Westerville Abbey

by HKVoyage (voyagehk)

Summary

Blaine is the second son of the earl of Westerville, and is considered the spare heir. After his 18th birthday, he attends the London Season to fulfill his duty of finding a wife. He soon realizes he is more attracted to the new footman. Kurt, who has just arrived at Westerville Abbey to work alongside his father, becomes equally as smitten with the earl’s youngest son. Will Blaine and Kurt be able to overcome their class differences in 1910s England? Will their forbidden love survive WW1? A Downton Abbey inspired historical Klaine AU.
Welcome to my new multi-chapter story! I promise that you won’t need to have watched Downton Abbey to enjoy this historical Klaine AU, set in Britain during the 1910s. It’s fully drafted and I’m now doing the final editing and polishing up. This story is a slow build, but there are plenty of plot twists along the way that I hope will keep your interest.

The story is roughly 225k words over 64 chapters. Updates will be posted each Wednesday and Saturday. I live in Thailand and travel a lot, so the timings might vary with time zone changes, but I’ll post faithfully on the days, wherever I am.

I couldn’t have possibly written this story without my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. They are both accomplished writers, and I urge you to check out their stories on this site. I did the last-minute edits and proofreading by myself, so all mistakes are mine.

The preface is written in a POV that is different than the rest of the story. If you don’t like it, please don’t give up. It will change to either Blaine’s or Kurt’s POV after this.
Now close your eyes, and imagine it’s a late afternoon in February. The sun has begun its descent behind the hills and casts weak shadows across the moors where cattle and sheep graze. The farmers are rounding up the livestock and leading them into barns to give them shelter on this cold winter’s night. There is no snow, but the hard ground crunches with the frost as you walk. You try to wiggle your toes in your boots to keep them warm, but it doesn’t help much, so you walk faster.

Can you feel it?

If you look to the east, you’ll spot a public bus in the distance, making its way across the moor. There’s a passenger on board who has never been away from his home in Somerset, the neighboring county. He sits by the window and marvels at the new landscapes that he sees. At 18 years old, he’s finally filling into his tall and lanky body. He’s lost the baby fat in his face and has muscular arms, thanks to the backbreaking work he’s done back at home on the farm. And like you, many ladies in the village find him beautiful.

He’s now a man and must make his own way in life. His father has secured him a job as the second footman at Westerville Abbey, an enviable position coveted by many a lad. It isn’t the type of work that he would have chosen for himself, but he’s accepted that it’s his lot in life. If he does well at the job, he’ll become the first footman, then the valet, and if he’s lucky, he’ll become the butler. His future is completely mapped out.

His father has been employed by Westerville Abbey for ten years. He’s sketched life at the abbey, and it all sounds so grand. The lad has been told many stories about the top-notch benevolence and loyalty that the abbey’s family extends to its staff. If he’s to be in service, it doesn’t seem as if he could do better than Westerville. He looks forward to spending time with his father, and reestablishing their relationship. It feels as though this position is his destiny.

What the young man doesn’t know is that Westerville Abbey is only a step towards his destiny, which is intertwined with the family’s second son.

The bus makes its way towards you, and you smile at the young man looking out of the window. You wonder how he will get on in his new position at the abbey. Don’t worry - this story will recount his tale.

A gust of wind has you turn in the other direction, and you see Westerville Abbey in the distance for the first time. As you walk towards it, you’re in awe of its grandeur and beauty. It could be mistaken for a castle, only the land was once owned by the Bishop of Exeter, which classifies it as an abbey. You hurry closer, for the sun is about to set.

You decide not to walk up the main road to the abbey, but take another path that seems to have been used by many. As you approach the estate, you eye what looks like a horses’ stable. You spot a young man close the barn door quickly and lower his head so that his mouth is covered by a soft-looking scarf.

The 17-year-old looks left and right to determine which direction the wind blows. It reminds him of how his life will soon change, with one of two predetermined paths already set out. What he doesn’t know is that the winds will bring significant changes that are well beyond his control... or even his imagination.

Life will soon not be at all like he thought it would.

George V has been king for almost four years, and already a parliamentary act was passed that made the elected House of Commons have supremacy over the House of Lords, of which the young man’s father is a member. Within his lifetime, women will have the right to vote. However,
for now, life is very much like under the reign of Edward VII, which was like his mother’s, Queen Victoria. Everyone knows their position in life and what is expected of them. He’s not sure whether it’s a comfort or a noose around his neck, but he’s accepted that it’s his lot in life.

The winds of change will blow even stronger, for there are rumored troubles on the European continent that will alter everything. It will be touted as the war to end all wars, although we know that this is simply not the case. Another world war will happen soon after, and wars will continue to this day.

However, on this winter’s day, the second son of the earl of Westerville is none the wiser. He’s more worried about his horse on this cold night than the changes that will soon come his way.

He hears the crunch of gravel as the new second footman makes his way towards the abbey. He looks in that direction, but soon loses interest when the shadowed figure makes its way to the back of the house, dismissing him as a delivery or staff returning, and really not of interest.

Oh, how wrong he is.

The shadow will change everything.

The sun has now set, and a cold gust of wind reddens your face. Your lips feel chapped, and all you want is shelter and the warmth of a bed with an eiderdown. However, the winds are blowing strong in Devon, England in 1914, for there will be major changes - politically, economically, but most importantly….

… for the second footman and the earl’s second son, who are coming of age.
“Blaine, are you ready? You know that father doesn’t like anyone to be late for breakfast,” Cooper calls out from the other side of the heavy oak door.

“Almost. I’ll be down in a minute,” Blaine replies from his bedroom. Blaine now regrets that he has stayed up so late last night reading *Sons and Lovers* by DH Lawrence. Although he’s received the novel as a Christmas present, last night was the first opportunity he has had to read it. He was so engrossed with the Morel family saga that he couldn’t put it down until the wee hours. It doesn’t help matters that the footman who usually wakes him up and helps him dress for breakfast has consumption, and is now in a sanatorium. He can’t wait for the day when a replacement is found.

Blaine goes to the valet stand in the corner of his bedroom to finish dressing. Blaine deftly buttons up his waistcoat and secures two chains into the appropriate holes before depositing the attached watch into his pocket. He wraps and knots his tie around the stiff shirt collar, ensuring that the wing tips are still pressed down. He slips the jacket of his brown worsted single-breasted suit, and sits down to put on his leather brogue shoes. Blaine goes to the full-length mirror hanging on one of the wardrobe’s door panels for a final check that he’s presentable for breakfast. His father is a stickler for attire, manners and the like.

When Blaine is confident that he’ll pass his father’s inspection, he leaves his bedroom, rushes down the long corridor, takes two steps at a time down the winding staircase, and enters the dining room.

The family’s butler is the first to greet him. “Good morning, Mr Blaine.”

“Good morning, Hummel,” Blaine replies before taking a plate from the end of the buffet table. He
methodically lifts the lid off each silver chafing dish one at a time, loading his plate with an omelet, a lamb chop, toast, mushrooms, and fried potatoes. He then sits at the last vacant seat, which is opposite his mother.

“Good morning, Blaine. You’re looking dapper this morning,” Pamela greets.

Blaine gently touches his hair to make sure that he did a proper job with his hair pomade and all his curls are slicked down. Satisfied that every hair is in place, he smiles at his mother and replies, “I’m glad that you think so, Mama. I’m surprised you aren’t having your breakfast upstairs, as usual.”

“You’ll find I’m full of surprises today,” she replies. Pamela is practically glowing, and Blaine can tell that she has good news. However, he’ll be patient and wait until she’s ready to share with the rest of the family.

Blaine glances around the dining room. It’s a rather somber room, with oak paneling and a 12-foot long oak table, but only set for people to dine at one end. The portrait oil paintings hanging on the walls are a reminder of the past generations that have lived at Westerville Abbey, and are intertwined in its history. It’s a cold winter’s morning, and although the full-length gold brocade curtains are open, there is only weak sunlight brightening the room. He notices the staff standing to attention along the wall, and Sebastian, the first footman, approaching him with a silver teapot.

After pouring tea into Blaine’s cup, Sebastian politely asks, “Did you find everything you required for breakfast, Mr Blaine?”

“Yes, I did, Sebastian. I plan to spend the day outside around the estate, so I’ll need plenty of energy.”

Blaine can see Sebastian’s lips curl into what almost looks like a smirk, but it quickly disappears. Although Sebastian has been employed at Westerville Abbey for almost two years, Blaine still feels uncomfortable around him. It’s the way Sebastian looks at him, as if he’s a prize for the taking and he’s not sure what for. Blaine always feels uneasy in Sebastian's presence, though the footman is far too clever to do anything that would cause Blaine to complain.

“You’re lucky, Blaine. I’ll be spending the morning stuck inside pouring over the estate’s accounts with father. I still can’t figure out the difference between a debit and a credit,” Cooper says with exasperation in his voice.

Blaine doesn’t feel too badly for Cooper. After all, he’s the firstborn son and heir to the Westerville estate and the titles. Cooper has to do boring tasks like reviewing the accounting records. Blaine, who is ten years younger, is considered the spare heir - someone who is around ‘just in case’ Cooper doesn’t sire a son. Blaine has never been involved in the estate’s business affairs, and that suits him perfectly fine.

“Nonsense, Cooper. We’ll spend the morning with the estate manager, who will explain everything to us in simple, easy to understand terms.”

Blaine’s focus turns to his father, who just joined the conversation. His head is deeply buried into the freshly-ironed Daily Telegraph newspaper that was delivered earlier in the morning.

“What’s happening in the world today, Michael?” Pamela asks her husband.
“To be honest, not very much. However, there’s a sense of trouble in Austria-Hungary. I’m not certain what will come of it. I’m sure I’ll learn more about it in the House of Lords next week.”

“Never mind, darling. We have the most wonderful news to give everyone on this winter morning.”

All eyes turn to the Countess of Westerville. “I received a telegram late last night from America. My niece, Rachel, will soon be on her way from New York City to stay with us. I can’t tell you how much I look forward to having the company of someone from my side of the Atlantic.”

Blaine smiles broadly at the news. He knows that his American mother has always enjoyed visitors from her home country. He also knows that Rachel is roughly his own age, and is looking forward to her companionship.

The Earl sets down the Daily Telegraph. “Just in time for the London season. We’ll need to find her a suitable husband… titled, of course.”

Blaine can sense the uncomfortable lapse in the conversation. It’s a well-known fact that his mother was once a young American million-dollar heiress who arrived in London in search of a titled husband. His father married her in order to save the Westerville estate from its financial problems with her enormous dowry. As luck had it, they had eventually fallen in love by the time Blaine was born. Their relationship is now full of mutual respect, love and affection, and Blaine can only hope that he will share a similar deep-rooted love with his future wife.

“What’s Cousin Rachel like?” Blaine asks.

“From what my brother Hiram has written, she’s intelligent and independent. She knows her mind and what she wants out of life.”

“So, Cousin Rachel is strong-willed and difficult,” Cooper chortles.

“I prefer the term ‘ambitious’. American women are slightly bolder than what you are used to. That doesn’t mean it’s bad, just different.”

Blaine can’t help but glance at Quinn, who has stayed silent throughout the conversation. Her golden hair is loosely pinned back in a low-lying bun against the nape of her neck and it frames her beautiful face. She’s wearing a simple navy blue dress with a cream-colored embroidered collar, cut in a V-neck, which displays the gold locket necklace that Cooper gave her for their last wedding anniversary.

“I for one am looking forward to having another woman in the house closer to my age. Do you know anything more about her?” Quinn politely inquires.

“Hiram raves about her virtues in every letter he sends. He’s absolutely besotted with her. Rachel has had the best women’s education in America - she recently graduated from Emma Willard with flying colors. She’s particularly talented musically and apparently has a voice of an angel.”

“Now that is something I’ll enjoy. It’s no fun singing duets with Blaine. He can’t match my vocal prowess,” Cooper brags.

Blaine rolls his eyes at his brother’s comment. Ever since he can remember, Cooper has shown himself competitive towards Blaine when it comes to musical talent. He and Cooper always
perform music after dinner, with Cooper singing the lead vocals, and Blaine playing the piano and joining in during the chorus.

“As you know, Rachel’s mother died in childbirth, so Hiram has had to raise her single-handedly. Now that she’s turned 18 years old, he feels that I’m more suited to present her to society than he is himself. We’ll have a ball at Westerville Abbey in May, and then head off to London for the remainder of the Season. I expect the entire family to come along.”

Quinn squeals with delight, clapping her hands softly. “I can’t wait! We haven’t had a major society event at Westerville Abbey since my wedding. I often think of my own coming out Season. The new wardrobe full of evening dresses in the latest fashion, the rounds of afternoon teas, and the balls… Oh, the balls,” Quinn says with a dreamy expression. She suddenly snaps out of her thoughts and adds, “And of course, meeting Cooper. He quite simply swept me off my feet from the moment I saw him.”

Blaine thinks back to three years ago, when the family was fully focused on finding Cooper a wife. After all, Cooper needed to marry and produce heirs to continue the family line at Westerville. Thanks to his mother, the estate was secure financially, so Cooper was able to find a wife that he wanted for love. Quinn had no such luck. Her parents owned an estate in nearby Cornwall, but she was cash poor due to her father’s financial mismanagement. Fortunately, Quinn is a woman of great beauty and grace, and captured Cooper’s heart during her coming out Season. They were engaged by the end of the Season and had a fairy-tale like wedding at Westerville Abbey the next spring.

On their wedding day, his father bestowed a subsidiary title to Cooper, so he’s now the ‘Viscount of Westerville’. For months afterwards, Cooper had been intolerable with his new title, and enjoyed having the servants referring to him as ‘his lordship’. Blaine put his foot down at calling Cooper ‘my lord’, and their mother had to intervene to put a halt to Cooper’s constant teasing.

“We have to make sure that Westerville Abbey will have the ball that everyone will talk about for the rest of the Season. There is so much planning to do,” Pamela ponders. She then turns towards Quinn and they rattle on about potential themes, food menus, music, decorations, and the like. In the meantime, the earl launches into a discussion with Cooper about the estate’s business, leaving Blaine to feel like a third wheel in both conversations.

“May I be excused from the table, Father?”

“Of course, Blaine.”

He grabs an apple from the fruit bowl set out on the buffet table as he leaves the dining room, eager to escape the house and the talk about the London season and the estate’s accounts.

Blaine hurries up the staircase to dress for the day. He rummages in his wardrobe to find his riding attire. He changes into his more informal white shirt, moss-green tweed trousers, coordinating waistcoat, and a Norfolk jacket, fastening the two buttons that secure the belt around his waist. He quickly knots the brown tie, changes his socks for a heavier wool pair, and puts on his riding boots, which fit snugly along his calves. After finding his woolen cap used for riding, he inspects his outfit in the mirror. His father holds the family and staff to a very high standard, both inside and outside the Westerville estate.

After popping the apple from breakfast in his jacket pocket, Blaine makes his way down the stairs, and he notices Hummel walking along the corridor.
“I see you are planning a ride this morning, Mr Blaine.”

“Yes, even though it’s overcast and cold outside, I need to exercise both my horse and myself. How is your health? I was worried about you.” Hummel had a turn last month, and for the first time that Blaine could recall, the butler had spent a day in bed.

“I’m much better, thank you. Tip top, you could say.”

“Have you had any luck finding a new footman?” Blaine inquires, because he certainly misses the assistance, particularly in the mornings.

“As a matter of fact, I have,” Hummel replies with a huge grin on his face. “My son started this morning. After a period of extensive training and making sure he meets my exact standards, he’ll be looking after you.”

“If he’s anything like you, I’m sure that he will surpass your exact standards very soon.”

After a short walk, Blaine arrives at the estate’s stables. It not only houses the dozen or so horses the family owns, but the dogs used on the fox hunts as well. In some ways, it feels more like home than the main house. Blaine has learnt to ride at an early age, and he spends as much time as he can with the horses.

“Wesley, where are you?”

“I’m over here, Mr Blaine,” Wesley calls out from the stall that contains Firebird, Blaine’s horse. After the Boxer Rebellion, Wesley’s family immigrated from China to London. Wesley’s natural affinity with horses earned him a position at the Westerville estate as a stable boy three years ago. Blaine considers Wesley a horse whisperer after helping him to break in Firebird.

His mother had arranged for the young black stallion to be shipped from Kentucky for his 16th birthday. Blaine immediately named him ‘Firebird’, after Stravinsky's ballet. He fell in love with the score when he first heard it three years ago during a visit in London, and to this very day, he still enjoys playing the music on the piano.

Wesley appears and brushes the straw off from his trousers. “I saw the tell-tale signs that you visited Firebird last night. You brushed him down and added more hay in his stable.”

Blaine drops his head and nods. “It dipped below freezing. I had to make sure that he was warm enough.”

“Firebird is ready for his ride. But I have to ask, why the glum face, Mr Blaine? You always look so happy before you set off for a ride.”

“I was told this morning that my American cousin Rachel will be visiting Westerville for an extended stay. I’m really excited about that, but she is 18 years old and will be joining the London season to find a husband.”

“There must be more to the story,” Wesley replies, encouraging Blaine to continue.

“The thing is, I have to attend the London season as well. It means that I’ll be away for three months in a city with no possibility of riding. You know how I much prefer the countryside to a
dirty place like London. Besides, I’ll miss Firebird...and you.”

“We’ll both miss you too, Mr Blaine. But before you know it, the three months will have passed in a blur and the London season will be over.”

“I still hate the thought of being apart from Firebird for that long,” Blaine pouts.

“You’ve got your pocket watch with you, Mr Blaine?”

Blaine chuckles, for he’s well known to lose track of time during his morning rides, and Wesley is usually tasked with retrieving him for lunch. Blaine nods and then turns his focus on his black stallion. He pats Firebird’s mane before mounting him and sets off in a gentle trot.

The 4,000-acre estate is considered to be on the smaller side compared to others dotted around Britain, but it’s been the soul of the nearby rural community for generations. Blaine rides past several of the tenant farms along the way, waving back to farmers that he encounters. His father has always been a fair landowner, letting rents slip when the crops are poor, and holds celebrations for bumper harvests. His grandmother is the governor of the local village school, where Blaine studied until he was 12 years old. He made friends with the farm children as well as those from the village. It’s a pity that he only sees them now at church on Sundays or village events, such as fetes and high dances.

Soon, Blaine enters a large field, laid bare and ready for food crops to be sown next spring, and clicks his boot spurs against Firebird, who immediately races into a gallop. Blaine loves the exhilaration he feels from the speed and the wind blowing across his face, in spite of the frosty weather. After thirty minutes, Blaine notices Firebird slow down ever so slightly. He’s fine with that, because they are almost at his favorite spot on the estate. Blaine sits deep in the saddle, taking his legs off Firebird’s sides, and pulls back on the left rein with one hand. Firebird immediately slows down to a walk as they make their way to the estate’s lake.

