Rob here just got out after a long six months, and this one's enough like a girl he probably won't even notice."*

Blaine's face feels hard and white as he hears the laughter and someone in the background saying, "*Screw you, Jake.*" and the line goes dead. It's a few seconds before Blaine can lower the phone from his ear, all his muscles have gone so rigid.

Shit.

Shit shit shit shit shit shit shit.

\*

Jake Petersen is a douche. He's not even the top douche, cocky as the bastard's acting while Damien's locked up; fuck Damien, fuck even thinking about Damien, every memory he has of him is so wrapped through with shame and rage and his own *stupidity* that Blaine tries largely to pretend that he never even knew the asshole.

Jake Petersen is a douche. Jake was one of the guys who was perfectly happy to let Blaine tag along after them, hang out in their cruddy hangouts, while Blaine thought he was getting an apprenticeship in something real and adult and completely out of the reach of his parents and in reality they used him at best as a mascot. He wasn't even fifteen yet and too smart for his own good and looking for trouble to get into, and he found them, small time dealers and troublemakers, small time trouble but still too much for a kid more naïve than he knew to admit to. Damien gave him his first cigarette. Fuck memory. Blaine wishes he could wipe it all out, start again from the first room he walked into with Kurt in it, start from the moment when he started doing things that didn't end in disaster. Or didn't always end in disaster, until now.

Jake Petersen is a douche. He's not as smart as he thinks he is but he's smart enough to act as Damien's deputy until Damien gets out, smart enough to know that they don't have to be finished with Blaine until they're ready even if Blaine just wants to stay the hell away from them. Smart enough to want a 'present' and know Blaine will be reluctant to offer it and know *exactly* how to get it out of him. Smart enough to trap him. Maybe smarter than Blaine is after all, Blaine is an *idiot* so much of the time.

Blaine heads straight for the designated street corner, the fast rhythm of his feet almost overpowering the panic of his heartbeat. They took Kurt. Kurt who is naïve and actually knows it, Kurt who for all he's been through wears his essential innocence with such sweetness, Kurt who's never hurt another human being

on the planet - smashing asshole football players who deserve it in the head does not count - Kurt who must have been so *terrified* -

He gets grabbed and tossed into the trunk of a car by a bunch of guys he's never seen before. What's he going to think? In this town? He's not going to think 'oh, these must be old acquaintances of my idiot boyfriend, I'll just wait this out quietly'. A bunch of guys he's never seen before *grab him off the street* and toss him in their *trunk*. And he's not so naïve that he doesn't know the world he lives in, and oh god, for him to be so afraid and for it to be all Blaine's fault -

And Jake wants a 'present'. Well, fuck.

Two years ago he'd waited where he'd been asked - told - to wait. He'd stood there clutching his schoolbag behind a kids' playground, hearing the swings squeak in the wind, sulking and a little uneasy at how frantic and snarled his orders had been. And Damien had skidded up in a car, slung a plastic bag into Blaine's arms, a plastic bag heavier than Blaine expected, told him to hide it for a while, got back in the car, screeched off. Fifteen seconds, less? And Blaine had opened the bag and even as a stupid fifteen year old had known that this was too adult too soon, the dull black gleam of the gun. There was no coming back from this.

He had so very nearly gone to his parents.

He hasn't had a cigarette since he met Kurt. It's not like he was ever addicted or anything, mostly he did it to look cool, and Kurt doesn't like the smell. He hasn't smoked weed since he met Kurt, hasn't taken anything. Hasn't even had a drink in weeks. He just doesn't feel like he needs any of it anymore, like whatever chemical high he was looking for was never as much as this anyway, like Kurt would think less of him and that would kind of make him want to kill himself. Kurt, Kurt, fuck, Kurt alone and terrified and it's all Blaine's fucking stupid -

He's out of breath when he stops outside the gym, leans against the wall for a bit, pants at the sidewalk. He wipes his mouth on the back of his hand because spitting in the street is just obscene, he's an idiot punk kid but he's got some fucking class, straightens up and scans the street. He can't see anyone he knows but they could have some new douches in their line-up by now, to replace the more criminally stupid ones who keep getting locked up. He glares at every guy, and at most they just glare back as they walk on past. He wonders if he is going to follow whatever guy they send or maybe just knee him in the crotch and then

break his nose for doing this to Kurt. He doesn't belong in all this. All this shit Blaine's done, Kurt doesn't *belong* here.

Doesn't belong with him. There's the honest truth of it. All the shit Blaine's done, what the hell is someone like Kurt doing with him? All Blaine ever was going to do was fuck Kurt's life up, he told him, he *tried* to tell him, but Kurt never really believed him and then Blaine stopped wanting to convince him, not when he'd convinced himself that this time, this time he wouldn't . . .

Should've known he always would, always will. He feels the things he's done weigh at him like they're bound around his ankles, he can only walk so far, he can never get entirely out of their radius. He just never meant to drag Kurt in here with him, he never meant for this to happen, he just wanted - he wanted -

He wanted Kurt. He wants him now. Kurt holds him and he feels *safe*, and what right does he have to want this when he's the one who put Kurt in danger?

A grubby car slows at the kerb, and Blaine narrows his eyes as the window winds down, a guy in the driver's seat jerks a hand at him. "In the front. I ain't a fucking taxi service."

Blaine gives the car a really disdainful look, opens the door. "Craptastic ride you got there, Rob. How was jail, have fun in the showers?"

"Sure I didn't enjoy it as much as you would. You know what, if you hadn't been so into getting at Damien's dick all that time, I'd start to question if you are gay, Anderson." Blaine slams the door, thinks about smashing Rob's face down into the steering wheel. "Real pretty girlfriend you went out and found yourself, huh?"

His teeth hurt from the tension. "If you hurt him-"

"It'd be more threatenin' if you ever got that growth spurt, kid."

Blaine squeezes his fists on his thighs while Rob drives, clenches his jaw, tries to pay attention to the route; he needs to know where they're going and how to get the hell out of there as soon as possible.

Out of the centre, into a fairly crappy part of town. Blaine notes turnings, pays attention to every bus stop - it might not matter what the hell direction the bus is going in if he can just grab Kurt and get him on one. Even the people begin to look harder in these parts of town, like poverty presses their skin more rigid; and yeah, his opinion's worth shit because he's got rich parents and doesn't have a clue and never appreciated the half of it, but they pass a girl younger than him wearing nothing like enough clothes for the weather and all Blaine can do is *hope* she just dresses like a ho instead of . . .

He doesn't belong here either. Who's he kidding? He's as in over his head as Kurt is, the only difference is he *deserves* it and Kurt never asked for this, Kurt . . .

"Not as chatty as you used to be," Rob says, indicating, turning down a street with a crunch of something broken under the wheels.

"Just pickier about my company," Blaine mutters, as they slow outside a row of garages under the shadow of a block of apartments. Rob kills the engine and Blaine closes his eyes for a second, opens the door again.

Rob bangs his palm off the metal door of a garage, calls through it, "Got a guest!" and the door rattles up, rolls back on groaning wheels, revealing no car inside but three other guys on mismatched chairs and stools, one not even looking up from the game he's playing on his cell, and at the back, pressed as far into the corner as he can get, as white-faced as if he's been bleached, Kurt. Blaine steps forward automatically and Rob shoves him at the three sitting guys, laughing. The dusty concrete floor is crunchy underfoot. "Easy, tiger, not in front of an audience."