Blaine jumps down from Firebird and immediately opens the saddlebag, taking out a heavy woolen blanket and the apple he snuck away at breakfast. He’s delighted to find a bottle of ginger beer, and an additional parcel. When he opens up the white linen napkin, he licks his lips when he discovers a slice of fruitcake. Cook knows him well, and Blaine assumes she sent someone to the stables to sneak a special treat into his saddlebag.

After stroking Firebird’s neck and feeding him the apple, Blaine sets out the old woolen tartan blanket under his favorite oak tree, which affords him an exceptional view of the lake and the undulating hillside beyond. Devonshire is famous for its rolling farmland that not only grows crops, but also has green pastures for cattle to graze. The Red Rubies produce milk so rich that people come from miles around to taste the special clotted cream. Devonshire is so linked with the family’s history that his parents even gave him the middle name of ‘Devon’.

This has always been Blaine’s special spot on the estate - a place where he can escape the rigid formalities of his life and just be himself. It’s the perfect place to daydream about the adventures he has read about in his books, and sing his favorite songs without Cooper turning them into duets.

Blaine sits on the blanket and tucks into the fruitcake. When he’s finished, he takes a gulp of ginger beer and looks out onto the lake, where ducks are swimming along the eastern side. At some stage soon, he’ll need to make a decision about his future. Convention dictates that Cooper will inherit the Westerville estate and enter politics, and Blaine has to make his own way in life.
Blaine’s formal education finished in early December before Christmas, when he went to London and sat the competitive exams for the Indian Civil Service. At his mother’s insistence, his father has also made inquiries about Blaine receiving a commission in the British cavalry. It could take up to a year to be offered the proper type of posting in either establishment. In the meantime, he’s biding his time at home, keeping fit for whatever the future has in store.

Blaine isn’t sure which option he prefers. His father’s stories of the Boer War only instill fear into Blaine. On the other hand, he could become a district officer in the Indian Civil Service - if he passes the competitive exams - but that would mean he would have to leave Britain and all that he loves.

Blaine knows that he has been groomed for either of these positions throughout his formative years. Whilst Cooper attended Eton College to study and make a network of friends he would need later in life in the House of Lords, Blaine’s life has been centered around Westerville. When Blaine turned 12 years old, he was pulled from the local village school, and Mr Schuester was employed as his tutor to teach him about the British Empire - its geography, history and other information needed to pass the Indian Civil Service exams. Although Mr Schuester was a kind man, he wasn’t a scholar, and many hours were instead spent in the music room practicing the piano.

Blaine’s summers were spent at the Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst, learning military tactics and fighting maneuvers on horses. His parents encouraged his polo as another way to hone his skills. Riding a horse is now second nature to him. He’s prepared for whichever direction his future takes him.

Blaine takes the day-old bread ends from the saddlebag and heads down towards the lake. The ducks quickly swim over as he breaks bread chunks and hurls them into the water. Blaine knows that when he’ll turn 18 years old in a few months’ time, he’ll be expected to attend the London season’s events as well. And that means spending time with society ladies.

The truth is, Blaine doesn’t know many girls his own age. After all, he has led a relatively sheltered life at Westerville. The girls in the local village are pleasant to him, but he doesn’t socialize with them. The ladies he has met during their stays in London have been enjoyable to spend time with, but there is no-one whom he feels attracted to. Not like the romance he has often read about in novels. These books have taught him that he should feel a stirring deep inside when he finds his true love, but Blaine has not experienced this type of yearning.

Blaine only feels his stomach stir when he’s around Sam, his father’s valet. He’s sure that these butterflies don’t indicate a physical attraction, but rather a bonding with his closest friend. Sam has been part of his life ever since he can remember. When Blaine was six years old, his father returned from the Boer War, and Sam came to live at the abbey on his own. As children, they attended the same village school and Blaine secretly tutored Sam, who struggled with reading and maths… well, all subjects.

During the summers, they spent countless hours fishing in the streams, swimming in the lake, picking raspberries from the kitchen garden, and pilfering leftover sweets discovered hidden in the kitchen pantry. At night time, they would lie out on the croquet lawn and gaze at the thousands of stars, whispering about their secret hopes and fears. Sam has confided that he feels these stirrings when he’s around Mercedes, the head housemaid, but is too shy let her know.

Blaine has become close friends with Jeff Sterling and Nick Duval during their summer training at Sandhurst. Both Jeff and Nick attend the academy all year round, and will receive their army commission upon graduation in July. Although they are infamous for their pranks, Blaine would
trust his life with either of them on the battlefield. Blaine knows he doesn’t feel any ‘stirrings’ for his friends at Sandhurst, so maybe he’s not attracted to any girls because he hasn’t met the right one yet. Blaine breaks out of his thoughts when he hears a horse’s gait coming toward him.


Blaine pulls out his pocket watch and is surprised that it’s already three o’clock. He’ll probably be late for afternoon tea. Although his mother would normally chastise him for poor timekeeping, he hopes that with her thoughts filled with Cousin Rachel and the Westerville Ball, she’ll be more lenient today.

Chapter End Notes

Let me know what you think so far. Can you imagine what life is like for a second son of an earl living on an English country estate in the 1910s? Can you appreciate the responsibilities and pressures that he might have?

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen.

I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr and would love to chat to anybody about this story or Klaine.

Next up: A few surprises during dinner at Westerville Abbey.
February 1914
Blaine

Blaine heads up to his bedroom, grateful that his mother didn’t comment on his tardiness at afternoon tea. His father and Cooper are still behind closed doors in the study with the estate manager, pouring over the ghastly accounts. He decides to take a long bath and presses the button for the bell by the side of his bed. Within a few minutes, there’s a knock on his door and Sebastian enters.

“I’d like to take a bath, Sebastian.”

“Very well, Mr Blaine.” When the footman heads towards the bathroom, Blaine recalls how times have changed since plumbing was installed a few years ago. Previously, a bath had to be ordered well in advance to allow the servants time to heat the water and carry the pails up the stairs. Now, it’s simply a matter of turning the taps to fill the tub with hot water. Inventions and progress are wonderful things. When Blaine hears that the water has stopped running, he heads into the bathroom.

Blaine undresses and provides Sebastian with each layer of his outfit, so that they can be tended to. When Blaine is down to his knee-length underdrawers, he looks up to find Sebastian’s eyes roaming over his body.

“That will be all, Sebastian,” Blaine states firmly, finding it unbelievable that the footman is still staring at him.

“I can stay, if you wish, Mr Blaine. I’ve been told that I’m an expert at scrubbing backs and hard-to-reach places.”

“I’ll be able to manage on my own, thank you very much,” Blaine says in a dismissive tone.
Blaine is relieved when Sebastian gets the message and leaves. Blaine isn’t usually modest around the footmen at the abbey, but he is absolutely not going to allow Sebastian to see him naked. There’s something in the way the footman looks at him that makes Blaine think that Sebastian enjoys it more than he should.

Blaine climbs into the hot bath and lets out a huge sigh. There is nothing he enjoys more than a long soak after a day of horseback riding to loosen his muscles. After scrubbing the dirt off his body from his ride and time spent at the stable, he leans over and reaches for his book. He gets caught up in the novel once again and before he knows it, the bathwater has become uncomfortably cold.

Blaine reluctantly sets his book down and climbs out of the bath to get dressed for the evening. Sebastian has left out his black-tie suit on the valet stand, so after drying off, he dresses himself. He’s ever so grateful that Cooper convinced his father to move with the times and replace the white-tie attire with the more contemporary black-tie suit. He enjoys wearing the accompanying black bow tie that is now considered fashionable.

Blaine can fix the black pearl studs to his shirt, but struggles with the cufflinks. It feels impossible to secure them with only one hand available, and he wonders for the 100th time that day when Hummel’s son will be trained to the butler’s ‘exact standards’. He decides to elicit help from his mother and quickly puts on his black Oxford dress shoes. He notices that they have been polished since he wore them last night, and is glad that not all standards have slipped with one footman missing.

Blaine knocks softly before entering his mother’s bedroom, and finds her sitting in front of the vanity with Lopez pinning her long and curly hair into the style she normally wears for a family-only dinner. He considers his mother to be the most beautiful woman he has ever laid eyes on. As a child, he had spent many an hour with her in this very bedroom as she prepared for grand dinners and balls.

“Can you help me with the cufflinks, Mama? I’m having problems fastening them by myself.”

“Of course, my dear,” Pamela replies, as she takes the cufflinks from Blaine’s extended hand and starts to poke the first link through the shirt cuff. “It won’t be long before Hummel has trained the new second footman.”

“I’m sure that Sebastian wouldn’t mind helping out and providing you with a very personal service in the meantime,” Lopez smirks.

Blaine is slightly baffled by her caustic remark. Does she know something that he does not? His mother hired Lopez six months ago based upon a recommendation from Lady Pennyworth of Bath. Blaine finds Lopez a bit haughty and having airs above her station, but his mother likes her, and that’s what really matters.

The earl pops his head inside the bedroom. “My mother has arrived. I’ll go fetch Cooper and Quinn. I’ll see you downstairs.”

Pamela gives her son a loving look through the mirror’s reflection. “Blaine, could you go join your father in the drawing room? Your grandmama has arrived early and you know how she detests waiting for others. I won’t be long. Lopez just needs to put the final touches to my hair.”

“Of course, Mama.”

When Lopez moves towards the jewelry chest to find the correct hair accessories, Blaine ducks
down and kisses his mother on the cheek. “We’ll see each other soon.”

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“Dinner is served,” Hummel announces.

Blaine sets down his now empty tumbler which contained a weak gin sling, and approaches his grandmother, the Dowager Countess of Westerville. After her husband died, the abbey was handed over to her eldest son, and she now lives in Dower House situated on the estate. She spends her time overseeing the village school and hospital as the governess. She’s quite a formidable lady, but the local villagers and farmers admire her tireless efforts and good works on their behalf. Blaine extends his right hand to offer her assistance getting up from the settee.

Once the dowager countess is standing, Blaine tucks her left arm underneath his and waits for his parents to leave the drawing room. Although the usual protocol dictates that Cooper and Quinn would follow his parents, they always defer to Blaine and his grandmama.

The dowager countess whispers in his ear, “You’ve turned out to be a fine young man with impeccable manners. With your dashing good looks and proper breeding, all the debutantes in London will be swooning around you.”

“I’m not sure about that, Grandmama. I don’t think any of the girls in London have ever noticed me before.”

“Nonsense, Blaine. They will see you for the true dandy that you have become. I simply know it.”

Blaine is always grateful to receive his grandmama’s praise. She has been one of his most faithful allies in the family, in spite of him being just the second son.

They enter the dining room and Sebastian immediately pulls out the dowager countess’s chair located to the earl’s left side. Once Blaine is certain that his grandmama is comfortably seated, he takes his place next to her. The silver candelabra is lit and casts a warm glow over the white linen tablecloth. Hummel makes his way around the table with a decanter from which he pours the sherry into the crystal-cut goblets. Now that Blaine has finished his schooling, his wine goblet is filled as well.

Sebastian enters the dining room with a silver tureen filled with an oxtail consommé, and carefully ladles a serving into each person’s bowl. Blaine takes in a deep breath as he smells the rich broth in front of him - he’s absolutely ravenous after missing out on lunch. However, he waits patiently until his father lifts his spoon as the signal that they may all start to eat.

“I’ve made an important decision today,” the earl announces after finishing his consommé. “We are going to have a telephone installed at the abbey before Rachel’s arrival.”

“First electricity, now telephones. Sometimes I feel as if I were living in an H.G. Wells novel,” the dowager countess remarks.

“I think that is the most wonderful news, my darling. Now Rachel will have a way to keep in touch with her father, who will surely miss her,” Pamela says with glee.

“We need to keep up with the latest advancements,” Cooper adds. “Electricity was the most wonderful invention and did away with those messy and smelly oil lamps.”

“Oh, I couldn’t have electricity in the house, I wouldn’t sleep a wink. All those vapors floating about,” the dowager countess retorts.
Blaine is excited about the news of a telephone at Westerville Abbey. While he can appreciate that his grandmama has traditional views, George V has been the king for four years now, and things are moving on from the Edwardian times. Blaine wonders who he could possibly call - does either Jeff or Nick have a telephone installed at their estates? He is so absorbed in his thoughts that he doesn’t realize that the bowls have been removed until a new plate is set down with a single vol-au-vent filled with wild mushrooms and bacon in a cream sauce. Blaine is grateful that the portions are small for there are many courses at dinner.

As they eat the crispy puff pastry case with the delicious filling, Pamela says, “Michael, you should host a fox hunt once Rachel arrives. It would be a good way for her to meet the local gentry before the Westerville Ball.”

“What a marvelous idea, Mama. It’s been ages since we’ve hosted a fox hunt. Isn’t that right, Quinn?” Cooper asks.

“Yes, that is true, Cooper. It’s been simply ages. But shouldn’t we wait until the autumn?”

“Why wait until the young cubs are old? The weather will be perfect in April.”

“I’ll have to discuss it with Bennett. The kennel man will know if the hounds are ready and fully trained,” the earl replies in a tone that indicates that this is the final word on the matter.

The second-course plates are removed and Hummel makes another round with the wine decanter, filling everyone’s second glass with a red burgundy. Sebastian serves Blaine a portion of roasted pheasant, a fond reminder of the recent shooting weekend at the Westerville estate, with nearby gentry in attendance. He then spots a silver serving dish to his left side filled with root vegetables and the dreaded Brussels sprouts.

Blaine absolutely detests Brussels sprouts.

They look like mini cabbages (another vegetable he hates), they feel slimy entering his mouth, they taste bitter, and they cause the most unpleasant wind afterwards. There is no other vegetable Blaine hates more than Brussels sprouts.

Blaine eyes the shaky hand that serves the roasted potatoes, carrots and parsnips on his plate. And then it moves on… without depositing a single Brussels sprout on his dinner plate. Blaine looks up and sees the new second footman for the first time.

Although earlier that day, Hummel had informed him that the new footman is his son, Blaine finds it hard to believe. All footmen are tall and handsome - after all, they bring prestige and pride to the families they work for - but Hummel’s son is absolutely stunning.

He’s not as tall as Sebastian, but he holds himself erect and proud. The evening livery looks as if it was tailor-made for him and hints at a slender but strong build. His hair is not completely slicked down with pomade, but rather it’s been loosely applied so that it swoops up a little at the front. His complexion is pale, but rosy cheeks give him a healthy glow. Blaine wishes he could touch the new footman to see if the skin is as soft as it looks. His eyes are a brilliant blue and he is trying to decide whether they are the color of his mother’s sapphires or the ocean he’s seen along the Devon coast, when he realizes that they are gazing back at him.

Blaine tinges pink with embarrassment at being caught staring at the new footman. He mouths a silent ‘thank you’ before focusing on his dinner plate and the course set before him. The conversation continues about the Westerville ball, but Blaine can’t focus on the words. He tries to capture inconspicuous glances of the new footman and appreciates that he moves with the grace of
“Blaine, did you hear me?” Cooper asks in an exasperated tone. When Blaine shakes his head, Cooper continues, “I asked what piece you wanted to start tonight’s entertainment with.”

“I don’t mind, Cooper. You decide.”

“You are full of surprises,” Cooper replies. “Quinn, please select a song that will showcase my musical talent.”

Pamela stands up from the table. “Lady Anderson, shall we join Quinn in the drawing room?”

Blaine stands next to his grandmama, and Sebastian immediately swishes over to pull out her chair. After helping her up, Blaine sits back down, for the gentlemen will be remaining in the dining room. Once the footmen have cleared the table, Hummel brings over the wooden box filled with cheroots, and a tray with small glasses and port wine.

Once Cooper has lit a cheroot and the port is passed around the table, the earl addresses Blaine. “I’m pleased that you’re spending time riding about the estate. It will keep you fit and prepared, whether you receive a commission in the army or the Indian Civil Service.”

“I’m ready for either, Father.”

“You’ll turn 18 years old soon, Blaine. Until your future is decided, I’ll need your help at the abbey. Obviously, Cooper will continue to learn about estate matters, but there are other things that require attention. For example, I’ll be sending you to Southampton to meet Rachel off her ship and represent the family.”

“Of course, Father. I’m more than happy to do that or anything else you may wish. I’m looking forward to Cousin Rachel’s stay.”

The earl takes a moment to pat the head of Roly, his Labrador Retriever, who is never far from his side. “Rachel’s stay is very well-timed. Since we’ll be hosting a ball at Westerville Abbey and attending the London season, it’s an ideal time for you to find a suitable bride as well. A wife who is willing to live in India with you... or stay behind if you receive a military commission. The London season provides you with this opportunity. It’s not beyond the realms of possibility that your first-born son could be the next Earl of Westerville.”

Blaine’s eyes widen as it dawns on him what his father is telling him… That he must find a wife over the next six months during the Season.

Grief cloaked the abbey twice over the past two years - once when Quinn gave birth to a stillborn son, and again when she miscarried six months later. Cooper makes sure that the family knows that they are trying for another baby, and Blaine shudders at the thought of the details. If Cooper and Quinn cannot have children, it will be up to him to produce the next generation’s heir.

He gives a curt nod and replies, “Understood, Father.”

They finish their port wine and join the ladies in the drawing room. A musical score is set out on the piano’s music rack, and the ladies are sitting around the games table playing cribbage. Once the men are settled in the drawing room, Pamela looks over at her second son. “Blaine, after discussing the Westerville ball and the London season with your father, I’ve come to an important decision.”

Blaine sets down his coffee cup on the walnut side table. His mother now has his complete and
undivided attention.

“You are to have a completely new wardrobe. After all, you’ll be included in all the activities taking place during the Season.”

Blaine looks open-eyed at his mother. It must be considered a serious business for him to find a wife if the family is investing in an entirely new wardrobe for him.

Pamela continues, “I have sent off a telegram to my brother this afternoon, asking that Rachel bring with her the latest fashion magazines. You’ll look simply dazzling in the most up-to-date attire. No lady will be able to resist you.”

“I quite like the way Blaine presents himself now, thank you very much,” the dowager countess interjects. “Fla Insights would not be a good look on Blaine. What could he possibly learn from the Americans?”

Blaine tenses at his grandmama’s last comment and glances at his mother. She seems to have taken the barbed remark about Americans in her stride.

“Of course, Blaine will go to the family’s tailor in Exeter after Rachel’s arrival. They will be able to balance America’s latest men’s fashion trends with the expectations of a gentleman attending the London season.”

The dowager countess raises one eyebrow, and Pamela adds, “Quinn will be visiting the tailor before Rachel’s arrival. After all, British women’s fashions follow the Parisian couture. She’ll explain our requirements well before Blaine’s visit.”

The dowager countess huffs, knowing that there is no rebuttal to Pamela’s carefully well-thought-out plan. Blaine is impressed by how his mother handles grandmama. He’ll have to take more notice of how to negotiate with a mother-in-law if he’s expected to find a wife soon.

His mother and Quinn monopolize the conversation with the latest Parisian fashion trends and speculating as to what Cousin Rachel’s wardrobe will consist of. They reconfirm their idea of waiting until after her arrival for Blaine to visit the tailor in case she is missing an important clothing article or accessory.

After accompanying Cooper on the piano far longer than he wanted, Blaine returns to his bedroom where a fire has been lit and warms the air. He heads to the washstand and pours water from the porcelain pitcher into the washbowl before brushing his teeth and washing his face. Blaine takes off his shoes and leaves them outside the door for collection later that evening.

After stripping off his suit and hanging it on the valet stand, Blaine changes into his nightclothes and climbs into bed, pulling up the heavy goose-feather eiderdown to the tip of his nose. He’s grateful for the hot water bottle that was placed there earlier, for it has warmed up the bedding. Although Blaine is tired from the long day outdoors, he finds it difficult to fall asleep. There are so many changes that will soon happen in his life.

It hadn’t come as a surprise that he’s expected to find a wife during the London season. After all, he’ll be turning 18 years old in May. His family only has his best interests at heart. There will be no time for courtship and a wedding once his future is decided. A marriage later this year does make sense. If he sets off for India, it would be easier with a wife by his side. And if he receives a commission in the cavalry, there would be something to look forward to during his home leaves.

He looks forward to Cousin Rachel’s arrival from America, and having the company of someone
his own age and status at the abbey. Perhaps she’ll help him to better understand girls before the Westerville ball. Yes, he’s convinced that Cousin Rachel staying with the family is a very good thing indeed.

He’s not looking forward to the London season - he much prefers the slower pace of the country life than the city, and he’ll certainly miss Firebird. However, it will give him an opportunity to attend the symphony and discover new music. He makes a mental note to himself to ask his mother if Cousin Rachel could bring some popular American music scores with her as well. He had listened to some ragtime music during his last stay in London and he loves it.

He can’t wait until the abbey gets the telephone installed. He’s thankful that Cooper is forward-thinking and embraces all the latest inventions. He’s able to convince their father that they are all good ideas. With indoor plumbing recently installed as well, Westerville Abbey will have all the modern conveniences of the great estates of Britain.

Dinner had more surprises than the announcement of the telephone. The new second footman had been in attendance as well. He doesn’t appear to be at all like his father. Not only is he strikingly handsome, but he somehow sensed - knew? - that Blaine detests Brussels sprouts. Blaine has a good feeling that they will get along just fine and that he’ll be the perfect person to look after his needs. As his eyes droop, Blaine’s thoughts drift to the footman’s beautiful blue eyes.

Chapter End Notes

No Downton Abbey inspired AU would be complete without Lady Violet, the Dowager Countess. There is no Glee character that even comes close to the perfection of Maggie Smith in this role, so she’s the same character in this story. Did you spot a few of her one-liners I used in the chapter? For those who haven’t watched Downton Abbey, here’s a visual:-

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. >. I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr and would love to chat to anybody about this story or Klaine.

Next up: Kurt settles into the household at Westerville Abbey.
February 1914
Kurt

Kurt sets down the last of the dinner plates in the kitchen scullery. It’s nine o’clock and he still has duties to perform, but his feet are killing him from rushing up and down the back staircase all night. He consoles himself in the fact that it’s his first day at the abbey and he’ll soon get used it.

“That’s the lot of them. I can’t believe how many dishes were used for dinner.”

“It’s the same for most meals upstairs.” The kitchen maid pulls her hands out from the hot water in the cast iron sink and wipes them on her apron. “I’m Brittany. I just know that we’ll be great friends because we’re both unicorns.”

“How do you do? I’m Kurt. Umm… What do you exactly mean by unicorns?”

“Quit your dawdling, Brittany, otherwise you’ll be there past midnight,” the cook barks out from the adjacent kitchen.

“Yes, Mrs Sylvester.”

Kurt gives Brittany a small smile before leaving for the kitchen.

“Did you remember not to serve Mr Blaine the Brussels sprouts, new boy?”

“Yes, Mrs Sylvester. I remembered.” Kurt hesitates before adding, “Can I ask you a question?”

“Go ahead, Porcelain, as long as it’s quick. There’s still work to be done.”
Kurt grimaces at the reference to his pale skin, but has figured out already that the cook calls most everybody by a nickname. It could have been worse. “Does the family usually eat so many courses at dinner?”

Mrs Sylvester sniggers as she takes the copper kettle off the oven hob. “Since it was only family tonight, there were six courses. However, when there are guests and it’s a formal dinner party, it’s usually a dozen or more courses.”

Kurt can’t believe how lucky the family is to have so much food for dinner, or every meal for that matter. He’s used to having one meal a day, supplemented with soup made of vegetables and a stock bone when he’s hungry. Kurt hears a loud ringing and glances over to the rows of bells, with each room labeled underneath.

“The ladies have retired to the drawing room. You best get the coffee and afters upstairs,” Mrs Sylvester advises, as she slides the trays across the large oak table in the center of the kitchen.

Entering the kitchen, Sebastian snaps, “I’ll take the tray with the coffee and china. Mrs Hudson will have a fit if they are broken by a careless oaf.” Kurt takes the smaller silver tray filled with sweet morsels, such as petit fours, chocolates and candied ginger, and quickly follows the first footman up the back staircase.

As they set foot inside the drawing room, Kurt can hear the cheerful conversation of the ladies of the house, discussing the invitation list for the Westerville ball. There are three generations of Anderson women around the card table playing cribbage. Kurt thinks that the dowager countess is a formidable lady, whose bark is probably worse than her bite. Kurt finds the countess’ American accent quite curious, but it’s obvious that she comes from a wealthy background and has had good breeding. Lastly, there is Lady Quinn who is a great beauty, although she seems more distant and cool.

Kurt follows Sebastian’s lead and offers the sweet morsels to each lady before setting down his tray next to the coffee service. A quick glance from Sebastian indicates that he’s now dismissed from the drawing room. As Kurt heads down the corridor, he hears muffled voices behind the closed dining room doors, and assumes that his father is looking after the men as they drink their port wine and smoke cheroots while discussing the news of the day and goodness knows what.

Kurt heads to the footman’s pantry, and sees the two dozen or so crystal-cut glasses that were used during dinner that night. He takes off his jacket and puts on the brown apron that is hanging on the wall hook and gets on with the task at hand. Just as he’s finished carefully washing and drying the glasses, and placing them on the correct shelf, his father pops his head inside the door.

“They’ve all retired to bed. Once you’ve finished your duties, please come to my office.”

Kurt nods and replaces the apron with his jacket, then goes up the backstairs to collect the shoes left outside each family member’s room. Once they are stacked in the footman’s pantry, ready for polishing first thing tomorrow morning, he heads across the corridor and knocks on the butler’s office door.

“Come have a seat, Kurt. How did you find your first day?”

“Are you asking me as the abbey’s butler or my father?”

Kurt isn’t going to let on that the hardest part of the day was getting used to calling his father “Mr Hummel”. Kurt knows that he needs to address his father with the same respectful title as any other servant at the abbey. They haven’t actually lived in the same household since he was eight years
old, when his father first took the position at Westerville Abbey.

“As your father, mostly.”

With this one sentence, Kurt relaxes because although the butler is in charge of the male servants, he’s also the loving and kind father Kurt remembers. He stares at his father for a moment or two, and notices that he’s aged since they last saw each other two years ago. There’s a sprinkling of grey in his thinning hair, and deep wrinkles above his brow.

“There are so many different duties to learn, but I’m listening carefully to everyone and watching what they do. Honestly, it all feels overwhelming.”

“I know that it can be a lot to take in initially, Son. However, it’s important to remember that you are doing the trial period, and the manner in which you conduct yourself now will influence your future prospects in the abbey.”

“I’ve only been upstairs a few times but it’s so fancy and grand. Not at all like the farm in Somerset. What’s the family like?” Kurt asks. He’s only really seen them when he was in attendance during dinner.

“They are like family to me, after you and my sister, of course. You will witness the family’s conduct, become acquainted with their affairs, and entrusted with the care of their property. If you obtain their confidences, you must be attentive and respectful to every member of the family, diligent and faithful in your duties, kind to your fellow servants, and honest in all your dealings.”

Kurt recognizes that he won’t get any further information about the family from his father, and in many ways, he respects that. Kurt’s thoughts are interrupted as his father continues.

“There will be gossiping among some of the other staff, but it’s very much discouraged. Ears open and mouth closed. Remember the three most important things about being a footman: cleanliness, diligence and attention.”

Kurt turns his head when he hears a knock on the door. He eyes a middle-aged woman entering the office, carrying a tray with a pot of tea, a jug of milk, two biscuits, and two cups and saucers.

“I do beg your pardon, Mr Hummel. I didn’t realize you weren’t alone.”

“Please, do join us. I’d like to introduce you to my son, Kurt, who joined the household today. Kurt, this is Mrs Hudson, the housekeeper.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Kurt. Your father has told me all about you. I have a son about your age. Finn is the family’s chauffeur, so stays mainly in the garage, although you’ll see him at mealtimes. I’m sure you will get along just fine. Let me go get another cup.”

Kurt can hear a jingling sound and realizes that the household keys are dangling from a chain attached to Mrs Hudson’s belt. He looks over to his father, who has a contented smile on his face, and raises one eyebrow.

“Umm… Mrs Hudson and I meet most evenings to discuss household affairs. It’s important that the people in charge of both the men and women working downstairs know how the day went and what the family’s plans are for the next day.”

“Why doesn’t Finn work inside the abbey?”

“He became a footman last year and didn’t last a day. He is quite a lofty man, but he’s like a bull in
a china shop. He’s good with his hands, so he apprenticed with the driver before he retired, and took over the position. He’s much better with wrenches and stick shifts, and it does keep him away from the fine china and crystal-cut glasses.”

Mrs Hudson soon arrives back with an extra cup and biscuits, and after pouring the tea, settles down in an old but comfortable chair. “You must find the abbey a hive of activity after living on a farm.”

“That I do, Mrs Hudson. It was a simpler life living on my uncle and aunt’s farm in Somerset, although the days were long there as well. But I knew what was expected of me each day, and nights were for studying and spending time with family.”

Kurt misses his uncle and aunt already. He knows that he was lucky to have them when he was growing up, always encouraging his studies and talents. His aunt would say, “Times are changing, and you’ll have more opportunities than we ever did. It’s important to study and figure out what you want to do in your life.”

Kurt had hoped he would get an apprenticeship of some sort in nearby Taunton. His aunt had already put feelers out at the tailor shop. However, his dreams were dashed when his father’s health took a turn for the worse. His father wanted him close by, and immediately sent for him when the abbey was in need of a second footman.

His father smiles discreetly at Mrs Hudson, before topping up both their tea cups. “I think you best get to bed, Son. You have a long day ahead of you tomorrow. Besides, I don’t want the other servants to get ideas that you have special privileges. It would make your life more difficult.”

Kurt makes his goodbyes and slowly heads up the back stairway to his room on the top floor. There is a modest wardrobe, chair, washing basin, and two cots, nightstands and dressers. His roommate is already asleep, so he quietly washes, changes into his nighttime clothes and slips into his bed, and thinks about his day.

There was something about the way his father and Mrs Hudson looked at each other and so easily slipped into a comfortable companionship. Are they merely friends due to their respective positions at the abbey? Or is there something more beneath the surface?

However, it was Mr Blaine that occupied his thoughts. He looked so dashing in his black-tie suit at dinner. Kurt giggles quietly when he remembers the priceless look on Mr Blaine’s face when he wasn’t served Brussels sprouts. When he surreptitiously glanced at Mr Blaine during the meal, he found that Mr Blaine was stealing glances back as well. Did that mean that he was in Mr Blaine’s good books? Or was Mr Blaine merely observing him as the new footman? Either way, he wants to learn more about Mr Blaine.

Two weeks later…

Although it is still pitch-black outside and not even the roosters are awake, Kurt wakes up at 5:30 a.m. to start the new day. When his feet hit the wooden floorboards, he can feel the bitter cold air seeping through the cracks. He does his business in the chamber pot and puts it back underneath his bed. After running through his morning ritual at the washbowl on top of his dresser, he carefully puts on his heavily starched white shirt and black trousers. The striped green waistcoat is next, followed by the white bow tie. The last part of the full morning livery is the heavy black jacket, cut at the hip with two tails in the back.

Kurt makes his bed, taking particular care with the corners, knowing his father will be inspecting the bedrooms after breakfast. Mr Evans is still sleeping, as he doesn’t start until 7 a.m. The duties
of a valet do not require the same long days as a footman.

Kurt makes his way down two flights of stairs to the servants’ area and puts on an apron before polishing the shoes he collected the night before. Once his father has inspected his work, and has made him re-polish two pairs, he delivers the shoes outside the respective bedroom doors. Now that all the staff are up and working, Kurt starts the worst task of all - emptying the chamber pots belonging to the male servants. He wishes that the indoor plumbing extended to the servants’ sleeping quarters as well. Once the soils are disposed of, he returns to the downstairs servants’ area, which is empty except for the kitchen.

“Brittany, where are you? This breakfast isn’t going to cook itself,” Mrs Sylvester shouts.

“I’m right here,” Brittany replies, entering the kitchen.

“I said you could go for a drink of water, not a trip up the Nile.”

“Yes, Mrs Sylvester.”

“What do you want, Porcelain?”

“Have the newspapers arrived?”

“Not yet. You best get your arse upstairs and help prepare the rooms before the family wakes up. You can bring up the tray of marmalade, jellies and honey whilst you’re at it.”

Kurt nods, takes the tray and makes his way up one flight of stairs to the main floor. As he passes through the upstairs rooms, he can see the housemaids relighting the fires, opening the window shutters and curtains, plumping cushions, and dusting under Mrs Hudson’s watchful eyes. He smiles at Mercedes, the head housemaid, who has become his friend. She’s the most approachable person on the staff, and they enjoy reading the fashion magazines together when the ladies upstairs have finished with them. Kurt has told Mercedes many times that one day she’ll make an excellent lady’s maid. She looks after Lady Quinn and hopes she’ll be responsible for Miss Berry as well when she arrives from America.

When Kurt enters the dining room, he sets down the tray on the buffet table, and takes out the white starched linen tablecloth from the buffet’s drawer.

“Where have you been?” Sebastian barks as he enters the room with a silver tray full of glasses leftover from the previous night.

“I’m not late, am I?” Kurt asks as he sets out the cloth on the dining table and smooths out any wrinkles.

“You’re late when I say you’re late.”

Kurt carefully sets the table, ensuring that the cutlery is the correct width apart. After all, his father will soon be checking it over with a measuring stick to ensure that he has done a precise job. Meanwhile, Sebastian sets out stands for the chafing dishes and places the tea candles beneath that will keep the breakfast offerings warm. Fifteen minutes later, Kurt’s father arrives with his measuring stick in hand.

“The room is ready for breakfast, Mr. Hummel,” Sebastian reports.

“Very good. Any sign of the papers yet?”
“They’re late,” Kurt replies.

“Go downstairs and get the board out so that you can press them as soon as they arrive.”

“Yes, Mr Hummel.” Even after two weeks, it still feels strange to address his father so formally. However, Kurt knows that Sebastian is watching his every move and waiting for him to slip up.

At 8:00 a.m. precisely, the staff pour into the servants’ hall for breakfast. The butler leads the morning prayer and inspects the footmen’s uniforms. Once his father has lifted his spoon, Kurt starts to eat his bowlful of hot porridge quickly; he’s been up for two and a half hours already and he’s starving.

“Have you heard the telephone ring yet?” Mr Hudson asks.

“The Earl received an important call from the House of Lords only yesterday,” Mrs Hudson confirms.

“I wish I could hear it ring with my own ears.”

Ignoring her son’s reply, Mrs Hudson focuses on the morning tasks. “Is the library done, Mercedes?”

“Yes, Mrs Hudson.”

“Good. I want the dining room to be given a proper going over today. You can do it after they’ve finished their breakfast.”

The first bell starts ringing and Kurt reads the label underneath - Lady Quinn’s room.

“And they’re off,” Sebastian announces. He wipes his mouth with his napkin and gets up to put on his jacket. If Lady Quinn is up, then it won’t be long before Lord Cooper will summon him.

“No rest for the wicked,” Mrs Hudson sighs as she quickly finishes off her breakfast.

Mrs Sylvester rushes into the room as she ties her apron strings. “Are the tea trays ready, Brittany?”

“Yes, Mrs Sylvester.”

Mercedes rises from her chair to get Lady Quinn’s tea tray and take it upstairs. She looks over at Miss Lopez. “Could you give us a hand to take the other two trays up?”

“I’ve got the countess’ tray to carry when she awakens.” Miss Lopez replies, still sipping her tea, waiting for her bell to ring.

Another bell rings, but Kurt can’t see which one it is on the board.

“Back door,” Mrs Hudson gently prompts him with a kind smile.

Mr Hummel nods. “The papers at last, Kurt.”

Kurt jumps from his seat to collect the newspapers from the back door and returns to perform his duty.

“Why are the papers ironed?” Brittany asks, watching Kurt carefully press the folds away from each page carefully.
“What’s it to you?” Mrs Sylvester asks.

“To dry the ink. We wouldn’t want his lordship’s hands black.” Miss Lopez answers with a gentleness in her tone that Kurt hasn’t heard before.

Kurt is nervous around Miss Lopez and her usual barbed remarks, yet she always has patience and a kind word for Brittany. The girls rise from their chairs and when they leave for the kitchen, Kurt notices a very curious thing - Miss Lopez’ and Brittany’s pinkies are linked.

Kurt and Sebastian place the serving platters on the chafing stands and light the tea candles, before standing against the wall waiting for the male family members to come down for breakfast. The first to arrive is the earl. Once he has prepared a plate from the buffet table, Sebastian is quick to pull out his lordship’s chair and offer him tea. However, when Lord Cooper arrives and has gathered food on his plate, Sebastian kicks Kurt in the shin and whispers, “Go on and serve him his tea. You’re not here for decoration.”

Kurt returns to his position against the wall next to the buffet table, and waits for the last person expected for breakfast. He tries to keep a schooled expression when Mr Blaine enters the room - he looks as if he’s still half asleep and little curls are forming along his nape where not enough pomade was applied.

“Up late again reading?” the earl inquires.

“Yes, Father. I finished the latest P.G. Wodehouse book last night. You’d like it, Cooper. It’s a collection of short stories so it wouldn’t be too overtaxing.”

“Very funny, Blaine. I’ll be inspecting some of the estate’s farm holdings today, but have someone deliver the book to my room and I’ll start reading it tonight.” Cooper looks up from his plate and adds, “I assume you’ll be riding aimlessly around the estate this morning?”

“For your information, it’s important for Firebird to have his daily exercise. He needs to be fighting fit in case we get entangled in the troubles brewing in Europe.”

“It will be a long time before it comes to that.”

“It might happen sooner than you think, Cooper,” the earl replies. “Make sure you’re back in time for lunch, Blaine. Your mother expects you to join us, and it has been noticed that you skip more lunches than you attend.”