Kurt stares at Blaine and doesn't say anything, so still he isn't even visibly breathing, and Blaine stares back and thinks *sorry I'm so sorry I'm so so sorry Kurt I'm sorry* -

His wrist's tied with thin orange rope to the metal supports for some dusty, sagging shelves covering the back wall, and he could probably get loose if he wanted to but get loose to do what, have to fight through three guys to get out? He's kneeling - pressed up against the wall and trying to touch it as little as possible - on a mattress, stained in ways that Blaine doesn't want to think about. He doesn't look visibly hurt. Scared to fuck, but not visibly hurt. Blaine can feel his own throat shaking.

Then Kurt swallows and lifts his head a little, holding Blaine's eye, like he's trying to steady him. Like he's trying to steady *Blaine*. Fuck. Fuck -

"Hey there, little man! Hell, they grow up so fast, don't they?" Blaine flicks his eyes to Jake as he stands up, Jake with his stupid I'm-such-a-big-guy tattoos in languages he can't speak, Blaine really hopes they actually say *I am such a giant douche* right across his biceps in Maori and Japanese. "How was juvie, Blaine?"

Blaine looks at him warily, because Rob's still at his back and there's no way out of this and his hackles are raised and quivering. "I've known worse company."

"There's gratitude for you. When we went and taught you everything you know."

"You taught me everything *you* know. It took you all of five minutes."

Jake grins, shaking his head. "He's such an asshole. Didn't I tell you? He was always *such* an asshole. I thought juvie might've taught you when to keep your fucking mouth shut, Blaine, but then even Johnny couldn't do that, could he?"

Blaine feels the sweat between his shoulder blades and does not look at the still-seated man to Jake's left, though out of the corner of his eye he sees Kurt's white face turn to him. *Piece of advice, never get into a fight with a guy called 'Flickknife Johnny'*. Like it's funny. Like it was just a joke, like Blaine laughs about this shit all the time, like the fucking *psychopath* didn't pin a fourteen year old kid with a too-big mouth on him to the floor and hold the knife over his face and tell him, slowly, carefully, that he didn't *like* that name and he didn't *like* people calling him it, while Blaine thought he would either suffocate or wet himself out of terror, and for a second when the knife came down, he thought it was going to be his eye.

And he's been in this garage with Kurt, with one wrist tied, for the last who knows how long. Blaine's seen him in a fight, he has this *thing* about going for the face. And his heart beats, fuck-fuck-fuck-fuck-fuck-fuck-fuck-fuck-

He says, and he can't make his voice not sound so dry, "What do you want, Jake?"

Jake grins. He probably thinks he's pretty cute when he grins, thinks he's such a ladies' man, Blaine thinks about putting a chair leg through his teeth. "That's the end of the pleasantries? That's as close to 'hi' as we get after all this time?"

He says again, head lowering a little, "What do you *want*, Jake?"

Jake shrugs, like Blaine's the unreasonable one when Kurt's sitting there tied to the wall too scared to move. "You know exactly what we want, Blaine."

"And you know exactly what I want, so let Kurt go and then we can - work this out."

They're going to kick the shit out of him, there's actually no avoiding it. He needs Kurt out of there first. Okay, they're going to kick the shit out of him; he doesn't need them turning on Kurt for something else to beat up.

"Oh he's not going anywhere, little man, not until we get what we want. He comes out with the *funniest* things, you know what he said to us when we tied him up back there? He said, 'My boyfriend is going to beat the crap out of you'. Fuck, I thought you must've *grown*, Blaine!"

Fucksake he is not so short as he was when he was *fucking fourteen* Jake you *massive douche*. "Just let him go so we can *talk*, Jake. He doesn't belong here."

"I'm not leaving without you."

It's so quiet that they could probably all ignore it and talk on, but it makes Blaine's stomach twist as it falls, and he looks at Kurt sitting there too terrified to stand up but looking right at him, white as paper and sure as stone. Jake starts laughing, Rob and some Neanderthal Blaine doesn't know laugh too; Johnny doesn't.

"Don't you worry your pretty little head about it, sweetheart." Jake croons to him, and Kurt looks back icy and stiff with fear. "You're not going *anywhere*."

Blaine says, slow and loud because there's no avoiding this forever, "I don't have the gun, Jake."

"So, thank you for wasting our time, Blaine? Fucking kids, some of us have *schedules*, shit. Rob can drive you out to pick it up, and your girlfriend can piss himself in the corner of the room a bit longer. I really thought you'd be smarter than to leave us time to get *bored* with him, kid."

Blaine says, again slowly, again loudly, "I don't know where the gun is, Jake."



"Jesus fuck." Jake rubs his fingers into his eyes. "What, Blaine, did you lose the treasure map you drew? Where the *fuck* is the fucking *gun*, Blaine?"

"What, do you want me to guess?" He throws his arms out. "Underneath us right now for all I know, I lost sight of it after I tossed it down the manhole."

Everyone is silent for a moment. Eventually Jake says, "You tossed it down a manhole."

"You gave me a *fucking gun* and you are all really seriously *stupid*, you think I wanted to give it back to you?"

His back's against the wall hard enough to jar his ribs, Jake's arm across his throat. "Okay. Bad decision number one, you little shit. If it was you put that *anonymous call* to the cops-

"-put me in juvie you asshole-" Blaine wheezes, clawing his fingers in, hauling Jake's arm off himself. "It put me in juvie *too* you moron-"

Jake slams him into the wall one last time and walks off, rubbing his hair, swearing. Blaine coughs, jerks his jacket straight, glares at his back. "Just let Kurt go, he doesn't owe you anything-"

"The next *fucking* time you tell me to let him go I'm breaking his fucking *fingers*, Blaine! *Christ* almighty, you threw the fucking *gun* away, do you *know* what an unmarked gun costs?"

"I'll write you a cheque." He feels like he's vibrating, fear and adrenaline, he used to feel this all the time. How the hell did he survive? Fuck, all this crap he's done, that was clearly his mid-life crisis, he's going to have a massive heart attack and drop dead by the time he's thirty.

"Fucking kids. Fuck. Fuck!" Jake kicks a chair and it hits the wall, and Blaine can see Kurt not cowering and he doesn't know what to do, he just *doesn't*. "Fuck," Jake says one last time, and walks to the other corner of the garage; Rob and the other guy walk with him, and they murmur quietly, fast and angry. Blaine looks at Kurt who looks back, drawn and pale and terrified, and he belongs here really as much as Blaine belongs in Kurt's goddamn glee club, different *worlds*.

(And part of him understands the lie that is, because for all he acts otherwise, for all he's done and tried to do, he does belong with Kurt, he does belong in that stupid glee club, he belongs in a normal teenager's life

and not this disaster he's created for himself. He'd just wanted to feel like an adult. He just hadn't wanted to feel so *young*. And all he's ever done, all the crap he's caused for himself and other people, all he's ever done is emphasise to himself how really young he really is.)

Johnny, who's still sitting perfectly calmly, takes a knife out, tilts it in the light, checking the blade. He keeps them obscenely sharp, thin and bright as starlight. Kurt closes his eyes, lets his breath out slowly through his nose, and Blaine thinks about walking to him, putting his arms around him, somehow being able to protect him from the shit that is clearly going to be beaten out of the both of them.

The huddle breaks. Blaine tilts his weight back instinctively, ready to spring, as Jake walks back to him and Rob heads out to the car. "Okay. I think you realise that you owe us quite a lot now, Blaine."

"I went to fucking juvie for you idiots."

"Yeah, after an 'anonymous tip-off' to the cops, do you think we're stupid?"

There is no point in fighting this, this is just who he is; Blaine *grins*. "Don't ask me that question, Jake, you know you won't like the answer."

It's quicker than a blink and snaps his head sideways, but Kurt's the one who makes the noise out loud, a high shocked burst of breath. Blaine just swallows, and glares back at Jake, while the side of his face sets up the beginning of the slow burn that will turn into a deep-set pain and a hell of a bruise. "You fucking owe us, you little shit. So this is what's going to happen. You're going to make a delivery for us. You got two hours. If you make it back, you can have your little boyfriend back and we might not even have cut any important bits off him. If you're late, or if the delivery does not get made, Johnny here's going to carve your initials into his face so he always remembers exactly who put him here. You understand?"

Blaine's hands are shaking however hard he tightens his fists. "I swear to fuck. If you touch him-"

"Like we *enjoy* touching him, you're the fucking pervert here." Rob's walking back, holding a small cardboard box wrapped all the way around with thick brown tape, sealing it tight. "The address is on the front."

"You could just put it in the mail, Jake."

"We have a slight issue with *time* since someone went and threw the fucking gun down the fucking *sewer*. You got two hours, we will call to check, if you put *this* one down the sewer I swear to god, Blaine, you will not even recognise that kid, do you understand me?"

Rob stuffs the box into Blaine's hands; it's sort of lighter than he expected, sort of heavier, too heavy for weed, too light for another gun. "You can't make the delivery because?"

"Because there are parts of town we're not so welcome in right now."

"You're getting me involved in a turf war."

"You got you involved, Blaine." Jake says, and his snarl bares his chipped front tooth. "You got *him* involved too. You got two hours and do not cut it fine because we are fucking *low* on patience with you, you little dick. *Go*."

## Part II

For a while he just walks, numb, box under one arm, remembering Kurt's face when Blaine left, the utter terror of being left alone with these guys and *trying* to be brave. This is a nightmare. This is actually worse than any nightmare he's ever had, *him* being scared is fine but getting Kurt put here, having to leave him alone with them -

At least Kurt, unlike him, has the sense to just stay silent. Blaine knows that Kurt's brave, mostly because he has to be but he really is, but this is more than asshole jocks who might beat him up, this is serious and Kurt is not stupid and Kurt knows that. But then, Kurt's lived through worse before and hauled himself out of it. Blaine had always thought that he'd protect him from all that crap from now on, because Kurt doesn't *deserve* to have to deal with crap even if he can deal with it perfectly well, Kurt deserves for the world to be as bright and shiny as it is in his head, Kurt just deserves better and it's Blaine's fault he's getting worse instead.

He thinks of Burt Hummel and reels a bit, and makes himself stop thinking about him.

He uses his phone, brings up a Google map. It's easily a forty minute walk to the address, Jake's cutting it fine enough, if Blaine can find the way there and find the way *back* in the time he's got. He knows what's in the box, or he knows what's likely in the box, and now he's a fucking drugs runner. I got a hundred percent in my last math test, he thinks, weakly. This isn't what's supposed to happen next.

It's not weed, he knows the weight and even through all the tape he'd know the smell of weed. What else? Something expensive and unpleasant, to buy Jake's sad little crew some reprieve, he knows. These other guys wanted a gun and this is their consolation prize, and the kind of guys who want an unmarked gun are unlikely to be nice people, it is seriously not a stuffed toy in this box. Blaine's hardly going to judge casual drug users but he can feel it, in the box under his arm, what it could contain. Sleeping white death, waiting to reach out and take people. Waiting to close a life up, like a throat pressed shut. Waiting to tear a space in a family as easy as breaking a bagel in half. Sleeping white death, and Blaine is the one letting it loose.

He really does want to cry but he hasn't done that in years, doesn't even know if his tear ducts remember how to do it while his throat remembers it too well. He swallows and swallows, walks and walks, but even through the horror of it dulling his muscles, he pays attention. No-one's tailing him. He'd thought they would but clearly they *are* scared to follow Blaine into this part of town, clearly they have fucked something up royally and they need to buy their own safety. There's no car behind him, no slow shadow

following him. They must know that Blaine's too scared not to do what they say, because Blaine knows them, and they have Kurt.

This is so much worse than any nightmare.

What is he going to do? Deliver it, to god-knows-who who really wanted a gun, and hope to walk away alive from *that*, and get back in time to get Kurt out? He knows that whoever he hands this to is not going to be happy about it, and in all likelihood they'll take that out on Blaine because that's how these guys think. He doesn't have the time to get beaten up. He has to get back to *Kurt*. So he can dump it down a sewer or in a trash can, yeah, but if Jake actually does check, if Jake calls and finds the delivery was never made -

Just, fuck, fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.

Kurt's not as naïve as he sometimes acts. He must have a clue what's in this box, he knows what Blaine's doing. Is he really ever going to look at Blaine the same way after he does this? Fuck, is he ever going to want to look at Blaine again anyway?

And Blaine's throat throbs, and he knows that he will. He *knows* that Kurt loves him, has no idea why, no clue what the hell Kurt sees in him but Kurt *loves* him and won't disown him even for this. Everyone else will, if they find out. Kurt's glee club will close ranks and force him away from Kurt, and Kurt's dad will throw Blaine out and be right to do it, and Blaine will always know what he's done and won't want Kurt near him knowing what he did anyway. So what will he do then?

*I guess he found it a really slow suicide method though, because he took a broken pen to his wrists one night instead.* He's not ever going to forget that, hard as he tries some nights in the dark. Squeezing twisted bed sheets around a guy's skinny wrists on the floor and cursing him continuously and viciously while someone banged and banged at their door bellowing for help and Blaine furious with him, his hands hot with blood, *furious* with him for -

For what? Taking the easy way out. Not wanting to live through what Blaine had to live through. Making Blaine deal with this, the possibility of this, the reality of this. His hands feel weak now with the memory of it. Because how long will he last without Kurt? Can he face the rest of his life empty and awful and without Kurt? He'll be on the streets and on his own and he knows how bad it can get, he *knows* what he could end up doing, and wouldn't it just make more *sense* to -

When he spots the police station, he remembers Kurt's words down the telephone, Kurt's belief that the police can help with shit like this. And Blaine's seventeen, and young, younger than that really, and he's never trusted an adult to help him in years, never trusted an authority figure to actually make things better, but - but, well, look where that got him, and Kurt.

Is he being selfish? Is it about saving himself or about saving Kurt? Or saving what Kurt sees in him, what kind of risk is he really taking?

He doesn't let himself think about it. He walks in, up the brick steps, onto scuffed linoleum under strip lighting. There's a woman arguing with a cop at the desk about her clamped car and him telling her, slowly, increasingly sarcastically, that she's in the wrong place. When she storms off, Blaine walks up to the desk - there's glass and little holes to speak through like at the post office - and dumps the parcel there, says, "I need a lot of help."