Kurt listens to the men’s talk at the table and sighs. Even though he’s been working at the house for two weeks, he still misses being outdoors. What he wouldn’t give to be the one riding around the estate, whether it’s visiting farms or giving a horse exercise.

“Why the gloomy face?” Mrs Hudson asks as soon as she sees Mr Evans sitting down for their morning tea break.

“His lordship’s jacket was torn by a hawthorn bush when he was hunting last weekend. I have no idea how to repair it.”

“I hope you’re not expecting me to do it,” Miss Lopez hisses.
“Not if you’re busy, of course,” Mrs Hudson replies.

“Good. I’m always busy.”

“Sebastian?”

“I’m not an octopus, Mrs Hudson. On top of my usual duties, I’m still training Kurt. It’s turning out
to be much more time-consuming than you can imagine.”

Kurt rolls his eyes at Sebastian’s spiteful reply. Sebastian’s training consists of barking orders,
criticizing everything he does, and berating him in front of the other staff and his father. “I’ll get
the hang of it soon,” Kurt responds.

“You’ll have to,” Sebastian counters.

Kurt wills himself not to lash back at Sebastian - nothing good will come from that. Instead, he
returns the conversation to where it had started. “Let me look at the jacket, Mr Evans. I might be
able to help you.”

“How would you know how to fix a tear?” Sebastian asks.

“There are many practical things you learn on a farm.”

Mr Evans grins as he hands over the jacket and the sewing box. “Thanks, Kurt. I could really use
your help.”

Kurt examines the jacket’s tear and smiles to himself. He’s done this type of repair before to his
uncle’s coat. It’s easy but time consuming. He searches the garment to find and detach threads from
the inside seams. After poking one thread through the eye of a needle, he starts weaving small
patches to cover up the tear.

Mercedes leans over to watch what Kurt is doing. “You’re brilliant, Kurt. I can’t even see where
the tear was in that little section you’ve already worked on. How did you learn to do it?”

“I’ve always enjoyed fashion and repurposing clothes that others have discarded. My aunt taught
me sewing skills during the long summer nights. Everyone thought I would apprentice with a tailor
in Taunton… Well, that was before I came here.”

“Do you do embroidery too? Sebastian asks in jest.

Before Kurt can think of a witty retort, the room bells start ringing as a reminder that it’s time for
the countess and Lady Quinn to have their morning tea.

“Get a move on it, Kurt. We don’t have all day to get the tea service upstairs. Leave that for later,”
Sebastian orders.

Kurt sets down the jacket in the corner and looks at Mr Evans before leaving. “I’ll finish it after
lunch. Don’t worry, the jacket will be good as new before the end of the day.”

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After the luncheon has been served and the jacket tear completely mended, Kurt goes to the
footman’s pantry to start the laborious task of polishing silver. His job is to polish the simpler
items such as the cutlery and candlesticks, while Sebastian and his father look after the more ornate
serving pieces. He hears the rustle of a skirt and the jingle of keys, and turns around as Mrs Hudson
enters the pantry.

“I inspected his lordship’s jacket. You did a marvelous job.”

“Thank you, Mrs Hudson. I’m only too happy to help out. I might have also enjoyed sitting by the window and feeling the heat from the sun.”

“It must be an adjustment spending your days inside the abbey after living on a farm.”

“It is, Mrs Hudson. Of course, I miss my aunt and uncle. However, what I miss most is spending time outdoors. Feeling the earth between my fingers, the sun warming my body, and the sounds of wildlife all around.”

“Do you like to grow things?”

“I do. There’s a sense of satisfaction to know that a small seed can grow into something that is set down to eat at the table.”

“I’ll have a word with your father. I need help with the kitchen garden. We’re already behind in potting the seeds in the greenhouse.”

Kurt perks up at this news. Although footmen normally don’t perform gardening duties, he would love to spend some time outdoors each day.

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“Go to the kitchen and see if you can make yourself useful,” Sebastian says after inspecting every single item that Kurt has polished.

Kurt takes off the apron and hangs it up on the hook before fleeing the pantry. Being confined in a small space with Sebastian is like torture. When he enters the kitchen, he sees the family’s second son sitting on a chair behind the oak island, chatting with Mrs Sylvester.

“I think the Cornish pasty you snuck into my saddlebag this morning was the best you’ve ever made. It was the perfect combination of pastry, meat, potato and gravy.”

“Thank you, Mr Blaine. Now don’t go telling your brother about your snacks, otherwise he’ll want them too.”

“My lips are sealed, unless of course, I’m eating a morning treat.”

“Porcelain, I see that Sebastian has let you wander away from his coattails. Come in.”

All eyes turn to Kurt as he enters the room, who’s cursing himself that he isn’t wearing his jacket in a family member’s presence. “Good afternoon, Lord Blaine.”

Kurt can see small wrinkles form around the gentleman’s eyes as he chuckles. “I’m nobody’s lord. I’m just the second son, so please call me Mr Blaine.”

Kurt can feel the heat run from his toes to the top of his head, and is sure that his face is a crimson red. He chastises himself for not remembering how to address the second son, but it’s so complicated with two lords in the house. He tries to rectify his faux pas and manages to string a couple of sentences together.

“How do you do, Mr Blaine? I’m Kurt, the new second footman.”
“I know who you are, Kurt. Hummel always talks fondly of you. I feel as if I know you already.”

Kurt is shocked that Mr Blaine knows his name. He would never have thought that, let alone that his father talks about him to the gentleman.

Mrs Sylvester hands Kurt an old heavy woolen jacket, with a waxy outer layer to fend off the cold. “Go pick some blackberries from the greenhouse. I want to serve them with the scones and clotted cream for afternoon tea.”

“Do you mind if I join you?” Mr Blaine asks.

“If you’re going to the greenhouse, it’s only right that I be the one with you,” Sebastian interjects.

Kurt sees Mr Blaine’s shoulders tense at Sebastian’s words - as if nothing could be worse than having to spend time in the greenhouse with the first footman. He wonders why that would be the case.

“No, I think I’d like to go with Kurt and see how a man raised on a farm picks berries.”

Kurt smiles at Mr Blaine as he puts on the jacket. He’s glad for the opportunity to check out the kitchen gardens and to be in the fresh air, but extremely nervous about spending time with Mr Blaine. What would he say to him? What is the protocol? And what was Mr Blaine doing in the kitchen in the first place? He’s never seen any family member downstairs before.

“So, what do you say, Kurt. May I join you?”

“Yes, of course, Mr Blaine.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope this chapter gives you a glimpse of a footman’s typical day in the early 1910s. Was there anything that surprised you?

For those that have watched Downton Abbey, it was super fun to write the “Yes, Mrs Sylvester” lines for Brittany. I did some research on Mrs Patmore quotes, and she really does have some good one-liners. I used a few in this chapter.

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Lilyvandersteen has created some fic artwork for me. I absolutely love it.
Next up: Blaine and Kurt spend time together in the kitchen gardens.
February 1914
Kurt

When Mr Blaine takes a pristine-looking Barbour jacket off the hook near the kitchen back door, Kurt realizes that it belongs to the second son. He wonders why Mr Blaine would keep a jacket downstairs in the servants’ area.

“I come down here a lot. I enjoy the hustle and bustle that goes on downstairs. Sometimes it gets lonely with only my parents, my brother and Lady Quinn for company.”

Kurt wonders if Mr Blaine can read minds as they head outside and to the far side of the abbey. Although they aren’t far from the house, they soon can’t be seen anymore from the windows of the abbey. When they get to a walled section of the grounds, Mr Blaine unlocks and opens the door. He steps back and says, “After you, Kurt.”

Kurt enters the enormous enclosed kitchen gardens and gasps, for he’s never seen anything like this before. There are rows upon rows of garden beds, neatly turned over and topped with mulch made of autumn leaves and horse manure to enrich the soil. In the far sunny corner, he spots the flower bushes, heavily pruned, waiting for spring to arrive and give them new growth. In the centre is a large greenhouse filled with green plants and a blaze of color, and Kurt can’t wait to go inside to see what is growing. This time, Kurt opens the greenhouse door, steps back, and says, “After you, kind sir.”

Mr Blaine roars with laughter. “I’m not a lord or a knight, or anyone important for that matter. Call me plain Mr Blaine.”

Kurt giggles and his cheeks tinge pink at Mr Blaine’s words. He hopes that it can be passed off as
the cold winter’s air hitting his face.

For there’s certainly nothing plain about Mr Blaine.

Sure, he’s shorter than the other men in the house, but it’s obvious that he keeps himself fit. Mr Blaine’s hair is carefully slicked back into the latest fashionable hairstyle, and Kurt wonders what it looks like in its natural state. However, what draws Kurt in most of all is Mr Blaine’s face. He’s not classically handsome like his older brother, but he’s very dashing, with warm hazel eyes, and a perfect nose and mouth. Mr Blaine’s best feature is his smile, which appears warm and genuine. It all adds up to the perfect package and the most drop-dead gorgeous man Kurt has ever seen in his life.

Kurt shakes his head to get rid of these thoughts and looks around the greenhouse they have entered. There are workbenches set up in rows, and the first bench is used for seedlings. Kurt spots the seed packets and potting soil that will need to be dealt with soon. There are sections for broad beans and other vegetables, fruit bushes, and herbs. And is that an actual mandarin orange tree that he sees? At the far end of the greenhouse, there is a section for flowers used to provide the estate with bouquets during the winter months. Kurt looks up and notes the position of the sun in the sky.

“What are you looking at?” Mr Blaine inquires.

“The flower and herb plants should switch positions. You’ll have more flowers if they are in a sunnier location. The herbs will grow just fine in the back corner.”

“You really do know about plants.”

“Of course, I do. My uncle often says that the location and rotation of crops are crucial. Now, where are the blackberry bushes? Mrs Sylvester is expecting me to pick some.”

Kurt picks up a wicker basket and follows Mr Blaine’s lead along the third row towards the back of the greenhouse. They soon turn to the task at hand and pick blackberries. Kurt suppresses a smile when he realizes that half of Mr Blaine’s berries land in his mouth and not in the basket.

“Try one, Kurt,” Mr Blaine begs, offering a blackberry from his fingers.

“I mustn’t, Mr Blaine. It’s forbidden to eat any food on the estate unless it’s on the servants’ hall dining table.”

“No-one would know… It’s only you and me here. Besides, I’ll say that I forced you if someone finds out. Please try one, because they are perfectly ripe and rather yummy.”

When Mr Blaine slowly moves his arm towards him, Kurt closes his eyes and opens his mouth for the berry. He’s a bit surprised when he feels Mr Blaine’s warm fingers brush his lower lip before the berry is deposited inside. When he closes his mouth, Kurt can feel the burst of flavor from not one, but two blackberries, and moans slightly at the taste that reminds him of summertime.

“They are so delicious,” Kurt groans. When he opens his eyes he finds Mr Blaine’s mouth wide open and his jaw dropped in surprise. It’s then that he notices the fruit stains around Mr Blaine’s mouth. He takes out his handkerchief from his pocket and offers it to Mr Blaine.

“Err… it’s written all over your face that you’ve eaten more blackberries than we’ve picked.”

Mr Blaine chuckles as he wipes the evidence off his face. “We’re now partners in crime,” Mr Blaine says when he returns the hankie. “We best get back inside before Mrs Sylvester sends out a search party.”
They walk back to the abbey in silence, each man consumed by their own thoughts. As they enter by the back door, Mr Blaine says, “I’m heading upstairs. My mother is expecting me to join her for afternoon tea. Thank you for allowing me to join your blackberry picking this afternoon. I feel as if I know you a little bit better already.”

“The pleasure was all mine, Mr Blaine.”

Kurt watches him walk a few steps along the corridor, but then Mr Blaine suddenly turns around and adds, “I don’t like boiled cabbage either, but, I love anything that has berries.” Mr Blaine winks and then continues on his way.

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Before Kurt knows it, dinner is ready in the servants’ hall and Kurt takes his usual seat next to his new friend.

“I heard you spent some time with Mr Blaine this afternoon, boo,” Mercedes whispers.

Kurt wonders if he and Mr Blaine have been the subject of gossip downstairs. “Is that so? Where did you hear that from? We only picked blackberries on Mrs Sylvester’s orders.”

“Sebastian was livid. I overheard him telling Miss Lopez that it should have been him spending time alone with Mr Blaine. He’s been angling for it for so long.”

“Why’s that, Mercedes?”

Their whispering is abruptly interrupted when Kurt hears his father’s voice.

“Kurt. Mercedes. Is there anything you wish to share with the rest of us?”

“No, Mr Hummel,” they reply in unison.

“Then quit wagging your tongues and eat. It will soon be time to start the dinner service upstairs.”

“Yes, Mr Hummel.”

Kurt can see how his father became the highest ranked servant at the abbey. Not only is he competent at his job, but he also has ears that can hear everything.

“Do we know who will look after Miss Berry when she arrives?” Mercedes asks Mrs Hudson.

“It will be you, my girl. All I know about Miss Berry is that she’s recently turned 18 years old, and she’ll be staying at the abbey for an indefinite length of time. Although you look after Lady Quinn already, it’ll be worth you discussing any additional duties with Miss Lopez.”

“As if I wasn’t busy enough already,” Miss Lopez grumbles.

“I’ll have none of that, Miss Lopez. We all have to do our duty to ensure that the household runs smoothly,” Mrs Hudson replies.

“Do you know who’ll be joining the family in London for the Season?” Sebastian asks the butler hopefully.

Mr Hummel clears his throat. “I’m putting together a list for his lordship’s approval. Although there is already staff at Anderson House in Belgravia, there will be additional requirements with both Miss Berry and Mr Blaine attending the Season. I’ll be announcing who will go to London
very soon."

A buzz of excitement fills the servants’ hall with the prospect of going to London for several
months. Kurt hopes that his name will be included on the list, for he’s always wanted to go to
London.

Brittany rushes into the hall. “Mrs Sylvester says to put a move on it. The family is expected to
dine in 30 minutes.”

Everyone scarfs down the remainder of their dinner, for no-one wants to be at the receiving end of
Mrs Sylvester’s wrath if the meal is not served at the proper time.

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On Kurt’s fifth journey down the stairs that evening, he’s pleased to discover that there’s only one
more platter to bring up for the main course.

“They’ve finished the wild salmon course and Mr Hummel is filling up the red wine glasses. He’ll
then start carving the roast beef,” Kurt reports.

“Very good, Porcelain. Everything is running to schedule. Now be a love and take the last platter
upstairs,” Mrs Sylvester replies. “Did you finish the gravy, Brittany?”

“Yes, Mrs Sylvester.” Brittany starts to hand over the last silver platter. “Here’s the last dish.”

“Leave it, Brittany. He’s a grown man. I suppose he can lift a plate of veg. Now go put the apple
tart in the lower oven.”

Kurt doesn’t understand how a kind young lass like Brittany can put up with Mrs Sylvester’s
pestering all day. However, Brittany always appears calm and has a sweet smile for everyone.

Kurt sets off for his sixth journey up the stairs and into the dining room. He’s relieved that his
timing is perfect because his father has just started serving the roast beef. Sebastian exchanges the
vegetable platter with one that contains roasted potatoes and Yorkshire puddings, for there is a
specific order in which the food should be served.

Kurt carefully sets down one roasted potato and one Yorkshire pudding on the his lordship’s plate,
careful not to let them roll off the serving spoons. The last person he serves is Mr Blaine, who
looks incredibly debonair in his black-tie attire. When Kurt is on his left side, he notices Mr Blaine
licking his lips at the offerings. Kurt takes a gamble and serves him two roasted potatoes and three
Yorkshire puddings. The huge smile that grows on Mr Blaine’s face is the only confirmation Kurt
needs that he did the right thing. Maybe food is the thing that connects them in some small way.

Sebastian is close behind him with the platter of vegetables, so Kurt quickly goes to the buffet and
grabs the gravy boat for the last round at the table. Once the serving is completed, Kurt takes his
position against the back wall next to Sebastian, who gives him a scowl. Kurt isn’t sure what he did
wrong, but he’s sure he’ll find out all about it soon enough.

“I saw what you did for Mr Blaine at the table. What did you two do in the greenhouse all alone
this afternoon?” Sebastian hisses as they head down the stairs with the empty dinner plates.

“What? We picked blackberries, of course. Mr Blaine looked like he was hungry, so I gave him
some extras. Is there anything wrong with that?”
Sebastian gives him a look that Kurt finds hard to interpret. Is he mad that Mr Blaine enjoyed the extra portions of potatoes and Yorkshire puddings? Or is it something else? It almost seems as if Sebastian is jealous.

Later that evening, Kurt goes up the stairs for the 12th time to collect the assorted glasses and plates left by the gentlemen after dinner. As he heads down the corridor, he can hear the most beautiful music being played on the piano. He hasn’t heard this particular piece before, but he loves it. The way the musical piece is played makes him think of hope, love and dreams. Kurt notices that the drawing room’s door is not fully closed, so he peeks in the doorway crack to see who is filling the room with beautiful music. His breath hitches when he realizes it is Mr Blaine.

Mr Blaine’s eyes are closed as his fingers adeptly press the keys, as if lost in a world of his own. His face conveys every feeling that pours out into the music, and it’s breathtaking. The other family members are sitting on various settees and chairs around the room. Whilst the dowager countess is following every musical note that Mr Blaine plays, Lady Quinn squiggles on her chair as if she’s bored. Kurt is interrupted by someone quietly clearing their throat, and is surprised to find his father behind him.

“I’ll see you tonight in my office after your duties, as usual?”

“Yes, Mr Hummel,” Kurt replies, embarrassed that his father has seen him spying on the family’s after-dinner activities.

After cleaning the crystal-cut glasses and collecting the family’s shoes for polishing the next morning, Kurt goes to the butler’s office to have their by now customary nightly talk. He spots his father next to the black candlestick telephone with the handset close to his ear, practicing greetings into the mouthpiece.

“I’m sorry, Father. Am I interrupting?”

“No, not at all. Come in, my son.

“Have you used the telephone yet?”

“Yes, but it’ll take some time to get used to it. You don’t mind if Mrs Hudson joins us?

“Of course not. I like her a great deal. She can be strict when it comes to doing the household chores, but she’s fair and kind-hearted.”

“So what’s this I hear about you spending time with Mr Blaine this afternoon?”

“There’s really nothing to tell. Mrs Sylvester wanted me to collect blackberries for afternoon tea and Mr Blaine asked if he could join me. I must say that I was surprised to see him in the kitchen. Does the family have a habit of coming downstairs?”

“Only Mr Blaine. He’s a special one. You see, his brother is ten years older than him, so most of his childhood was spent with his nanny. Mr Blaine loved going to the village school and playing with children his own age. Sam Evans arrived at the abbey at roughly the same time as I did. As children, those two were as thick as thieves. Mr Blaine would spend many an hour with Mr Evans,
whether it was outdoors or downstairs. Those of us who have worked here for a while have a special place in our heart for Mr Blaine.”