\*

There are things he doesn't find out until later. Two uniformed cops interview him in a little room with a desk and chairs, and one of those obvious one-way mirrors in the wall. When Blaine tells them how they must have taken Kurt off the street, one of them gets a little look in their eye, stands up and walks out. Blaine doesn't know that it's already been reported, a couple of hours ago, by an old lady alerted to what was happening by Kurt's rape alarm going off.

Burt had bought him the alarm, after the whole Karofsky thing came out. Kurt had sat on his bed holding it up by the fob in front of Blaine, said gloomily, "I must be the only *boy* in Ohio who has one of these things." and Blaine, because he's Blaine, had taken it off him and popped the fob loose to find out how loud it was. Apparently *really fucking loud*, piercing like nothing else on the planet, and they'd scrabbled and fumbled to get the fob back in while Burt Hummel nearly broke the stairs coming up them because he gave his son a rape alarm half an hour ago and then it got set off as soon as his boyfriend came over. Blaine had been flustered and apologetic and more than a bit terrified; Kurt had been flustered and startled and eventually had just *laughed* at both their faces.

Blaine can't seem to make them understand how *quickly* they need to go get Kurt out of there, what these guys might do to him. When they finally tell him a car's gone to pick them up, Blaine just hopes to god they're well armed. He knows how essentially cowardly Jake is, and the rest of them - maybe not Johnny, but Johnny is a fucking psychopath - and that they'll crumble at the sight of a gun. He's already wished he

hadn't thrown the gun away. He could have walked into that garage with it, cocked it, blown their brains out if any of them do have enough of a brain for a headshot to kill them, got Kurt free. But then Kurt would have seen that, and he doesn't want Kurt to see what he might be capable of.

He doesn't know what he's capable of. He wipes his nose on the back of his hand, sits on the hard plastic chair and thinks that actually, Kurt already knows what Blaine's capable of, and Kurt knows he couldn't do that, however much he might want to. Blaine is not who he pretends most of the time to be. Blaine is really who he is when he's alone with Kurt, someone more unsure, more needy, more *happy*, not this. He's not really this. Only Kurt has ever understood that.

The problem is, he can't tell only part of the story, it all comes out in an ugly unformed series of lumps. They want to call his parents and he has to tell them that he's not actually living with them right now, and that complicates things, but he has to give them their number and Burt Hummel's number (there's no escape now from the only adult he's sort of wanted to *like* him in years finding out). They leave him alone in that room for what feels like hours, with a little plastic cup of water he drains, desperately thirsty with sheer fear, in the first five minutes. Eventually a woman with a notepad and a bag bulky with files comes in, and in three seconds Blaine knows that she's a social worker.

So, he's not going to end up on the streets after all, he's going to end up in foster care or what the fuck ever, unless they just stick him back in juvie again because it's easier for everyone. Everyone but him. He thinks about going back there, who he has to be when he's there, his throat tightens so hard it feels like it might collapse; he can't do it again, he can't, he needs *Kurt*. The woman doesn't know if Kurt's safe or not and it's all Blaine can care about, he drags his hands through his hair, he doesn't know how to cry anymore -

She says, "Has there ever been any physical violence in the home?", working through a form. Blaine swallows, understanding the shit it could cause if he's actually honest here. He says, carefully, "No." which is a lie but it's a defensible lie, because his dad could probably get off on self-defence, Blaine was the one who shoved him first, even though Blaine thinks he could have been given justifiable homicide if he'd *murdered* his dad in that moment for the shit he'd been saying.

After she goes he's on his own again, drumming his heels, mad with too much thought. He doesn't know if he's in trouble or not, doesn't know if he's under arrest or just - waiting. He wants them to tell him that Kurt's alright and everything's been a giant mistake and his parents *do* want him and he can go home now.

He wants to be eight years old and happy again. He wants - he'll settle for Kurt. Fuck all the rest of it. He just wants Kurt to be safe.

He thinks he's maybe remembered how to cry now, and he wishes he hadn't.

A cop opens the door, smiles at him, tells him they've got his friend, he's alright. Blaine's glad he's sitting, it feels like the ropes to his legs got cut, they wouldn't have the strength to stay upright if he was standing. He really can't be fucked to correct him on 'friend', just says, "Can I see him-?"

"His dad's coming to pick him up. Yours is on his way, don't worry."

Because that's one *less* thing to worry about?

\*

Burt does not appreciate a call from the police to tell him that there's been an 'incident' involving his son. The conclusions he leaps to automatically - he and Kurt are both optimists until faced with disaster, when their minds go immediately to the worst case scenario they both know from experience - turn out to all be wrong: Kurt is fine, a little bit bumped about and nervy but fine, and it apparently wasn't some bastard homophobic streak of scum Burt needs to break the teeth of who did this, it's some of Kurt's boyfriend's old friends.

It's not the best phone call he's ever had, no.

One of the guys in the garage makes him sit down and drink some water before he goes, because they think he's on the brink of another heart attack. So it's the late afternoon before he arrives at the station in a grim part of town, where in some kind of interview room there's a female police officer sitting with Kurt, who stands up as soon as he sees Burt and grabs him into a hug. He surprises Burt with how tall he's got - he thinks of his son as *small*, he forgets that he's still growing in absurd teenage jolts - and with how okay he is. A little too sparky, a little high with adrenaline, but fine fine fine he insists impatiently, fine, they won't let him see Blaine, Burt has to find Blaine for him.

"And what exactly was his part in this?" Burt says cautiously, and Kurt's eyes light up with fury.



"He got the *police* was his part in this. They were trying to - to drag him back into all that crap and he did the *right thing* and now *they* say I can't see him and I have to wait for our parents and you're here now so you have to go find out if he's alright. He didn't look alright, he looked *soscaresd* and that asshole *hit him* and I need to see him, Dad-"

"Kurt, it's best if we wait for his parents to-"

"No it is not! How the hell will they help, they let them put him in juvie before! Dad, he didn't do anything wrong, you *know* he didn't, it *justhappened*, please just go find out for me-"

"Kurt-" What is he supposed to say, with that officer sitting there carefully not looking at them both? "I know - I know you're crazy about him, okay, but this - this is like a warning, maybe, of the things we can't help him with-"

"Someone has to! He *hasn't done anything wrong*. He makes it sound like he has, I don't know why he does it, it's like he *needs* people to believe the worst about him so that, so if they like him anyway then it actually *means* something. Because he told me - I knew - he told me he got put in juvie for hiding a gun for someone." Something runs up Burt's back like a rat that he let a boy who did that near his kid, but Kurt squeezes his hands and stares wild up at his face. "But he *didn't*. He threw it down a sewer and put an anonymous call in to the police. But he told me like he'd done worse, and I don't know why he does that, Dad, I just think people never trust him enough so he doesn't even want them to anymore but he's a good person, I promise, I swear to god, Dad, he's a good person-"

If Kurt actually starts crying then Burt will fold like a house of cards, he always does. "Kurt, calm down, okay? I'll - if you're alright -"

"I'm *fine*."

"-I'll ask if I can talk to him. Can I go talk to him?" to the police officer, who smiles awkwardly, stands up.

"Let me go find out if his parents are here yet."

Burt tries to get Kurt sat down but Kurt is twitchy and impatient and disconcertingly tall now, Burt honestly did not notice his son growing like this, he's a young man. Really weird to think of Kurt like that, he never really stopped being a child in Burt's head, he'd barely got used to him as a teenager and now

he's a young man, buzzing with worry for his first boyfriend. Of all the boys in the world, Kurt pins his heart to the most trouble he can find: of course.

"I don't know what he thinks I'm thinking," Kurt says, pacing up and down the room, rubbing his folded arms. "If he thinks I blame him. I don't blame him. Can you tell him that? I don't know if they'll let me see him, I don't know if he's in trouble, I told them and told them he didn't do anything wrong-"

"Are you really okay?"

"Dad, god, I'm fine. I banged my head a bit in the car, I'll have a bump, my hair will cover it. I was *scared* is the only thing that really happened, but I'm fine. I just don't know if he's in trouble and he shouldn't be, *please* make them understand that, he shouldn't be in trouble, he hasn't done anything wrong."

"Clearly at some point he did, Kurt."

Kurt looks stonily across at him and says, "Look me in the eye and tell me you never screwed up, Dad."

Burt says, angrier than he expected, "Do not start judging *me*, Kurt."

"Then don't judge him! Please, *talk* to him, Dad. But - please remember - he makes himself sound worse than he is, remember - remember he would never, never hurt me, he's a good person, he *loves* me."

Burt doesn't know how he feels that Kurt is so sure about that.

The female officer comes back, says she can escort Burt to speak to Blaine, asks Kurt not to come Burt suspects just because the station does not need to deal with the drama of it, it's pretty obvious that Kurt is one wrong push away from screeching or crying. Kurt sits, icily upright with his legs crossed, and nods, and looks at Burt. So Burt takes a deep breath and follows her out, down the dull institutional corridors, his muscles tired with how tight he must have been holding them until he saw Kurt.

He doesn't know how to deal with this. Yeah, he likes this Blaine kid. He sees what Kurt sees in him, he sees the honesty beneath his awkward attempts at being polite, sees that really he is a good kid who's done enough bad things that it's hard for him to admit to that anymore. And he loves Kurt, Burt doesn't doubt that, he sees how they are together, he's never seen Kurt *relax* for anyone like this. And he saved Kurt from god only knows what at the end of last year. He brought Kurt back to Burt, made him start

talking again, dragged him out of the glass box Kurt had built around himself to try to stop everyone good and bad from getting in at him. Burt can't bear to think what could have happened if Kurt had kept his mouth shut and just let himself be picked to pieces until there was nothing left by that asshole at his school, and it's Blaine who saved him from that, and Blaine who's been there for him, Blaine Kurt turns to and trusts. So Burt owes Blaine; it doesn't mean he has to forgive him, though, not for what this could have been. It does mean that he'll talk to him. It does mean that he will *try*.

The officer lets him in at another paint-chipped door, and walks in after him. It's some kind of interview room, no natural light at all in here, and sitting at the table in the middle of the room - he starts to stand and then sags back into the chair at the sight of Burt - is Blaine, his hair all pulled back wild, his eyes raw-rimmed and one of them bruising black, his mouth moving like it doesn't know what expression to wear. He looks *young*. If Kurt's older than Burt thought, this kid is younger, and all on his own, and Burt wonders with a sick jolt if his parents are even coming and what happens to him if they don't.

Blaine swallows, says, "Is Kurt alright?"

Burt doesn't know what to say. Blaine clears his throat, says, "I'm sorry, Mr Hummel, I'm sorry, I'm *sorry*, I didn't want - I didn't know - I didn't want this to happen. I didn't. But - is he alright? Is he-"

"He's fine," Burt says softly. "He's fine. Did nothing but ask me if *you* were alright, so yeah, he's fine." He swallows. "He's shook up a bit but he'll be fine. You know Kurt."

Blaine closes his eyes, hunches a little, nods. Burt breathes in, breathes hard out. "Are you okay?"

Blaine lifts his head, blinks. "I'm fine."

"Hell of a shiner you got there."

"Oh." He shrugs. "I've had worse. God." He drops his face to a hand. "God, god, I know what that makes me sound like. I'm sorry. I can't - think right. I don't know what's happening." His breath shudders in. "I'm glad if Kurt's alright. I don't know - I don't know what's going to happen, if they're going to let me out, so - could you just tell him - I'm, I'm glad he's alright, and I didn't know this would happen and I'm just, I'm so, so, so sorry -"

"I think he knows all that, kid."

Blaine rubs his forehead with his fingers, takes his hand from his eyes. He says quietly, "I don't know what's going to happen next."

Burt's not even angry. It turns out it's not even about forgiveness, he's just not angry, looking at the kid alone and scared and hurt like this. But he has to be honest with him, he can't make this alright just because he wants to, he just can't. "Your parents here yet?"

"No. I - I don't know what happens. If they don't want." He folds his arms, looks at the corner of the room, shrugs. "Me. Because there was a social worker, so I guess that means I go into 'the system'. And I don't know what happens then. If they don't pack me off to juvie again anyway."

"For doing what?"

Blaine chokes the laugh a little. "I don't even *know*. For being an idiot who had it coming." He closes his eyes, draws his head back, his jaw twitches but he doesn't say anything. Burt rubs his own forehead, so tired, now.

"I dunno if they'll let me take you home with us, kid. Not if they've got - got social workers an' stuff involved. I don't know how it works either."

The way Blaine looks at him then is just sort of awful, but Burt reads it right. "You're welcome coming back if they let you. You know I'd never hear the end of it off Kurt if I didn't - hey. Hey, hey . . ."

Blaine covers as much of his face as he can, hunches his shoulders up like he can hide himself, but his back's shaking. "Hey," Burt says, walks over, squeezes his shoulder, feels like he's dealing with this so clumsily but he doesn't know *how* to deal with a kid who isn't his, you're not supposed to rear up like this in the defence of other people's kids, you're not allowed to protect them like they're your own even if Blaine *is* for how close he is to Kurt. "It'll be alright. We'll get something worked out, it'll be okay."

Blaine's breath shudders in, and his back quivers under Burt's hand as he pats it, awkwardly.

"It'll be alright. You didn't do anything wrong. It'll be alright."

Blaine makes an ungainly wet noise through his nose. Burt murmurs, "It'll be alright."

\*

It must be getting dark out by the time someone lets Blaine's dad into the room. They've given him a cup of coffee and a sandwich by then, which Blaine left the grosser parts of because he wasn't really hungry anyway, and here's his dad in his suit, too pale behind his glasses. And the bitter part of Blaine thinks, What, like it's the first time we've been here?

"Hi, Dad." he says, and his father stares at him for some time, then takes the seat opposite him.

"My god, Blaine, my god. Do you have any idea - I have just spent an hour talking to a social worker. About *our family*. Do you have any idea-

"-how much shame I've brought on the family name?"

"Blaine for god's - I don't know how we got here." He takes his glasses off, rubs his eyes. "I don't know how this happened. I don't know how we got - to here."

Blaine looks to the side, and tries to disentangle the parts of this that are about his parents making him feel like *shit* and the parts that are actually his fault. It's a pretty messy thing to untangle, it's just too hard to work out which is which. Mostly, they're both.

He says, very quietly, "I actually didn't do anything this time. I don't expect you to believe me, but I didn't."