Mrs Hudson enters the butler’s office with the usual plate of tea and biscuits, making sure there’s an extra one or two sweets for Kurt. “I hope I’m not interrupting anything.”

“No, your timing is perfect. We were just talking about Mr Blaine. I haven’t told Kurt the important news.”

“Father, do tell.”

“Starting next week, you’ll be responsible for looking after Mr Blaine. You’ll need to serve him tea and help him dress in the morning.”

Mrs Hudson chuckles. “Mr Blaine is notorious for staying up late at night reading. You’ll have to wake him up and not rely on the bell system if he’s to join the others for breakfast on time. Don’t worry, he might be a sleepyhead in the morning, but he’s not too grumpy.”

Kurt gulps at the prospect at being responsible for waking someone up each morning. “What else will I have to do?”

“You’ll help him dress at various times of the day, not only in the morning. There’s his riding attire, his day suit for luncheon and afternoon tea, and of course his black-tie suit for the evening. You’ll need to brush down the suits every time they’ve been worn and make sure that his laundry is done in the washing scullery. You’ll need to make sure that all his clothes are in pristine condition. Mr Evans can help with that.”

Kurt internally rolls his eyes. He’s already discovered that his skills are far superior to those of his lordship’s valet.

Mrs Hudson joins the discussion. “You’ll also need to draw Mr Blaine’s bath and assist him as he requests. This can mean washing his hair and scrubbing his back. And although Mr Blaine can manage his own hair, he’ll spend half the time on it if you help him with the pomade.”

“Don’t worry, my son. Mr Blaine is quite modest in his needs, unlike his older brother. After a while, you’ll be accustomed to what he wants from you. But there are other duties as well. You’ll accompany Mr Blaine during outings when needed. For example, you’ll be going with him to Southampton to collect Miss Berry when her ship arrives from America.”

“Really? I get to visit Southampton?” Kurt squeals in delight. He’s heard so many stories about the famous port city that bustles with ships coming and going. He has never thought he would be able to see it for himself.

“As long as you tend to Mr Blaine satisfactorily, both here and in Southampton, you’ll go everywhere he does, even to London. But don’t tell the others - the list hasn’t been announced yet.”

“Have you told Kurt about his other duties yet?” Mrs Hudson inquires.

“No, I thought I’d let you tell him, Mrs Hudson.”

“Mr Blaine had a word with me after you spent time together in the kitchen gardens today. He was quite impressed with your horticultural knowledge and suggestions on how to improve things. And
as you know, we are in desperate need of someone to help out. So once you have gotten used to looking after Mr Blaine, you’ll be tending the kitchen gardens as well.”

“I would like that very much, Mrs Hudson, but I’m not sure that there are enough hours in the day to do it on top of my usual duties.”

“I’ve discussed the matter with Mrs Hudson, and I’ve decided that you’ll work in the kitchen gardens in place of polishing the silver in the afternoon. I’m sure that Sebastian and Mr Evans can cover that task. Now, get yourself to bed, son. Speak to Mr Evans over the next few days so that you know exactly what is expected of you when you start looking after Mr Blaine on Monday morning.”

After saying goodnight, Kurt leaves the butler’s office, internally squealing at all the good news his father told him. Kurt has a feeling that he’ll enjoy looking after Mr Blaine, and the outings away from the estate will be the icing on the cake. As he makes his way to the back stairs, Kurt notices that the delivery door is slightly ajar. When he makes his way over to close and lock it, he sees Sebastian and Miss Lopez’s silhouettes outside. They are smoking cigarettes and Kurt wonders where they got their hands on the tobacco. When he hears his name spoken, Kurt hides behind the door to listen.

“Can’t see him lasting long,” Miss Lopez says.

“That boy… He’s after my job.”

“Who cares? Someone will need to do it when you usurp Mr Evans from his job as his lordship’s valet. And who better than you? You’ve been looking after Lord Cooper for two years now.”

“Yes, but my daddy isn’t the abbey’s butler. I don’t have the same connections as Kurt does. Besides, he’s getting all cosy with Mr Blaine. I have an uneasy feeling about it,” Sebastian admits.

“I hardly call picking blackberries together as getting cosy.”

“I’ve been angling to get time alone with Mr Blaine for so long. His pretty little arse is just ripe for the picking.”

“Be careful, Sebastian. You don’t even know if he leans that way.”

“I’ll know soon enough, when the Season starts. So far, every time the young ladies swarm Mr Blaine, he acts like a bashful schoolboy, excusing himself at the first opportunity. Maybe he has different needs that I can help him with… at least once.”

Kurt has heard enough of Sebastian’s talk about Mr Blaine. No wonder his father had advised him to stay well away from the gossip amongst the staff. Thinking it over, he decides not to inform his father about Sebastian’s leanings. After all, he has leanings that way as well.

He slowly climbs up the two flights of stairs to the servants’ sleeping quarters, and quietly enters his room for Mr Evans is sleeping. Maybe he would enjoy the valet position one day. After all, he was considering becoming a tailor before his father summoned him to Westerville Abbey. Besides, the hours aren’t as long and he could get more sleep which he desperately needs.

After doing his night-time routine and changing into his bed clothes, he crawls into bed and pulls the heavy blanket up to his neck. Although it’s scratchy, it’s very cold inside the room, so any
warmth is welcomed. Once he’s settled in, Kurt lets his thoughts drift to the conversation that he overheard. Frankly, he isn’t surprised that Sebastian and Miss Lopez don’t like him - it’s obvious by the way they treat him. But what does surprise him is that Sebastian likes men, and confided to Miss Lopez that he lusts after Mr Blaine.

Kurt has known all his life that he also likes men in a way that is frowned upon. When his mother would read him fairy tales of knights saving princesses from castles, Kurt would dream about a knight in shining armour saving him. These feelings only became stronger as he grew older. While other boys would whisper about girls at the nearby village’s Friday night dances, he would covertly sneak glances at them. It was ironic that those very same boys thought he was a casanova with the girls, for they always enjoyed his company. He could admire a girl’s beauty and disposition, but it was men that ignited something more deeply inside him.

Kurt has been careful to keep these urges to himself - he could be imprisoned if he acted on his desires. But that doesn’t stop him from developing feelings for men. He would never be as forthright as Sebastian is to anybody. He shudders at the thought of Sebastian pleasuring Mr Blaine. Kurt doesn’t even think that Mr Blaine is interested in men. After all, isn’t Mr Blaine attending the Season to find a wife?

Kurt thinks that Mr Blaine will have no problem finding a wife over the upcoming months. Although he has no title, he must have a generous allowance. And it won’t escape the ladies’ notice that he’s extremely handsome and has impeccable manners.

When Kurt reminisces about their time spent together blackberry picking in the kitchen greenhouse, what he remembers most are Mr Blaine’s sparkling eyes, his warm smile, and how easy it was to talk to him. And when Mr Blaine winked at him as they were parting... he looked so relaxed and happy; why, it even started a flurry of butterflies in his stomach. Kurt knows that Mr Blaine is the type of man straight out of his childhood dreams, but shuts down those thoughts immediately. He can’t start his new duties of looking after Mr Blaine next week and be consumed with desire for him at the same time. No, it wouldn’t do at all. It’s going to be hard, but he doesn’t want to disgrace himself or his father.

Kurt closes his eyes and tries to concentrate on the upcoming visit to Southampton, but the last images he has before falling asleep are of warm hazel eyes and a wink.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: Kurt and Blaine go to Southampton.
March 1914
Blaine

Blaine stirs in his bed when he hears the bedroom door open and light footsteps heading towards the fireplace. He snuggles further into his pillow when he hears the fire crackle with new life, feigning sleep because he’s not planning to leave his bed until the room is toasty warm. Just as Blaine is drifting back to sleep, he feels the sunlight across his face as the curtains are opened. Blaine slowly opens his eyes and sees Kurt looking bright and cheerful, smiling at him.

“Good morning, Mr Blaine.”

“Good morning, Kurt. Aren’t you here a little bit earlier than usual this morning?”

“Well, yes, I am. However, we’re off to Southampton after breakfast.”

Blaine sits up and adjusts his pillow so that it’s propped behind his back. He smiles to himself when he spots the cup of piping hot tea on the nightstand.

“What book kept you up ‘till all hours last night, Mr Blaine?”

“The Return of Tarzan. Have you read the first book?”

“No, I haven’t, Mr Blaine.”

“Well, you must borrow my copy. It’s hard to explain the story without ruining the plot, but I think you might enjoy it.”

“Thank you, Mr Blaine. I’ll read it at night after I’ve completed my duties.”

Blaine has a warm feeling inside him as he tries to imagine Kurt reading his book in bed, directly one floor above him.
“I’ve already packed for the journey to Southampton and your case is downstairs. I just need to select your clothes for today. Would you prefer to wear your brown or your navy suit?”

“I don’t mind, Kurt. Whichever you think looks best on me.”

“Then the navy one it is.”

Blaine takes a sip of his tea as he watches Kurt rummage around the closet for a coordinating shirt and tie. He pays particular attention when Kurt bends down low to get his socks. The tails of Kurt’s jacket fall on either side of his body, revealing well-defined buttocks. It’s then that Blaine realizes that his morning wood hasn’t disappeared yet. This has become a daily occurrence since Kurt started taking care of him in the mornings, and he wonders what that can mean. He’s never had this problem around anyone else before.

“I’ve poured hot water into the bowl. It’s time to shave and I’ll make sure I do the best job I can since we’ll be in Southampton today.” Kurt hands Blaine his dressing gown and waits patiently near the dresser, sharpening the straight-edge razor with a leather strop.

Blaine gets out of bed and puts on the dressing gown, making sure that it’s securely wrapped around the front of his body and doesn’t reveal his stiffy. He sits down on the chair in front of Kurt and tilts his head back in preparation for the shave. Kurt takes a towel that has been dampened in hot water and places it over Blaine’s face. He can hear Kurt humming as he wets the shaving brush and swirls it on top of the Taylor of Old Bond Street shaving soap. Blaine feels his stomach start to stir as Kurt takes off the hot towel and uses gentle strokes on his face to build up the lather. The previous footman would use a shaving bowl to produce the lather, but Blaine prefers Kurt’s method of building it up directly on his face. The brush’s soft bristles lightly massage his face and it feels… intimate. When Blaine can smell the sandalwood fragrance, he knows that there is enough lather for Kurt to start shaving.

Kurt places one hand on his chin and gently strokes with one finger, while the other hand passes the straight-edge razor along his neck. Blaine looks up at Kurt, who has pursed lips and is fully concentrating on the task at hand. Kurt smells heavenly, and it is all that Blaine can do to resist the urge to touch his face to see if it’s as soft as it looks. Kurt continues to hum as he shaves and Blaine thinks it’s the most wonderful sound in the world. Soon, Kurt moves his free hand to Blaine’s neck as he shaves his cheeks and chin. Lost in the sensations, Blaine only realizes it’s over when Kurt covers his face with a cold damp towel. Although it’s a shock to his system, Blaine squiggles in his seat, for his favorite part is about to begin.

Kurt squeezes some aftershave balm from the tube and rubs his hands together. Kurt then gently massages the balm onto Blaine’s face, using soft circular motions. The touch of the fingertips causes Blaine’s stomach to stir, and his cock starts to stiffen once again. Kurt finishes the task far too soon for his liking, and when Blaine opens his eyes, he can see Kurt rinsing and drying the razor and brush.

“Would you like some help dressing this morning?”

Blaine is absolutely mortified that Kurt might see his stiffy, which simply won’t go away. “No, that’s not necessary. I’m sure you have plenty to do before we head off to Southampton. I’ll be fine on my own.”

“I’ll see you downstairs then, Mr Blaine.”

Blaine quickly dresses and controls his bed hair with pomade. After checking himself in the mirror, deciding he’ll pass his father’s inspection, he races downstairs. He’s surprised to find
Hummel at the bottom of the stairs, as if the butler has been waiting for him.

“Good morning, Hummel.”

“Good morning, Mr Blaine. I was wondering if it’s possible to have a quiet word with you before breakfast.”

“Of course,” Blaine replies, giving Hummel a questioning look.

“It concerns Kurt… and Southampton. Up until a few weeks ago, Kurt has spent his entire life in the countryside. The largest town he’s been to is Taunton, which is more like a big village. He’s never been anywhere like Southampton before, and therefore doesn’t know a thing about city life. The thing is, I’m a little worried about him. One hears about the ruffians that work at the docks.”

“But Kurt will be with me…”

“During the day, yes. But at night, Kurt will be dining and sleeping with Mr Hudson, and I’m not sure if he always makes wise decisions. Mr Hudson can handle himself, but I’m concerned that Kurt might end up in a situation that he is ill-equipped to deal with.”

“I understand perfectly, Hummel. Leave it with me. I promise to keep Kurt safe from harm or injury, and return him to the abbey in one piece.”

“Thank you, Mr Blaine. I knew you would understand. It eases my mind that you’ll be looking out for Kurt.”

Blaine fills up at breakfast, not knowing when they’ll be in Southampton for lunch. His mother gives him a sketchy description of Cousin Rachel - she’s petite, with long brown hair, and brown eyes. She’s been instructed to wear her red coat and hat, whilst Blaine is to wear a red flower on his coat’s left lapel.

Hummel enters the dining room just as Blaine finishes his meal. “The car is ready and waiting for you at the front of the house, whenever you’re ready, Mr Blaine.”

“I’ll just freshen up and be out in 10 minutes,” Blaine replies. “May I be excused, Father?”

“Yes, of course, Blaine. Remember you are representing the family in Southampton. First impressions are important.”

“I promise to live up to the Anderson name, Father.”

“Do you have the list of things to buy in Southampton?” Pamela asks.

“Yes, Mama. I’ll have everything purchased before Cousin Rachel’s ship arrives tomorrow.”

Blaine gives his mother a peck on the cheek before he leaves the dining room. After freshening up, Hummel escorts him out the front door, where the Renault car is waiting, freshly cleaned and polished.

“Do you have the ropes to secure Miss Berry’s trunks to the top? Is the tank filled with petrol?”

“Yes, Mr Hummel,” Hudson replies.

“Well, I suppose you better get a move on.”

Kurt, who’s standing by the car’s side, opens the rear door. Blaine slides into the backseat, and
Kurt closes the door and runs around to the front passenger side. Hudson starts the motor and commences the four-hour drive to Southampton.

“Have you been to Southampton before, Mr Hudson?” Kurt asks.

“No, but it’s easy to get to. I just need to follow the coastal road.”

“I’ve been to Southampton a few times,” Blaine interjects. “My American granny visits us every few years and I’ve always been allowed to join my mother to meet her off the ship.”

“What’s Southampton like?” Kurt asks.

“It’s a bustling port city. In addition to the passenger liners, there are cargo ships filled with coal, slate and building stone leaving the port, and ships with timber, fruit and wine arriving.”

“I can’t wait to see it.”

“Like any large city, it’s got its upsides and downsides. You can buy almost anything in Southampton - the shops cater to the passengers boarding the ships. We must be careful to avoid the dockworkers at night, though, particularly when they have their bellies full of beer. Where have you been, Kurt?”

“Nowhere, really. I was born in Midsomer Norton, Somerset and lived there until I was eight years old. Then my mother died, and I went to live with my aunt and uncle on their farm near Wiveliscombe, and my father came to Westerville Abbey. I’ve been to Taunton several times, but that’s it. Westerville is the farthest I’ve ever been.”

“Then this will be your first adventure of many, I suspect.”

“I certainly hope so,” Kurt sighs.

Blaine is distracted by a road sign stating that they are 10 miles away from Torquay. “Hudson, you’re driving us west when Southampton is to the east! We need to turn around.”

“Sorry, Mr Blaine. I was told to follow the coastal road. Nobody told me which direction.”

“Definitely east, Hudson.”

Hudson performs a U-turn that has Blaine and Kurt clinging to the hand straps hanging on the side. Once Hudson is driving in the right direction, Blaine relaxes once again in the back seat.

“Have you been to America, Mr Blaine?” Kurt asks.

“No, I haven’t. I really want to visit New York City and see everything that my American granny has told me about.”

“I would love to visit New York City too,” Kurt admits. “It seems like it would be a different world than South West England. America is the land of opportunity, and I’d like to see it first-hand.”

Blaine wonders what Kurt would like to do if he had the opportunity, but keeps silent. He knows it’s not his place to stir these types of feelings amongst the staff. The car is silent as Hudson concentrates on driving, and Blaine can’t help but admire Kurt’s side profile while Kurt is looking out of the window. A warm feeling starts in his belly at the thought that they’ll be spending the afternoon together.
Why would that be? It’s not like he hasn’t been around handsome servants before. Yet, there’s something special about Kurt that isn’t only about his looks. Perhaps it’s how cheerily he goes about his work. Or maybe it’s the questions Kurt is always asking, which hints that there’s more to the man hidden beneath the surface.

However, Kurt is someone Blaine should not be spending his time thinking about. After all, he needs to find a wife during the upcoming London season, and more immediately, collect Cousin Rachel from Southampton. Not for the first time, Blaine considers Cousin Rachel’s stay perfect timing. He’ll learn the ways of upper-class ladies from her, and will soon get the warm stirrings with them that he feels when he’s around Kurt.

Soon Blaine dozes off, lulled by the engine noise. He wakes up a few hours later when the car screeches to a halt. Hudson gets out of the car to examine the road signage. When Blaine sees Hudson scratching his head, Blaine gets out of the car to help him.

“I’m lost. I haven’t seen the coast for about an hour,” Hudson confesses.

Blaine looks at the road signs and sighs. “That’s because we’re heading north. You should have turned right and headed south 30 minutes ago. We’ll need to turn around.”

When they return to the car, Blaine and Kurt automatically brace themselves for Hudson’s U-turn. Before they know it, they are back at the intersection and Hudson is driving on the correct road towards Southampton. Soon, they are passing small villages and can smell the sea air. Blaine looks at Kurt, who is staring out the car window, eager to absorb everything they pass by.

Blaine makes Finn pause when his stomach starts rumbling. No wonder: it’s past the luncheon hour. He gets his bearings on where they are and smiles when he sees a familiar shop sign.

“Hudson, can you stop outside that bakery up ahead? We’re running late and we need some lunch. We’ll eat in the park across the street.”

Hudson pulls to a stop in front of the Crusty Cottage Pie Shop. Blaine quickly jumps out of the car and enters the shop, already knowing what he wants to order. He buys three of its famous steak and kidney pies and bottles of ginger beer. After paying for the goods, Blaine crosses the road and joins Hudson and Kurt on the park bench. Hudson immediately tucks into his pie, finishing it in record time.

“You bought us lunch?” Kurt asks.

“Of course I did. Were you expecting not to eat while in Southampton?”

“I was expecting to eat, but not until this evening at the hotel’s servants’ quarters. My father gave me some pocket money for tea and a bun if I got hungry before then.”