"Oh, I do. You have never been shy about telling us what you've done."

Blaine flicks his eyes back to him, to a man he recognises in his own face, a man he knows he'll grow to be like, an idea he's hated for the last four years. He swallows. "Where's Mom?"

"At home. She's too - distressed. I didn't think this was the best place for her."

". . . I talked to her this morning."

"I know." He puts his glasses back on, whispers, "Jesus, Blaine. The *questions* they asked me, like - like -"

"Like maybe it's your fault I'm a fuck-up?"

"You made your own choices."

"Oh like you're *blameless*, you think I would have chosen this *mess* if I thought I had a viable alternative? You think I *want* my life to be one unending pile of crap?"

"You're doing a damned poor job of convincing me otherwise!"

Blaine's jaw grinds. "I have taken responsibility for the shit I have done. *Mea culpa*. I have fucked up a *thousand* times and I know it. But I'll tell you what, Dad, if I hadn't come home to you every night, I wouldn't have done the half of it. I didn't even realise that until recently, because I didn't want my life to just be a reaction to yours, but you know what? A lot of it is. If I hadn't felt so - *blamed* -"

"Do not make this my fault. I did not raise you to be a criminal."

"I haven't done anything! I came to the fucking police! You know what, just, fuck you. Fine, they can put me in foster care or whatever, it's only for a year, once I'm eighteen I don't even have to leave you a forwarding address."

His father's elbows thud off the table as he holds his head up. "I just don't understand how we got *here*."

There's no point explaining it again. Blaine looks to the side, just tired, now. He doesn't care where they dump him, so long as there's a bed. Juvie or some foster home or a cell for the night, he just wants to curl up and be alone with his thoughts, with the Kurt in his head who loves him and wants him to be okay.

His father sighs very, very slowly. There are lines on his forehead Blaine doesn't remember him getting. He finds himself hoping it's just age.

"I tried," his father says, very quietly. "I did try, Blaine."

Blaine rubs his face. "You think you did," he says.

"Blaine, I *tried*."

"What, with all those *manly* bonding activities, like maybe I would grow out of it? You wanted to go *fishing*, you've never been fishing in your life! You actually invited me *camping*. I swear you wake up in a morning already ironed into that goddamn suit and you invited me *camping*, what thehell, Dad."

When he'd asked Blaine hadn't even looked away from the game he was playing on his phone, lying on his back on his bed. *Is that supposed to be a joke?* It had been the last 'bonding' exercise his dad has suggested. Maybe that wasn't the moment when things started to unravel, but it was there along the way, all the same.

"I just . . . all this trouble, Blaine. Do you think any of this would have happened if - if -"

"If I was straight?" He can feel the heat in his face, in his throat. "Do you think any of this would have happened if you'd loved me anyway?"

"Of course I -"

He stops. Blaine rolls his eyes to the ceiling, he could choke on this. "You can't even say it. It's fine. I don't want to hear it if it's a lie anyway."

"Of course I love you." His father swallows hard. "Of course I . . . of course I love you."

He's seriously not going to cry again, he's already used up about three years' worth of crying this afternoon. He just shuffles his arms closer around himself, says roughly, "I don't see where the 'of course' is in this."

"You know we love you, Blaine, it's just-"

"I don't know that. You act like - like there's something *wrong* with me. Because of what, Dad, because I'm not going to lie to you? And I don't forgive you for the way you talk about Kurt. You can just, just, just fuck you. He's the best person I ever met and he made me *better* and he doesn't even care that I fuck things up for him. You would rather I was a *mess* than I was happy with him, and it just-"

"That's not true. It's not."

"Whatever. God, whatever."

"I'm sorry." Blaine's eyebrows raise, his head lifts uncertainly. "That night, I'm sorry. I was - I don't know. You don't talk to us, and you did your best to never even let us see this boy, and when you hide things, Blaine, it just ends up *worse* for us every time-"

"I wasn't hiding anything. I was *ashamed* to introduce you people to him. I don't forgive you for what you said about him. I don't."

"Don't talk about your mother and I like that."

"Then don't act like it."

"I didn't know if he was getting you into - drugs or god knows-"

The laugh *explodes* out of him, probably nervous tension as much as anything else, but the thought of *Kurt* leading *Blaine* down the wrong path - "No, sorry, sorry," he says, trying to cram the giggles down with a hand. "Sorry. But you have *clearly* never spoken to him."

"You won't let us."

"You don't want to."

"I'm beginning to understand," his father says, low, "that that doesn't change the fact that we need to."

"I don't want you to. I know what you think about him. And he works really hard at not giving a crap what people like you think about him. I'm not letting you hurt him for him only being himself."

He says slowly, "I would try not to."

Blaine just watches him, and waits. His father swallows, folds his hands together on the table.

"She was asking me - the social worker. All these questions about you that I couldn't answer. I don't know who your friends are, what you do after school, what time you get in most nights. And she made so many notes, like - like it means something. Like we're neglecting you."

Blaine just gives him a *what the fuck* face because, well, yeah.



"She asked me about the family you're - staying with, and I couldn't even tell her anything about them, I don't know them. I just . . . I just thought that as long as you're not actually in trouble there's nothing else I can do anymore. I." He bows his head a little over his hands. "I just ran out of energy, Blaine. I couldn't fix any of it, so I just - hoped for less, it seemed to be all I could do."

"And you're actually wondering why people question your parenting?"

"Do not act like you haven't made this more difficult. Do not act like you haven't gone out of your way to hurt us."

"Don't act like you don't understand why."

"Children expect more nowadays. I didn't expect my parents to adapt for me, it was the other way around back then."

"And they did a *super* job raising you, didn't they? They made you this emotionally constipated automaton with so much buried rage you can't even-"

"Do *not* talk about them like that-"

"Your father was an asshole, Dad. Maybe you loved him anyway, that's fine, but don't act like he wasn't an asshole."

He was the first person who'd ever called Blaine a 'fag', or at least pointed out his actions were 'faggy'. Because he liked singing and dancing. When he was *six*. Blaine hadn't known what the word meant, felt only the shame the old man had wanted him to feel. Nasty old fuck. Blaine had remained stonily unmoved throughout his funeral, stared at his casket, felt stirring angry guilt at how *relieved* he felt.

There's a silver lighter in his bag in Kurt's house, from his other grandfather, the one who sat with Blaine on his knee jiggling it like a horse, and played Frank Sinatra records for him. He never called Blaine a fag. Never acted like he noticed or cared either way. Sang *Lonesome Road* with him and then died when Blaine was thirteen, and pretty much broke his heart. What was left of his family after that was seriously not enough.

"He had standards. He raised me to be a decent citizen."

"It's a real shame he didn't put more effort into raising you to be a decent person."

"Oh Jesus." His dad drags a hand into his hair, *stares* at Blaine, says and it croaks in his throat, "Do you know what it's like to have your own son hate you?"

It actually knocks the breath out of him, it's worse than a blow. "What - the hell, Dad, do you know what it's like when your *dad* hates you?"

"I don't - I just - I'm *trying*, Blaine -"

Blaine sags his head into his hands again. "What do you want me to say, I don't hate you? You make me feel like *shit*, Dad."

"We can try-"

Silence. It's too much for both of them, these things.

"We can try," he says again, softly. "If you - come home. We can try again."

He's not going to cry again. He licks his lips, lifts his hands from his eyes, hot and raw and aching. "What are we going to do? Act out happy families and pretend like it's not all broken?"

"We can talk. We can - Blaine, I don't even know you anymore. I - I know you don't know me. We can - Blaine, that woman writing everything down, do you think - do you think I *want* my child taken away from me-?"

His voice is shaking. "You spent the last four years *shoving* me away."

He puts his hand under his glasses, fingers digging into his eyes. "Blaine. I'm allowed to fuck up too."

He would laugh, but he knows that if he starts he'll start crying.

\*

Everyone is late home, and Finn is *hungry*. He raids the fridge at a constant low hunch, guilt by association, like Kurt could come in through the door at any second and scream him out because he's just about to start dinner, but no-one comes. He eats a bag of chips too, and thinks about maybe making a sandwich before he has a really mature thought. He can call Kurt. He can find out *when* dinner is coming, and then know whether to keep eating or not. He's a genius, in out of the blue ways.

Kurt picks his phone up and says, *"I don't know if this is a good time, Finn."*

"Oh, sorry, are you - um. With Blaine?"

Kurt gives a little annoyed huff of breath. *"Because I could not conceivably be doing anything else that requires my full attention. I'm - in the truck, with Dad, we're, well, we're waiting outside a police station."*

"Okay." Finn opens the fridge again because the one thing he guesses from that is that Kurt's going to be a while. "Um, why?"

*"... they won't let Blaine out yet."*

Finn goes still, and then closes the fridge again. "What did he do?"

*"Why would you leap to that conclusion? Why would you just assume he did something wrong, he hasn't done anything-"*

"Kurt, okay, just, the guy spent half of last year in juvie or something and he's kind of crazy sometimes, don't act like I'm being a jerk here-"

*"He has been so good for the last three months, he has behaved himself impeccably, and everyone still assumes that at the first opportunity he'll throw it all away- no, he is being a jerk, let me- Dad-!"*

The phone scuffs about a bit, and Burt's voice says wearily, *"We might be a little bit longer, Finn."*

"Okay. Uh. Should I start on dinner?"

*"No, my god, my stove," Kurt's voice snaps in the background, but Burt says, "I don't know how long we'll be, he could walk out in the next ten seconds or tomorrow morning for all we know and, you know, I'm under pretty strict orders that we're not going anywhere until he does."*

*"You're all such jerks, he's being good."* Kurt snarls.

*"I'll call you when we head back, okay? Maybe just - just eat without us until then."*

"Okay. Um. What did he- what happened?"

*"I don't think that telling you it's a long story," Burt says slowly, "gives you any idea how long a story it is. He didn't do anything wrong, though, Finn."*

"Okay. Um. Is Kurt okay?"

*"So long as he's got someone to take his bad day out on he's fine."*

*"I hate all of you," Kurt's voice buzzes in the background. "You have no idea of the stress I'm under. They are not taking him to juvie. I'll throw myself under the car if they try."*

*"I'll speak to you later,"* Burt says, in that voice that means he and Finn share something, they share trying and failing to understand Kurt, and hangs up. Finn stares at the phone in his hand, stares at the fridge, worries a bit.

Blaine's okay. He is kind of crazy sometimes and Finn thinks that he actually would stab someone in the head if they ever tried to hurt Kurt, sometimes Finn sees that mad light in his eyes like he's running through all the possibilities of shit he could pull before Kurt grabs his arm and yanks him away. But Kurt is crazy about Blaine in equally genuinely crazy ways, Finn didn't know that Kurt *could* be so utterly *easy* with anyone but he's seen them dance together never taking their eyes off each others' faces, he's seen Kurt close his eyes and *trust* Blaine, he's seen him watch Blaine walk away so open and so owned. He remembers the fluster and unease and occasional horror on *both* their parts of Kurt's crush on him; but Kurt leans his forehead into Blaine's shoulder and trusts that he won't be rejected, when fear of rejection has been most of Kurt's life so far. And the ways Blaine could hurt him - the things they don't know about Blaine, the ways he could seriously *hurt* Kurt -

He does like Blaine, though. When Blaine forgets himself in glee club he's a *hell* of a lot of fun. And he's the only other person besides Finn who occasionally knots his own ankles, gets too enthused about a dance move and dances right into someone else, and then laughs about it, and gets an affectionate, amused glance from Kurt.

And he remembers sometimes how alone Blaine looks, before Kurt takes his hand. He remembers that Blaine doesn't even have his parents and that's the one thing Finn's always thought, however woefully unpopular he could dip at school, at least he'd always have his mom, if nothing else he's got his mom . . .

So . . . yeah, Finn hopes he's okay, and that he really didn't do anything stupid, and this all gets cleared up. But mostly he's hungry, and Kurt is likely to talk a *lot* about this 'long story', so he needs to eat like, now.

He makes a quadruple-decker peanut butter sandwich. Kurt's not the only one who can cook.

\*

Apparently he's not being arrested, they just couldn't let him leave without a parent. Ridiculous fucking world they live in, Blaine thinks, stepping outside blinking and startled with cold at the rich blue of the dusk. There's his dad's long black car parked on the kerb - and there's the door opening on the truck parked closer, Burt calling, "Kurt-" but Kurt's already on the sidewalk, running to him, pale in the dark with a scarf tucked close around his throat. His eyes flit to Blaine's dad but then he just grabs Blaine's arm, says, "You're alright-"

"I'm fine, you're-"

"I'm fine." Kurt puts his arms around him, hugs him hard. Blaine drops his head to his shoulder, buries his nose in Kurt's scarf, smelling of Kurt and cold night air, closes his eyes tight. "I'm fine, I'm fine. Oh god, your eye-"

Blaine cracks his eyes open when he hears his dad move, sees him walk to Burt standing by the car, and they begin a murmured conversation. Kurt just clings to him, whispers, "I'm sorry, I couldn't - it just all happened really fast and I didn't know it was about you and I didn't know how to get away-"

"Jesus, it wasn't your fault, how the hell could it be your fault-?"

"Because I am about as much use in a fight as a wet tissue, Blaine."

"I'll have you know I can do some pretty serious damage with a wet tissue. I'm just - I'm sorry. I didn't know, I - I tried to forget about them, I didn't think they wouldn't have forgotten me."

"Would they try to hurt you?" Kurt lifts his head, checks Blaine's face. "Would they come back?"

"I think they have slightly more to worry about than me right now. I don't know. Just need to get the hell out of this state as soon as possible."

"New York," Kurt murmurs, and slides his hand down Blaine's arm until their fingers fold together; Blaine squeezes back. They turn to face their fathers, who stand there uneasily side by side, watching the both of them.

"Easier if you just come home with us tonight, maybe." Burt says. "I can drive you and your stuff back over tomorrow. If you want."

Kurt's head swings to look at Blaine. Blaine shrugs, still holding his hand. "I guess. Thank you."

They can't really talk about it yet. Blaine manages one corner of a smile for his dad. "I'll see you tomorrow."

He says, quiet in the gathering dark, "Goodnight, Blaine." and walks alone to his car.