“You can keep your pocket money for an afternoon treat. We have a lot to do this afternoon, so eat up. The Crusty Cottage is famous for its pies.”

Blaine watches Kurt take a tentative bite of his meat pie, and smiles when he sees Kurt closing his eyes and chewing with a large grin on his face.

“This pie is the most wonderful thing I’ve ever tasted. Those huge chunks of steak and kidney are to die for.”

“Steady on, Kurt. I promised your father that I would return you in once piece. The pies here are wonderful, but not as tasty as cook’s.”
“Does she sometimes give you pies for your morning snack whilst riding?”

“You know about that?”

“Who do you think gives the snacks to Wes each morning?” Kurt smirks.

Blaine bows his head, chuckling to himself. Of course it’s Kurt who delivers the late-morning riding treats to the stables. Kurt is always somehow involved in the good things in his life.

Once the pies and ginger beer are finished, they return to the car. Hudson starts the Renault once again and they are back on the road for the last leg of the journey. Blaine gives him driving directions to ensure that they don’t get lost on the way to the centre of Southampton. Soon the streets become more congested with motor cars on the roads and pedestrians strolling along the pavements.

“Is that a tram?” Kurt asks.

“Why, yes, it is. They were introduced in Southampton in 1900, for the centennial.”

“I’ve never been on a tram, or a train for that matter. It’s been carts, cars, and coaches… and the steam tractor my uncle hires for the harvest.”

Ten minutes later, the car stops in front of the South Western Hotel, their base in Southampton. The four-story red brick building with white painted trim around the windows and columns with intricate friezes is situated on a corner block in the heart of the city. It’s considered the most desirable hotel in Southampton, not only for its opulence and service, but for being conveniently located near the train station and the docks that are used for the passenger liners.

“See that dock over there, Kurt? It’s the one that the RMS Titanic left from two years ago, never to be seen again.”

“You don’t think that Miss Berry will have problems crossing the Atlantic…”

“No, she’s on the reliable and trustworthy White Star liner.”

The hotel porter, wearing a smart red uniform and cap, opens the car door for Blaine. Hudson jumps out of the car and provides another porter with the overnight bag. After obtaining directions on where to park, Hudson approaches Blaine.

“Will you need me today, Mr Blaine? I need to find some parts for the car, Mr Hummel has a wine order for me to collect from the Lankester’s Vault, and Mrs Sylvester has given me a list of provisions to buy.”

“Go about your business, Hudson. Kurt and I will be fine on our own with my mother’s list. I suspect we’ll be back by dinnertime. Take care not to get lost in the back streets.”

Once Hudson has driven away, Blaine can hear Kurt snigger behind him, so he turns and gives Kurt a quizzical look.

“Mr Hudson has absolutely no sense of direction. I think he could get lost in a teacup.”

“Better that he works in the garage than in the main house. He didn’t last through dinner on his first day as the second footman. His mother and Hummel feared that there might be an incident with the glasses and china. If you wait in the porters’ area just inside the door, I’ll check us in.”
Blaine enters the hotel’s reception area, which is fitting for its clientele, who are typically first-class passengers on the ships. The walls consist of white marble from Italy and the crystal chandeliers reflect rays of light. A green patterned wool carpet covers most of the flooring, and there are groupings of chairs, sofas and side tables dotted throughout the reception area. Blaine heads towards the check-in counter and completes all the formalities. He’s delighted to find out that his father has booked an ocean-front deluxe room for him. Blaine asks for directions to the servants’ dormitory in the basement and enquires about any rules. Other than being in the dormitory no later than 10 p.m., Kurt can do as he wishes.

Blaine heads over to the porters’ area and smiles when he sees that Kurt is keeping a vigilant eye on his overnight bag.

“Please send my bag to room 206,” Blaine instructs the head porter.

“I can bring it up,” Kurt chips in. “Would you like me to unpack whilst you freshen up, Mr Blaine?”

“There’s no need to do that now. We’ve arrived in Southampton a little later than planned, and I have some family matters to attend to. You’ll be with me for the rest of the day.”

Chapter End Notes

This is the first time I’ve written Finn, so let me know how I did (positive and constructive comments are appreciated). The chapter photo is the South Western Hotel in Southampton.

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: Blaine and Kurt spend the afternoon together in Southampton.
March 1914
Kurt

Kurt follows Mr Blaine’s lead through a series of Southampton’s side streets, careful not to bump into anyone. After five minutes, they end up at the bottom of High Street, which is in the heart of the main shopping precinct. Kurt thinks that the side streets are busy, but nothing could have prepared him for the throng of people on High Street. There are gentlemen and ladies stocking up before their long ocean voyage, delivery men carrying large boxes to restock the stores, and children racing along the streets looking for the nearest sweet shop.

Their first stop is G Baldwin & Co, and Kurt immediately smells the wonderful fragrances as they enter the herbal and alchemy shop. When Mr Blaine busies himself with the shopkeeper, finding lavender aromatherapy oil for the countess, Kurt goes to the counter, which has testers set out. He takes the cork stopper off one bottle at a time, and inhales the rich scented oil. When he gets to the sixth tester, Kurt closes his eyes and a faint curve forms on his lips.

“Judging from your expression, you found an oil that you like.”

Kurt quickly opens his eyes when he hears Mr Blaine’s voice, a little embarrassed at being caught out. “This smells heavenly. It reminds me of my mother. What is it?”

Mr Blaine takes the small bottle from Kurt and recognizes the scent when he sniffs. “Chamomile. Some people like to drink chamomile tea, but I prefer to use a drop or two of the oil when I take a bath. Shall I get some?”

“Only if you would like to, Mr Blaine.”
Mr Blaine adds the chamomile oil to his purchase, and Kurt looks forward to adding a few drops to Mr Blaine’s bath and smelling the fragrance linger in the air.

Mr Blaine leads them to the next shop, Sawyer’s Grocer. Instead of the usual dried goods such as flour, spices and tea, this grocer sells luxury items, the likes of which Kurt has never seen before.

“I need a jar of Marmite,” Mr Blaine informs the shopkeeper.

“What’s that, Mr Blaine? I’ve never seen it in the dining room before.”

“It’s a yeast spread that Mrs Sylvester enjoys on her toast. I’m not surprised that she doesn’t share it with the rest of you downstairs. I’ll buy two jars and tell Mrs Sylvester that one is for the servants’ dining room.”

Mr Blaine turns his attention to the shelving behind the counter. “Hmm… Heinz Baked Beans. Fancy that - beans already prepared and tinned. I think I’ll buy half a dozen tins.” Mr Blaine turns to Kurt and adds, “Hopefully there will be beans included in the breakfast buffet more often now.”

After selecting a half-dozen bars of chocolate, which Mr Blaine assures Kurt are for Mrs Hudson and other staff, he pays for the order and organizes the wrapped parcels to be delivered to the hotel.

As they continue along High Street, Mr Blaine stops in front of a large store with a ‘F.W. Woolworth & Co. Ltd.’ sign hanging above the entrance. Mr Blaine smiles brightly and says, “We must go in here, Kurt. This is a new type of store that an American has set up. They have threepenny and sixpenny sections, so I think you’ll find something to buy with the pocket money Hummel gave you.”

As they walk down the aisles, Kurt touches everything that interests him. “I can’t believe that they allow everyone to touch things. I’m used to having to ask a clerk to present something from behind the counter.”

“I think it’s the way of the future, judging by the number of people in this shop. Let’s get out of the homewares department and look at the clothing.”

They head to the section that contains men’s clothing and Kurt immediately heads towards a display of flannel shirts. Kurt strokes the fabric, loving the soft feel. Why, it’s the perfect type of shirt to wear when working in the kitchen gardens.

“Do you like these shirts?” Mr Blaine asks.

“I’m not sure if you know, Mr Blaine, but I’ll be responsible for the kitchen gardens when we return. I don’t have any of my farm clothes at Westerville Abbey and I can’t tend to the gardens in my footman livery. This type of shirt is exactly what I need. It’s heavy enough to keep me warm and it will wear well.”

“Is this your way of telling me that you need new shirts?” Mr Blaine teases.

“Oh, I would never do that, Mr Blaine! I’ll let my father know about them, and perhaps he’ll consider it.”

“Since we’re here and it’s the perfect shirt for your new gardening duties, I’ll buy it. After all,
we’ll be saving your more expensive footman livery from dirt and grime. I think two shirts are in order.”

Kurt is surprised at Mr Blaine’s generosity, but is too excited to refuse the new purchase. He knows that his father will be upset when he finds out, but the logic of having proper clothing for the kitchen gardens will eventually win out.

“Does this look to be the right size, Mr Blaine?” Kurt asks, holding a shirt against his upper body. Kurt blushes when Blaine’s eyes slowly rake over his body.

“Err… It looks perfect.”

“Now, I need to decide on colors,” Kurt says, turning his attention to the large display.

“I happen to like the light blue flannel shirt - it matches your eyes. The green one also looks good. Now go pick a pair of trousers as well.”

“Thank you, Mr Blaine!” Kurt replies, handing over the shirts to Mr Blaine before darting to the trouser section. This time, Kurt makes a choice of his own - a pair of blue bib-and-brace dungarees that look as if they’ll be comfortable but hard-wearing.

As they make their way to the checkout counter, something catches Kurt’s eye in the sixpenny aisle. There’s a small decorative plate that has a very tall structure painted on it. “What’s this building, Mr Blaine?”

“Why, that’s the Woolworth Building in New York City. It’s the tallest building in the world.”

“How tall is it?

“The Woolworth Building was only completed a year ago. From memory, it’s almost 800 feet tall.”

Kurt thinks that New York must be an amazing city, with impossibly tall buildings filled with merchandise that people like him can afford. He wants a memento of his time in Southampton and a reminder that he should always dream big. “I’m going to buy this plate with my pocket money. One day, I’m going to see the Woolworth Building with my own eyes.”

Their last stop is at Blackwell Bookshop. Mr Blaine gets lost in the new titles section, and Kurt decides to browse in the periodicals section. Kurt looks up when he hears a loud squeal, and smiles when he sees Mr Blaine with the newest Sherlock Holmes book in his hands. Kurt turns his attention to the magazines on offer and picks up the latest issue of Gentleman's Magazine of Fashion. As Kurt flicks through the pages, he’s so absorbed in the pictures of men wearing the latest styles, that he doesn’t realize that someone is right behind him.

“You enjoy fashion?” Mr Blaine asks.

“Umm… yes, I do. It used to be one of my hobbies before I started working at Westerville Abbey.”

“Then I’ll buy it for you.”

“No, Mr Blaine. That’s too much! I couldn’t accept it. What would my father say?”
“Nonsense, Kurt. I’m about to receive an entire new wardrobe for the London season. I’ll tell Hummel that I bought it for you to study and give me ideas. He’ll take that to mean that you are well-established in your duties.”

Mr Blaine takes the magazine and includes it in a large stack of books on top of the counter. Kurt is surprised that *The Dubliners* by James Joyce is included in the pile. He’s not sure that the lot of the Irish poor is that much different from that of the English. Kurt smirks when he sees latest *Night Wind* as well, for he never pegged Mr Blaine as an illustration book fan. Fortunately, Mr Blaine makes arrangements for the books to be delivered to the hotel, for Kurt would have struggled to carry the parcels for the rest of the day.

Once they have finished making all the purchases required, and buying a few treats as well, they are at the top end of High Street.

“Come with me. There’s something I want you to see,” Mr Blaine says, leading the way off High Street. After a few blocks, they find themselves in front of a medieval gatehouse. The two-story structure, made of stone and flint and topped with battlements, is quite impressive.

“I’ve never seen anything like this before. What’s its purpose?” Kurt asks.

“During the Norman times, Southampton was constantly raided by French forces. In the 1300s, King Edward III ordered a wall to be built around the town so it could defend itself. This used to be the main gateway into Southampton. It now houses the police force, and it was recently used as a prison, but it shut down with the increased road traffic and trams. I think the council isn’t quite sure what to do with the gatehouse now.”

“I hope they keep it intact as a memory of its history,” Kurt replies.

“Me too. Are you ready to head back?”

When Kurt nods, Mr Blaine takes the lead again and walks to the closest tram stop and checks the timetable. “We’re in luck. The next tram will be here in two minutes.”

“We’re really going to take the tram, Mr Blaine?”

“It wouldn’t be a trip to Southampton without at least one ride.”

Kurt is practically bouncing in place with the excitement of a tram ride. Soon the tram arrives and they board the first carriage so that they can have both the side and front views. They take their seats next to each other in the very first row, allowing Kurt the best view out the windows. Once the tram starts, Mr Blaine pays the conductor their fares. Kurt looks out the window, asking all manner of questions.

“What do you think of that gentleman’s bowler hat?”

“Why is there a bicycle shop when I haven’t seen anyone ride a bicycle here?”

“What does Thomas Cook & Son sell?”

Despite his curiosity, Kurt finds it difficult to focus on Mr Blaine’s replies, for he’s far more focused on the feel of Mr Blaine’s side against his in the narrow seats. Kurt feels himself flush as he soaks in the heated friction provided by Mr Blaine’s muscular leg.

The sun has almost set by the time they return to the South Western Hotel, arms laden with their
purchases. They both take the elevator to the second floor and Mr Blaine unlocks the door when they reach room 206. It’s quite spacious, with a double bed, two nightstands, wardrobe, dresser, and a vanity table. There is also a chair and reading lamp tucked into the corner. Kurt busies himself with unpacking while Mr Blaine uses the adjoining bathroom to freshen up.

When Mr Blaine returns to the bedroom, he strips off his day attire and passes Kurt each article of clothing, who carefully folds them and stores them in the wardrobe.

“I wish I didn’t have to go downstairs to the hotel’s restaurant. There is nothing I’d rather do tonight than have a long soak in the bathtub with a few drops of chamomile oil and bury my nose in the new Sherlock Holmes. However, my father will hear about it if I don’t make an appearance at dinner.”

_I wonder what the poor are doing?_ Kurt thinks to himself. Kurt hands Mr Blaine each layer that he needs to wear that evening. After assisting with the shirt studs and cufflinks, Kurt takes the bowtie and slips it around Mr Blaine’s neck. Kurt is standing so close that he can feel Mr Blaine’s warm breath washing over his face. Kurt wonders what it would feel like if their lips brushed, then shakes his head to get rid of his ungentlemanly thoughts.

“Is there anything else you need tonight, Mr Blaine?”

“No, I’m fine. Do you have plans with Hudson this evening?”

“No, Mr Hudson said he was taking dinner out and not to wait up for him. I’ll just have dinner downstairs in the servants’ dining room, then retire to bed and read the magazine you bought me.”

“I think that’s wise, Kurt. It’s dark outside already and soon the dock workers will be finishing their shift. The backstreets and pubs are no place for you to be at night.”

“Then I’ll go downstairs now. What time do you wish for me to wake you in the morning?”

“Eight o’clock. Cousin Rachel’s ship doesn’t get in until noon, but I fancy a stroll along the promenade tomorrow morning.”

Kurt nods and walks out of the room. Just before he shuts the door, he pauses. “Mr Blaine?”

Mr Blaine looks up and hums questioningly.

“I want to thank you for today. It’s been the best day of my life. I ate a steak and kidney pie, saw some of Southampton, visited Woolworth’s, bought some gardening clothes, rode on a tram, and I have a new magazine.”

Mr Blaine smiles. “You’re very welcome. Goodnight, Kurt.”

“Goodnight, Mr Blaine.”

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After dinner in the hotel downstairs, consisting of soup and a bread roll, Kurt cautiously enters the servants’ dormitory, not knowing what to expect. He’s relieved that it’s virtually empty, with the others out enjoying the Southampton pubs. He goes up and down the rows of bunk beds until he finds the one that contains his and Mr Hudson’s overnight bags. After changing into his night
clothes, and doing his normal routine in the adjoining bathroom, he climbs to the top bed of the bunk. He is absolutely not going to risk Mr Hudson accidentally falling on top of him during the night.

Kurt is quite content to stay in tonight and read the new issue of *Gentleman’s Magazine of Fashion*. Both his father and Mr Blaine have warned him of the seedier side of Southampton at night, and he definitely doesn’t want to put himself in danger. Besides, he told Mr Blaine that he would stay inside the hotel tonight, and Kurt doesn’t want to disappoint him.

It certainly has been an exciting day, and he has Mr Blaine to thank for that. He’s not at all toffee-nosed like other upper-class gentlemen his age. Mr Blaine is actually pretty easy to talk with. The only time Kurt feels uncomfortable around him is when his own thoughts drift to how handsome Mr Blaine is. There’s no doubt that there’s a physical attraction. *I need to nip these feelings in the bud before Mr Blaine catches on.*

Kurt peeks down from his bed when he hears noise from the bottom bunk. He’s relieved to see that it’s only Mr Hudson taking off his heavy boots.

“An interesting night, Mr Hudson?”

Mr Hudson shakes his head. “You can’t believe how complicated the Southampton street system is. I managed to collect the wine and food provisions, but for the life of me, I couldn’t find the auto mechanics shop. Fortunately, the lads at the pub knew where the shop is and drew me a map. Can you tell Mr Blaine I’ll meet you at the dock tomorrow at noon?”

Kurt wonders if he’ll be the bearer of bad news. “Shouldn’t you tell Mr Blaine yourself? Will he be angry?”

“Oh no, Mr Blaine will be all right about it. He knows me very well. It might take me a bit longer to get things done, but I always do.”

“How long have you lived at the abbey?”

“My mother and I came to Westerville Abbey when I was 10 years old. My father was in the same regiment as his lordship during the Boer War. When he was killed in action, my mother had no means of supporting us. She struggled for a few years, working in service for a family in Bath. Just when there seemed no option but to join a workhouse, his lordship heard of our plight and offered my mother the position of housekeeper. We’ve been at Westerville Abbey ever since.”

It’s not the first time Kurt has heard of the earl’s generosity with his staff, particularly with allowing Mrs Hudson to raise her son at the abbey. After all, the earl took a gamble when he hired his father as the butler all those years ago. Mr Hudson seems roughly the same age as Mr Blaine, and Kurt is curious as to what Mr Blaine was like as a child. “Have you known Mr Blaine the entire time?”

“Of course. Why, we even went to the same school in the village for a few years. Mr Blaine was the class swot, always with his nose in a book. But Mr Blaine was so friendly with everyone and loved playing outdoors with us. He and Sam Evans would get up to all sorts of mischief. Very different from his brother, Lord Cooper. On school holidays, he would come back from Eaton and pull pranks on us.”

“Are you still friends with Mr Blaine?”
“We’re friendly enough. When I’m not driving about, Mr Blaine comes to the garage with a treat from cook and we shoot the breeze. One thing I’ll say for Mr Blaine is that he’s the friendliest gentleman you’ll ever meet. He doesn’t put on airs like other men of his standing.”

“And yet you call him Mr Blaine.”

“On his 16th birthday, his address changed from Master Blaine to Mr Blaine. Mr Hummel insisted that us young ones call him by his new title as a sign of respect. To be honest, it was easy to slip in the Mr when addressing Blaine. He certainly has my respect.”

Kurt mulls over what Mr Hudson has told him. It has only confirmed his own thoughts about Mr Blaine. It seems as if today Mr Blaine went out of his way to make the day special for him - the trip to Woolworth’s, the tram ride, the old gate building, and more. Kurt smiles to himself as he figures out a plan that will allow him to reciprocate in some small way.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed reading about Mr Blaine and Kurt’s alone time in Southampton. Hopefully, you have a feel of what the city would have been like in 1914.

For those that are interested, I’ve made two posts on Tumblr - Hierarchy and Duties of Downstairs Staff and Titles of the Anderson Family and How They Are Addressed.

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: Cousin Rachel arrives in Southampton
March 1914

Blaine

Blaine goes through the motions of eating dinner at the South Western Hotel’s large dining hall. He’s grateful to be seated alone because he’s lost in his own thoughts. He mulls over the day’s events and smiles when he remembers Kurt’s excitement during their afternoon in Southampton. Blaine is glad that he has made the extra effort to make the day special for Kurt.

Although it’s the first time they have spent any length of time together, Blaine can tell that Kurt feels comfortable around him. Blaine hopes that Kurt hasn’t caught him stealing glances throughout the day. It was so difficult to stop himself from staring, for Kurt is the most beautiful person he’s ever laid eyes on. And this makes him consider his feelings further.

He’s never considered a man to be beautiful before, but that is exactly what Kurt is. His complexion is porcelain white, with rosy cheeks that give Kurt a healthy glow. His hair, that looks soft to the touch, is carefully styled. His eyes, that seem to change from blue to green and every hue in between, are beautiful. He carries his long slender body with pride and grace. As Blaine visualizes Kurt, his stomach stirs, and he realizes that this has never happened while thinking of a girl.

Numerous courses keep arriving at the table, but as soon as each plate is whisked away, Blaine can’t remember what he’s just eaten. As soon as he can, he returns to his room and quickly changes, washes, and climbs into bed. He knows that his new Sherlock Holmes book will have to wait for another day, for Kurt still consumes all his thoughts.

Blaine wonders if he’s like one of those men that are gossiped about late at night in the dorms of
the military academy at Sandhurst. He’s heard tales of wicked men who like other men and do unspeakable things to each other. There are plenty of rumors of what the house master gets up to at night, and Blaine has always made sure to give him a wide berth. Blaine doesn’t think that how his body reacts to Kurt is wicked at all - it actually feels pretty good.

Blaine hopes that his future wife will stir similar feelings inside him, however, he’s skeptical that will happen. In the past, there have been no end of girls giving him attention at dances, some of them great beauties. But none of them have made Blaine feel like he does right now.

Perhaps it’s just a phase he’s going through with the pressure to find a wife during the upcoming London season. He’ll meet a lovely lady who will sweep him off his feet, just like Quinn did to Cooper. One thing Blaine knows for sure is that he can’t think of Kurt in that way. He’ll somehow have to rid himself of these thoughts, biding his time until his future is determined and he’s far from the temptations at Westerville Abbey.

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Blane is awakened by gentle but persistent knocks on the door. He climbs out of bed, puts on his dressing gown, and heads toward the door. Once he’s opened it, Kurt enters the room holding a breakfast tray, smiling as brightly as a ray of sunshine.

“Good morning, Mr Blaine. I wasn’t sure whether you wanted to go down to the dining room this morning, so I decided to bring breakfast up to you.”

“Breakfast in bed! You spoil me, Kurt.”

“I hope so,” Kurt replies, blushing.

Blaine goes to the bathroom to do the necessaries, then runs back and jumps into bed. Kurt has already opened the curtains, and it looks unusually bright and sunny outside for a March day. Once Kurt has positioned the tray across his lap, he notices a red carnation in the corner. Kurt must have heard his mother mention a red flower boutonnière at breakfast the previous morning. It’s a reminder that Kurt is clever and thinks of all his needs.

After Blaine has taken his first sip of tea, he asks, “So, what did you get up to last night, Kurt?”

“I had supper with the other servants staying at the hotel. The food was fine, but not as good as Mrs Sylvester’s. After that, I went straight to bed and read the magazine you bought for me yesterday. It’s full of the latest fashions and it’s given me so many ideas.”

“Good, then I’ll make sure to bring you to the tailor’s with me next month. I’m sure that you’ll do a better job of advising me than Evans will.”

“I’m sure that Mr Evans gives every gentleman in the abbey good advice.”

“We’re talking about Sam Evans, right? In no universe does Evans know anything about fashion.”

“Then why is he your father’s valet?”

“That’s Evans’s story to tell, not mine.” There’s an awkward pause in the conversation, so Blaine changes the topic quickly. “Did Hudson make it back before curfew last night?”

“Yes, Mr Hudson returned well before 10 o’clock. Oh, I forgot to mention that Mr Hudson will be out this morning. Apparently, he had some difficulties finding the shop that sells motor supplies yesterday.”
Blaine giggles. “Is that code for he got lost along the way?”

Kurt nods and joins in the giggling. “At least Mr Hudson managed to find his way to the wine merchant and the provisions store. He’d never have heard the end of it if he’d returned to the abbey without them. Anyways, he’ll meet us at the dock at noon sharp. Mr Hudson assured me that he knows how to tell time.”

“Very droll, Kurt. So if it’s just the two of us this morning, what do you say about taking a stroll along the famous Southampton docks?”

“That sounds grand, Mr Blaine. Will you be bathing this morning?”

“I think I’ll wait until we get back to Westerville - I’ll want to bathe after the car trip this afternoon.”

“Very well. I brought the shaving supplies. I’m under explicit instructions to shave you this morning before you meet Miss Berry.”

Blaine groans. No doubt his mother whispered something in Kurt’s ear. However, what she doesn’t realize is that shaving has become a favorite pastime of his, now that it’s one of Kurt’s duties.

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After a leisurely stroll along the Southampton docks, looking at cargo ships and naval vessels, they finally make it to the seaside promenade near where the passenger liners arrive. This portion of the docks is a lot smarter in appearance as well-to-do folk wait for their family and friends. They can already see the White Star ship in the distance, with thick black smoke spewing from its funnels.

“After all the walking this morning, I think it’s time for an early luncheon. I have a special treat in store for you,” Blaine says as he stops in front of The Fisherman’s Catch shop.

“I’ve eaten fish and chips before, Mr Blaine. It might be hard to believe, but even Taunton has a fish and chips shop.”

“But they don’t have The Fisherman’s Catch. It’s quite a local favorite.”

After Blaine has purchased three portions of fish and chips, they sit on a nearby bench on the promenade, and open the paper parcels filled with their luncheon. The fried battered cod is crispy on the outside, and filled with freshly-caught fish cooked to perfection on the inside. The thick wedges of potato have also been fried and tossed lightly with salt and vinegar.

“This tastes so different to the fish and chips I’ve eaten in Taunton.”

“The best fish and chips are always in coastal towns, because the fish has been caught earlier the same morning. Except for London, of course. London has the very best of food.”

When the bell tower rings 12 times, The White Star ship is almost at the dock and Blaine can see Hudson bounding over to them. Blaine passes to him the extra portion of fish and chips and greets Hudson, “Your timing is perfect. Here’s your luncheon.”

“Thank you, Mr Blaine. I’m starving,” Hudson replies sitting down, licking his lips as he opens up the package.

Blaine spends a moment watching Hudson devouring his fish and chips and is amazed at how he practically inhales his luncheon. Hudson has always had a huge appetite, and as a younger teen, he
would often raid the kitchen pantry for extra morsels to eat. Many a time, Blaine accepted the blame for eating the food when Mrs Sylvester noticed, which earned him Hudson’s loyalty.

“It looks like The White Star is right on time. Is everything in order, Hudson?”

Hudson crumples the empty paper and wipes the grease off his face with the back of his hand.
“

“Yes, Mr Blaine. I’ve arranged for porters to assist us with Miss Berry’s trunks and have detailed instructions for the drive back. I won’t disappoint you.”

“You never disappoint me, Hudson. Oh, look… The plank is coming down from the ship. We better get a move on if we want to greet Cousin Rachel directly off the ship.”

They quickly head towards The White Star and wait among the crowd of people who are there to greet family and friends, along with porters, drivers, and the like. Soon, the first-class passengers start to disembark and Blaine looks out for a lady his age. Blaine looks down at his coat’s lapel to ensure that the red carnation is prominently displayed. He smiles when he sees a petite woman covered from head to toe in red about to head down the plank. He quickly makes his way towards her, and smiles and waves when their eyes meet one another. The next thing he knows, she is scurrying over to him.

“Are you Blaine Anderson?”

“Yes, I am. Welcome to England, Cousin Rachel. Let me introduce you to Hudson, the family’s chauffeur, and Kurt, our second footman. They’ll retrieve your trunks. In the meantime, why don’t we go to my hotel and have tea and sandwiches. I’m afraid that it’s a bit of a journey back to Westerville.”

“What a wonderful idea, Cousin Blaine. Can I call you that? I’m dying to know if the tea here is even better than in America.”

Blaine chuckles and replies, “Us Brits have been drinking tea for centuries. I’m sure you’ll find it top-notch. I would love for you to call me Cousin Blaine. I can already tell that we’ll be friends.”


The time goes by quickly as Cousin Rachel freshens up at the hotel, and no sooner have they finished their tea (the British variety is most definitely better) than Kurt announces that everything is ready for the journey back to Westerville. After Cousin Rachel has confirmed that all of her trunks are loaded at the back and on top of the Renault, they start their journey to Westerville.

“So, Hudson, you must be very busy driving the entire family about,” Cousin Rachel says.

“Yes, Miss, I am. However, at this time of year, the family stays at Westerville mostly, so I do things to maintain the car.”

“It must be quite complicated. I can already tell you are good at your job. Would you have time to drive me around and show me the highlights of Devonshire?”

“Yes, Miss. Just let the butler know and he’ll be happy to make the arrangements.”

“I’d be happy to show you around Devonshire,” Blaine offers.

“Thank you, Cousin Blaine. I’ll take you up on your offer. However, for those days when you’re busy, I’m certain that Hudson would look after me.”
If Blaine isn’t mistaken, Cousin Rachel is smitten with Hudson. Why, she is practically flirting with him. Yes, Blaine will have a lot to learn from Cousin Rachel before they go to London and attend the Season.

The car is quiet as they drive from the coast to the countryside dotted with farms. True to Hudson’s word, they don’t get lost on the journey back, and Blaine is relieved. Before he knows it, they are in Tedburn St Mary, approximately 30 minutes from Westerville.

“Hudson, could you stop at the telephone kiosk up ahead? I promised Hummel I would call him closer to our time of arrival.”

Hudson stops in front of the kiosk, and gets out of the car to open the backseat door. When Blaine gets out, Hudson whispers, “Can I make the telephone call, Mr Blaine? I’ve never used a telephone before... and I want to try it... and....”

“What a jolly good idea, Hudson. Here’s a tuppence that will let you talk on the telephone for three minutes. Let me show you how to dial the number.”

After instructing Hudson on how to use the telephone, Blaine steps out of the kiosk and breathes in the early evening air. After precisely three minutes, Hudson comes out of the kiosk with huge grin on his face.

“That was fantastic. Mr Hummel sounded the exact same as he does in person!”

“That he does, Hudson. Did you remember to tell them when we’ll arrive?”

“I almost forgot, but Mr Hummel asked me. He told me to get a move on, as it will be dark very soon.”

They return to the car and make the last leg of the journey, and it’s dark by the time they arrive at Westerville Abbey. As is usual with important guests, both the family and servants are standing in two separate lines outside the main entrance, waiting for their arrival.

Kurt jumps out of the car and opens the door for Cousin Rachel. Blaine can tell that Cousin Rachel is impressed with not only the size of the abbey, but also the formal welcome.

As custom dictates, the earl is the first to step forward. “Welcome to Westerville Abbey, Rachel. I trust your journey went well?”

“Yes, my lord. The sea journey was long but enjoyable. I’m glad to be on firm ground once again.”

“My dear Rachel. I’ve been looking forward to your stay,” Pamela greets her niece, and she gives her a hug. “Let me introduce you to my other son, Cooper, and his wife, Quinn.”

“Cousin Rachel, I see that Blaine safely got you from the docks to us,” Cooper says.

“Cousin Blaine was brilliant. He met me directly off the ship, and whisked me to the hotel for a bite to eat while the staff dealt with my trunks. I couldn’t have asked for a better car journey to Westerville.”

“Cousin Rachel, I can’t tell you how pleased I am to have another lady in the house. There is so much to do to get ready for the Season.”

“There’ll be plenty of time for that later, Quinn. We mustn’t overwhelm Rachel on her first day,” Pamela chides. “You must be exhausted, Rachel. Come inside and you’ll be shown to your room.
After you’ve freshened up, we’ll have a light supper.”

“If it’s all right with you, I think I’ll go straight to bed. I haven’t been able to sleep a wink on the ship - I was too excited about being here.”

While Pamela whisks Cousin Rachel inside, the earl walks over to Blaine and pats him on the back. “Well done, my son.”

Blaine feels pleased with himself, for he’s passed the first test at representing the Anderson family.

“You must be tired too, after the long car journeys.”

“I think I’ll forgo supper tonight and take a long bath. It’ll be good to wash away the dirt and grime of Southampton.”

Before Blaine joins his father inside the abbey, he looks around to find Hummel organizing Hudson, Kurt and Sebastian unloading the trunks from the car to take them upstairs. Hummel walks over to Blaine and asks, “I trust Kurt was useful during your trip? You weren’t bothered by awkward difficulties to sort out?”

“Kurt wasn’t a bother at all. Actually, he performed his duties to the highest of standards. You should be very proud of your son, Hummel. I’ll retire to my bedroom shortly. Could you please send someone up to run me a bath?”

Blaine enters the abbey and says goodnight to his father, Cooper and Quinn. He goes upstairs to his bedroom, and immediately spots his overnight bag and purchases in the corner. When he goes to the bathroom, he’s surprised to find Sam running his bath and not Kurt.

“Hi, Mr Blaine. Kurt is busy with Miss Berry’s trunks and the stuff Finn collected. I offered to come up and run your bath.”

“You just offered so that you could get your gift earlier,” Blaine chortles. He’s in the habit of buying Sam something every time he makes a trip.

Sam turns off the taps and dries his hands. “You know me too well, Mr Blaine.”

“You’ll find your gift in the pile of books. You’ll know which one it is when you see it.” Blaine strips off his clothes and smiles when he hears a hoot from his bedroom.

Just before Blaine steps into the bath, Sam comes rushing in. “I’ve never heard of Night Wind before, but this book looks great, Mr Blaine. Get inside the tub before the water turns cold, and I’ll read it to you.”

Blaine soaks in the bath as Sam tells the tale of the superhero who can use a sword made of dark force. Sam shows him the many illustrations that are contained in the book. Blaine knows he’s made a wise choice, for Sam always enjoys books with more pictures than words.

Blaine half listens to Sam while he washes his hair and scrubs his body. He feels quite comfortable naked in the bathtub with Sam at his side. After all, they’ve seen each other naked plenty of times before. Blaine certainly doesn’t have problems with stiffies around Sam. It’s only Kurt that evokes that particular reaction.

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Later that evening, Blaine’s stomach grumbles as he’s reading his new Sherlock Holmes book in
bed. He decides it’s too late to ring for Kurt to bring up a snack, so he puts on his dressing gown and slippers, and heads to the kitchen to help himself. Just before he gets to the butler’s office, he can hear Hummel, Mrs Hudson and Kurt discussing the trip to Southampton.

“I’ve never imagined that there would be a store like Woolworth’s. Everything was laid out in the middle of the shop and you could touch things without asking an assistant. And there were threepenny and sixpenny sections!”

“You shouldn’t have bothered Mr Blaine about gardening clothes, Kurt,” Hummel reprimands.

“I refused his offer, but Mr Blaine insisted. Besides, these clothes are perfect for working in the kitchen gardens. Did I tell you that we went on a tram ride? And I saw the city’s old gate? And Southampton has the best fish and chips that I’ve ever tasted?”

“Yes, I think we covered your every movement in Southampton,” Hummel notes with amusement.

“It sounds like you had a wonderful outing with Mr Blaine,” Mrs Hudson chimes in. “He’s a good man, that Mr Blaine. He seems to know what special things to do to make others happy. Finn is so excited that he finally got the chance to use the telephone.”

Blaine bows his head and smiles in the dark shadows. It humbles him to think that a few simple things can have such an impact on others. His stomach rumbles once again, so he decides to continue down the passage before he’s caught eavesdropping. Blaine takes a platter of cooked meats and a slab of cheddar cheese from the cool pantry and sets them out on the table in the centre of the kitchen.

“There are some leftover rolls as well.”

Blaine turns around to see Kurt standing in the kitchen doorway.

“I...I didn’t have supper tonight. My stomach is rumbling….”

“You don’t need to explain it to me, Mr Blaine. Let me make you a sandwich.”

Blaine sits at the kitchen table and watches Kurt cut a thick slices of ham and cheese, and quickly make his snack.

“I wanted to thank you again, Mr Blaine, for yesterday. It really was the best day of my life.”

“You are most welcome, Kurt. I enjoyed myself as well. Do you want to make a sandwich for yourself?”

“I wouldn’t dare. I would be back to Somerset on the first bus if I ate any of the food not served in the servant’s dining room.”

When Kurt sets the sandwich down before him, Blaine attacks it as if he hasn’t eaten for days.

“I thought Mr Hudson was the fastest eater I knew,” Kurt giggles.

“Shush you. I’m starving.”

When Kurt has collected the dirty plate, he heads toward the scullery.

“I’ll bid you goodnight, Kurt. Tonight, I will be thinking of you reading your magazine directly one floor above me.”
“And I will be wondering if you are as clever as Sherlock Holmes.”

Blaine returns to his bedroom, climbs back into bed, and picks up his new book. He looks at the ceiling and wonders if Kurt thinks of him at night as well. Oh, what he would do to know those thoughts.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: Cousin Rachel settles into Westerville Abbey.
When Blaine enters the dining room, he’s relieved that he’s arrived at breakfast earlier than Cousin Rachel. Both his mother and Quinn have decided that they will eat breakfast downstairs until Cousin Rachel has settled into the abbey. Blaine serves himself a large portion of kedgeree, a rice dish containing smoked haddock, eggs, curry powder, and sultanas, and sits at his place across the table from his mother.

“You did leave some kedgeree at the buffet in case Rachel wants to try it?”

“Yes, Mama. There’s plenty left. I’m ravenous this morning. It must be all the Southampton sea air.”