\*

He doesn't know what's happening, not really. He should go up to bed sometime soon but he doesn't want Finn there trying to act like he's not thinking about Blaine, Finn's thoughts are so grindingly laborious that Blaine can't read in the same room as them. Not that he's reading now, sitting on the sofa in front of the Hummels' blank television, book splayed open on the arm of the sofa, one lamp on against midnight outside the windows. Maybe he'll just sleep down here. Maybe he won't sleep.

The stairs creak. He can always trust in this.

Kurt sits next to him, curling his legs underneath himself neat in pyjamas and robe, and they look at each other for a second before, just because it's habit mostly, they both stare at the dead TV. "Interesting day," Blaine says, and Kurt gives a little amused breath.

"I never did get that rice."

"Takeout now and then isn't the end of the world."

"I'll have you know I have nutritional *plans* for this household and they just got kicked out for a whole week. I swear they fry the pizzas for all the grease in them."

"We'll live, Kurt."

Kurt tilts his shoulder a shrug. "We're good at that."

Blaine looks at him, and Kurt looks back. Blaine's never looked so openly at anyone before Kurt, never been looked back at with such calmness before, like anything Blaine does next is okay. "I don't know what happens next," Blaine says, and begins playing with the end of the cord of Kurt's robe for something to do.

Kurt says teasingly, "I thought you never knew what you'd do next."

"Hah. No, I don't. I mean - no, this time I do. I want things to not be fucked up anymore. Screwed up anymore. So I'm going to try, I am, I want things to *work*. I just - it means I have to trust other people to want that too. And I don't know if they do, not really."

"Your parents."

Blaine flicks the end of the cord back and forth a bit. "I think they do right now. The whole interview with a social worker thing shook my dad up pretty badly, I think it's the first time he's thought about what our family looks like to other people. God forbid we *look* like the mess we actually are."

Kurt's silent, watching Blaine's face, waiting for him. Blaine rubs the cord between his fingertips.

"I just don't know how long it'll last. I don't know if he *can* be okay with it. I think my mom'll come around, she usually finds a way to convince herself that the things she didn't really want are actually pluses - and

I'm pretty certain she really wanted a girl anyway, so maybe she can talk herself around to this as a compromise."

"Blaine."

". . . yeah. Okay. It's a lot of bitterness to let go of."

Kurt looks down. Blaine tugs at the cord. "Will you miss me?"

"Because I'll never see you again now? Blaine - I could never *enjoy* it, you being here, I just couldn't stop thinking about what it meant to you. It would - it would kill me if I fought with my dad like that." His voice sounds too full, and Blaine curls the cord around his hand, pulls at it. "I just felt *helpless*, all the time, at all the things I couldn't fix for you. I feel like I should be able to."

"I'm not actually your responsibility, Kurt."

"It's not about that, you know it's not *duty*, it's just - I love you, Blaine, you know I do."

He tugs at the cord. "Yes. I know you do." Kurt comes with him as he pulls, curls into the shoulder he's offered. Blaine murmurs into the hair above his ear, "I love you too."

Kurt folds an arm around Blaine's waist, settles his cheek into his shoulder. "I'll still help. Everything I can."

"Just - don't hate me when I get you into the worst situations. That is actually the most I can ask of you."

"No it's not. I'd lie down in the road for you." Kurt closes his eyes, his breath a warm press of living ribs against Blaine's side. "I was scared. I can't even *tell* you how scared I was, but - when I realised it was about you - all the fear changed. What they might do to *you* - I was still scared but it was just, it was different. And I'm alive, and I'm fine, and I don't care. If it took *that* for your parents to realise how great you are-

"Yeah, why did it take them so many expulsions and warnings from the police for them to realise that I'm such a *great* guy?" Blaine says, and Kurt smacks him in the shoulder without lifting his head.



"- I'm just glad I'm alive and you're alive, and things can work out. They can work out. We've both done heavy before."

"Mm." Blaine reaches for his wrist, slips his fingers along it, is puzzled by the expanse of bare skin he finds. Kurt sits up and Blaine's fingers slip loose, and Kurt wraps a hand around his wrist, suddenly stricken.

"They - when they cut it off, the rope, when the cop cut the rope off he - he cut too much. I - I did keep it. But there's not enough to - to tie it back on."

His wrist looks weirdly naked without that ratty leather braid tied around it. Blaine stares, tries to tell himself it doesn't matter. "It was just a stupid bracelet," he says, and can't even understand how it's got in at his stomach like a bad hamburger.

"It was not." Kurt snaps back. "It was *not*, I *liked* it. We have to go out tomorrow to get another one. I thought black would be better, that thing did not go with half of what I wore."

"It matters to you that much? I mean - yes, if you want, whatever. Just - just don't worry about it. It *was* just a bracelet, Kurt."

"It was not. It meant something. It felt - all wrong, someone else taking it off, *you* put it on me. Um." He shakes his head, cheeks hot now, flustered by his own honesty. Blaine always has wondered why Kurt never just took the thing off himself, he mostly acted like he didn't much care either way and kept it on for Blaine's sake; he realises for the first time that Kurt *likes* the fact that Blaine put it on him, that Kurt maybe wouldn't have minded it coming off if *Blaine* had taken it off . . .

"You're getting one too." Kurt says decisively. "Not a matching one, that's tacky. But just - something. Maybe a damned collar and tag so I can keep track of you."

"And so if I get thrown in the pound you can claim me back?"

"Hm. Just something. To *warn other males off*." He smirks, takes Blaine's arm and settles himself against his side again. "I liked having it there whenever you weren't there. So I could think about you."

Blaine skims his knuckles down the exposed skin of Kurt's wrist, says, "Would you love me more if I had better taste in accessories?"

"Probably. I don't ask for everything, though."

"Would you love me more if I was less of a fuck up?"

Kurt turns his head so he can look at Blaine's eyes and Blaine looks back; Kurt's eyes are a dark blue-green in this low light, and there's always too much in them, Blaine hardly needs the words when Kurt just tells him more than he knew there was with a look like that. He says quietly, "I don't know if I could love you more." He touches Blaine's cheek, his fingers skimming that scar like he's not afraid of it. "But if you were happier I think I'd be happier."

He doesn't have the words, for how it hurts in such a *good* way to hear that, but from Kurt's face maybe he can see that in Blaine's eyes too. Blaine makes himself smile a little, says, "I think your dad would like me more if I was less of a fuck up."

Kurt snorts, turns his head back into Blaine's body, nuzzling down to get comfortable. "Stop saying 'fuck up', Blaine."

"Sorry. Juvie doesn't exactly improve your vocabulary."

"I thought you learned an exceptionally large number of words for 'penis' while in there."

"I think they make some of them up on the spot to pretend they know more than they do. And again, I wouldn't call that an 'improvement' to my vocabulary."

Kurt holds his arm, murmurs with his eyes closed, "You're not a fuck up. I think you're doing fine."

Blaine settles himself back against the cushions, settles his arm around Kurt, blinks his eyes towards closed. "Oh, *you're* allowed to say it, then."

Kurt's thumb strokes at the inside of his wrist. Blaine closes his eyes, tilts his head towards Kurt's, lets his muscles relax. The morning always comes, one way or another, and they should have time to sneak to their respective beds before anyone else moves. And if not - well, it's not like he can get thrown out for it now.

"Maybe I'll just get you tattooed," Kurt murmurs without moving, and Blaine thinks that that's actually not a bad idea.