The dining room is silent as his father pores over the newspaper, and the rest of the family eat. However, everyone looks towards the door when they hear dainty footsteps approaching. Blaine’s eyes open wide when he sees Cousin Rachel wearing a black jumper with a white carousel horse knitted into the front, with a black and white tartan skirt. Americans certainly have a rather interesting idea of what is fashionable to wear.

“Good morning, Rachel. Did you sleep well?”
The bedroom was most comfortable, Aunt Pamela, although my toes became icy cold as soon as the fire petered out. I have a radiator in my bedroom in New York, so I’m used to warmth throughout the night.”

“Unfortunately, our coal-burning boiler is only large enough to heat the water. You’ll find that it’ll warm up soon when spring arrives. In the meantime, I’ll give you a pair of woolen socks; that should do the trick.”

Cousin Rachel gives her aunt a sceptical smile and proceeds to the buffet table to select her breakfast. The earl raises an eyebrow when he notices Cousin Rachel’s plate only contains two pieces of toast and some strawberry preserves.

“The English enjoy a full cooked breakfast,” Pamela remarks. “Cook got in the black pudding especially for you.”

“What’s black pudding?”

“It’s like a sausage, but it’s made from pork blood and oatmeal. The village butcher produces the best black pudding in all of Devonshire,” Blaine boasts.

“Pork blood!” Cousin Rachel exclaims with horror written all over her face.

“It’s an English specialty. You’ll be tasting new foods during your stay in England. Some you will like and others you won’t,” Pamela explains. “Tell me, Rachel, what do you normally eat for breakfast?”

“I usually have corn flakes with milk, some sort of canned fruit like peaches, and biscuits.”

“What are corn flakes?” Blaine asks.

“You haven’t heard of them? It’s a breakfast cereal - made from toasted flakes of corn. You eat them in a bowl with milk. It’s all the rage in America.”

“I’m more interested in the biscuits. Are you telling me that you eat sweets for breakfast?” Cooper asks.

Pamela starts giggling. “Oh, Cooper. American biscuits are like scones, but without the sugar. Biscuits are called cookies in America. I can see that I’ll be acting as an interpreter until Rachel has learned the British expressions.”

Blaine is grateful that his mother is at breakfast and helping Cousin Rachel adjust to the English way of life. He’s fascinated by the American girl and wants to get to know her better. He looks up at her and asks, “Do you have any plans for today, Cousin Rachel?”

“I think I should like to go exploring. I’ve been confined to a ship for the past week and it would be nice to get my land legs back again.”

“I plan to go riding this morning and would be happy to show you around the estate,” Blaine offers.

“That’s an excellent idea. I’m not sure how long this warmer weather will hold,” the earl chimes in. “Can you ride a horse, Rachel?”
“Yes, I can.”

“Blaine, tell Wesley that Rachel can use my horse,” Pamela instructs her son. She then turns to Cousin Rachel and adds, “There’s no need to worry about Bluebell. She’s a tame old thing, but quite strong. She could use a good run around the estate.”

“Shall we meet downstairs in say 30 minutes, wearing riding attire?”

“That sounds like a wonderful plan,” Cousin Rachel replies.

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Blaine is impressed with Cousin Rachel’s riding skills. There’s no doubt about it - she’s a natural on a horse. They race across the barren fields and slow down to a more leisurely trot when the horses need to recover. Firebird automatically heads towards the lake where they have their usual morning break. Blaine immediately jumps off Firebird to help Cousin Rachel dismount Bluebell.

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“The estate has such a large lake,” Cousin Rachel exclaims.

“My great-great-grandfather had it made. When the weather warms up, we can go boating on the lake. We have a few rowboats in the boathouse over there.”

Blaine finds the horses’ carrots in Bluebell’s saddlebag and the blanket in Firebird’s. He’s pleasantly surprised to find a metal flask filled with hot tea, two enamel mugs, and linen napkins containing two thick slices of Battenberg cake.

“How did you know I love picnics, Cousin Blaine?”

“I think everyone loves picnics. This is where I usually stop for morning tea. I think it’s my favorite place on the estate. It’s so peaceful here. I can really think about things, daydream or do anything I want. It’s my secret spot. You won’t tell anyone about it, will you?”

“No, your secret is safe with me. I can see why this spot is so special to you. It’s so beautiful.”

Blaine pours the tea and they eat their slices of the sweet Battenberg cake in silence. Once Blaine has finished, he heads to the saddle bag and takes out the stale bread ends that Mrs Sylvester provided.

“Come on, let’s go feed the ducks,” Blaine proposes. He holds out a hand to help Cousin Rachel up and they head down to the lakefront. The ducks flock towards them as they break off tiny pieces of bread and toss them into the water.

“We’re friends, right?” Cousin Rachel asks tentatively.

“I’d like us to be… No, I can already tell that we’ll be the best of friends,” Blaine assures her.

“I have a secret of my own. The thing is… I’m a vegetarian.”

“What’s that?”

“Someone who doesn’t eat meat.”
“Really?”

“Yes, really. I hate the taste of it. The idea of eating black pudding turns my stomach. What am I to do?”

“Well, I think our cook needs to know immediately, and you should also tell my mother. It’s strange, but I’m sure we can accommodate your diet. Leave it to me - I’ll have a word with the cook.”

Cousin Rachel gives him an enthusiastic hug. “You’ve been so kind to me since you collected me from the ship in Southampton. I knew that you of all people at Westerville would understand. Thank you!”

Blaine smiles at Cousin Rachel as she releases him from her tight embrace. “Is there anything else you don’t eat?”

“Brussels sprouts. I can’t stand them.”

“Me neither!” Blaine chuckles. “We’re going to get along just fine, Cousin Rachel. We had best return to the abbey. We’ll be expected to be washed and changed in time for luncheon.”

They gather up the blanket and remnants of their mid-morning tea, mount their horses and gallop back to the stables. Realizing that they are pressed for time, Blaine hurries Cousin Rachel back to the house.

“Mr Blaine, Miss Berry… I trust you had an enjoyable ride this morning,” Hummel enquires when they enter the abbey.

“Yes, we did, Hummel. We’re going upstairs to change for luncheon. Could you ask Kurt to join me? I’ll need his assistance if I’m to make it to luncheon on time. Better ask Mercedes to tend to Cousin Rachel as well.”

Once Hummel has assured him that he’ll send both servants upstairs, Blaine races upstairs, and strips down to his undershirt and knee-length drawers. He washes his face, being careful not to mess up his hair slicked down with pomade. When he hears a knock on the door, he turns around to see Kurt entering his bedroom. Blaine notices that Kurt’s eyes darken when he glances along his body. Blaine recalls that he’s seen Sebastian look at him the same way many a time, but somehow, when it’s Kurt, it doesn’t feel creepy. It actually makes him feel proud of his body, which is muscular from the time spent at Sandhurst.

“Kurt, thank goodness you’re here. I need to let you in on a secret.” When Kurt nods and raises an eyebrow, Blaine continues, “I just found out that Cousin Rachel doesn’t eat meat.”

“What do you mean? I’ve never heard of that before. Does meat make her sick or something?”

Blaine shakes his head. “I know it sounds strange, but she doesn’t like the taste. I’m pressed for time, so I’ll let Mrs Sylvester know this afternoon. In the meantime, we have this little problem called luncheon. Would it be possible to serve her lots of vegetables and no meat?”

“Yes, Mr Blaine. I’ll arrange it so that I’m serving the meat and vegetables.”

“Another thing…. Cousin Rachel hates Brussels sprouts as well. She likes cabbage, so you can
maybe give her my portion?”

Blaine hears the chuckling as Kurt leaves his bedroom, and is glad that the footman is on board with his plan.

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After luncheon, Blaine heads downstairs to the kitchen, dreading the conversation he’s about to have with Mrs Sylvester. Kurt did a brilliant job of serving Cousin Rachel a mountain of vegetables (including his portion of cabbage) and not a single piece of meat was placed on her plate. He takes a deep breath before entering the kitchen, and stops when he hears the conversation.

“American ladies certainly have strange eating habits. Miss Berry seems to prefer bread and vegetables over meat,” Sebastian remarks.

“I’m sure she’s just adjusting after the long voyage from America. It takes the countess’ mother at least two weeks to sleep and eat properly after she arrives,” Mrs Hudson replies.

Blaine decides to enter the kitchen to avoid any further gossip. “It has nothing to do with adjusting after the long voyage. The thing is, Cousin Rachel doesn’t eat meat.”

“What do you mean she doesn’t eat meat? Doesn’t she know how lucky she is to have it served three times a day?” Sebastian asks.

“I know it sounds incredible, but it’s true, and you’ll need to accommodate her diet during her stay. What’s for dinner tonight?”

Mrs Sylvester sets down the rolling pin with a bang. “Venison pie. I don’t have enough time to change the dinner menu on account of Miss Berry! Only late this morning, the countess asked me to make a special trifle for dinner. Do you know how long it takes to prepare all the layers? No, I can’t change the menu on the whim of a teenage girl, no matter how important she may be.”

“Mrs Sylvester, calm down. I’m sure that you don’t have to change the menu for the entire family. You could make a special pie for Miss Berry,” Mrs Hudson suggests.

“What?! Serve a pie just filled with potatoes? What kind of dinner is that? The countess would not be happy.”

“It doesn’t really matter if my mother is happy. It’s about Cousin Rachel feeling at home at Westerville,” Blaine counters.

There’s a few minutes of silence as each person tries to figure out a solution.

“I know! We can make her a pie filled with vegetables,” Brittany proposes.

“And where will we find the time to make that on top of afternoon tea, the family’s meal and the trifle? I have no time for experimenting in the kitchen today,” Mrs Sylvester huffs.

“But I do,” Blaine replies. “If Brittany can make an extra pie crust, I’ll make the filling.”

“We couldn’t ask you to do that, Mr Blaine,” Mrs Hudson says.
“You’re not asking me… I’m offering my services. I’ll go to the kitchen gardens and see what other vegetables I can include in the pie besides potatoes.”

Blaine puts on his Barbour jacket that is hanging by the back entry and makes his way to the kitchen gardens, wondering how he’s going to make a vegetable pie. Sure, he has spent many an hour watching Mrs Sylvester and Brittany in the kitchen, and has learnt some basic culinary skills, but creating something new is ambitious. Yet he wants to do this for Cousin Rachel, his new friend. Blaine comes to a sudden halt when he discovers Kurt at the kitchen garden gate throwing Brittany’s large cat through the air.

“Scram, Lord Tubbington! I don’t even know why you hang about here. Go inside and find some mice!”

When Blaine chuckles, Kurt looks up. “Mr Blaine, I didn’t realize you were here. What can I do for you?”

As they enter the kitchen gardens and head towards the greenhouse, Blaine updates Kurt on the earlier discussion with Mrs Sylvester. “I’m not sure what I’m doing. I just know that I want to make Cousin Rachel happy and allow her to eat what she wants to eat.”

“I have an idea. Let’s pick some vegetables and I’ll help you make the pie. Of course, it will need carrots. Let’s see what else is ripe.”

Kurt collects a woven basket and heads up and down the aisles, selecting a few carrots, onions, cauliflower, and leeks. Blaine feels their fingertips accidentally brush together as they both go for the ripest broccoli head. Blaine thinks that the way Kurt blushes is adorable, and makes sure that further ‘accidents’ occur when they pick peas. They make their way to the newly-relocated herb section and Kurt snips off a few twigs of rosemary.

After inspecting the vegetables in the basket, Kurt sets down the gardening shears. “I think we have all the ingredients for a magnificent pie.”

Blaine follows Kurt’s lead from the greenhouse to the outdoor gardens. “Do you know how to cook, Kurt?”

“I know enough. You need to be a Jack of all trades when you live on a small farm. After the harvest, I spent many an hour in the kitchen helping my aunt can fruit and vegetables. Between the two of us, we’ll make a pie that is fit for a queen.”

Blaine isn’t so sure, but Kurt’s confidence rubs off on him as they race back to the abbey. Once they take off their jackets, Blaine notices what Kurt is wearing. The blue plaid flannel shirt accentuates Kurt’s eyes, and it is all he can do to not reach out and touch the soft material. The new trousers cling to his body, hinting at toned legs. Blaine shakes his head and walks toward the kitchen, somehow knowing he will be dreaming of Kurt tonight.

A section of the kitchen has been set up for Blaine, that includes a prepared pie pastry, a small bowl of chopped potatoes, and a pot simmering with vegetable stock. He takes a deep breath because he doesn’t know where to begin.

“The first thing we need to do is cook the vegetables. Why don’t you prepare the vegetables and I’ll work on the filling’s gravy.”
Blaine nods and takes a sharp knife, and attempts to peel the skin from the carrots. It’s more difficult than he thought and he’s having a hard time of it.

“Let me show you how to do it,” Kurt offers.

Blaine’s stomach stirs when he feels Kurt’s body behind him and Kurt’s face close to his cheek. Kurt wraps his fingers around Blaine’s hand and the knife. “Gentle strokes. You want to get rid of the outer skin, but keep as much of the carrot as you can.”

With each stroke of the knife, Blaine can feel Kurt’s body lean in towards him. It’s warm and sturdy, and with each movement, Blaine feels butterflies in his stomach. Kurt leans into him as he reaches for the next carrot, and Blaine can feel something hard against his buttocks. When Kurt immediately steps back, he realizes that it was Kurt’s cock… and it was erect.

“I think you’ve got the general idea. You can do the rest of the vegetables on your own,” Kurt says in a high breathy voice, and he quickly moves towards the hobs to start the pie’s gravy.

“Brittany, chop up and fry the onions for the blooming vegetable pie. We can’t have Mr Blaine reeking of raw onions at dinner.”

“Yes, Mrs Sylvester.”

Blaine continues to peel and dice the remainder of the vegetables, placing them in the large pot in the counter. Blaine knows that his body responds when he’s around Kurt, but he had no idea that Kurt might have similar problems.

When Brittany comes over to move the pot to the hobs, she whispers in his ear, “Kurt is a dolphin too.”

Blaine has learnt to disregard most of what Brittany says, but he’s curious about anything that has to do with Kurt. When he gives her a puzzled look, she merely replies, “Did you know that dolphins are just fairy sharks?”

Blaine can only think of two meanings for the word ‘fairy’ but the marine animal references don’t make sense. However, he’ll tuck this away and bring it up with Brittany when they’re alone and not so pressed for time.

Once the vegetables have sautéed and the filling gravy is ready, Blaine and Kurt quickly assemble the pie. Brittany comes over with rolled-out puff pastry and carefully places it over the top. It looks so mouthwatering that Blaine wishes that they had made one for him to eat as well.

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“This is the most delicious pie I’ve ever tasted. My compliments to the chef,” Cousin Rachel says after tasting her pie course. She then looks over at Blaine and mouths ‘thank you’.

Blaine preens at the compliment and is delighted that his vegetable pie is a success. He looks over at Kurt, who is also grinning, and winks.

“We usually have music for entertainment after dinner. Blaine is quite good at accompanying me while I sing,” Cooper remarks.
“Hiram has written to me many a time that Rachel sings like an angel. Perhaps you’ll perform for us one night?” Pamela asks.

“I would be delighted to perform for you. Would tonight be too soon?”

“We would be honored, my child. Blaine is quite accomplished on the piano and knows many pieces. I’m certain he’ll be able to accompany any song you choose.”

“This will be so much fun! Not only have I brought the musical sheets for all the songs I usually perform, but also the latest published.”

Blaine crosses his fingers and asks, “Did you bring any ragtime music? I love Scott Joplin.”

“Have you heard of Irving Berlin?” When Blaine shakes his head, Cousin Rachel continues. “If you like Scott Joplin, then you’ll love ‘Alexander's Ragtime Band’. I’ve also brought gramophone discs so we can listen to the new music, like The American Quartet.”

“We don’t have a gramophone.” Blaine slumps in his chair. He’s been begging for a gramophone, but his father wouldn’t hear of it. Why do we need recordings when we have you and Cooper to entertain us in the evenings?

“Oh, I see. Never mind, there’s enough sheet music to keep us entertained for a while. At least until the Season begins.”

The ladies take their leave, while the men remain for their customary port and tobacco. Blaine rolls his eyes when Cooper rants about being the second to perform this evening. Soon after, they join the ladies in the drawing room. Blaine’s nerves disappear when he sits down in front of the piano and sees the sheet music on the stand. Although he’s never played the Elsie Baker song before, he’s confident that he’ll be able to sight-read the music. When Cousin Rachel nods her head, Blaine plays the introductory notes.

I love you truly, truly dear,
Life with its sorrow, life with its tear
Fades into dreams when I feel you are near
For I love you truly, truly dear.

His mother is right - Cousin Rachel does have the voice of an angel. For someone who is 18 years old, she’s able to convey the emotions of someone twice her age. He can see Cooper get twitchy in his chair, not used to sitting on the sidelines. Blaine smirks, pleased that there is someone else taking the spotlight away from Cooper. As soon as he’s played the last notes of the song, Blaine starts clapping, and soon the rest of the family joins in.

“Bravo, my dear. That was simply wonderful,” Pamela exclaims.

“You do have a voice of an angel. I look forward to future recitals,” the earl adds.

“I hope you have some duets in your repertoire,” Cooper chips in.

“I do. Perhaps we can study my music sheets together and see what songs might showcase my musical talent,” Cousin Rachel replies.
“And mine as well,” Cooper reminds her. “Blaine, let’s show Cousin Rachel that we know a thing or two about music too.”

When Cooper sings the opening line to ‘When Irish Eyes are Smiling’, Blaine joins in on the piano. It looks like they are going to be in for a long night of performances.

Later that night, when Blaine is in bed, he can’t chase thoughts of Kurt off his mind. Kurt is unlike any man he’s met before. The highlights of his days are when Kurt is around. It’s not only how Kurt takes such good care of him in the mornings, but also how Kurt talks to him about anything and everything.

Although Kurt is only six months older than himself, he’s knowledgeable about so many things - gardening, fashion and cooking, to name a few. Blaine grimaces when thinking of his own skills - horse riding, music, and passing time with idle small talk.

Without question, Blaine finds Kurt an attractive man - the number of stiffies he has in Kurt’s presence is a testament to that. However, is it possible that Kurt finds him attractive as well? A warmth fills Blaine’s belly when thinking of Kurt’s erection pressing against him while they were peeling the carrots in the kitchen. And if this attraction is mutual, what will they do about it?

Chapter End Notes

Song Cousin Rachel sang - [I Love You Truly](https://example.com) performed by Elsie Baker (1912).

The photo at the top of the chapter is of the kitchen in Downton Abbey.

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: The rains have come in, but that doesn't stop Kurt and Blaine spending time in the kitchen gardens.
March 1914

Kurt

After finishing for the evening, Kurt goes up two flights of stairs to his room. He’s surprised not to find Mr Evans already sleeping in bed. He’s glad to be on his own for a change, because there’s a lot on his mind, and it’s all about Mr Blaine.

Kurt is pleased that Mr Blaine has confided in him about Miss Berry’s peculiar dislike of meat. His father always says that earning the trust of the family is important in this job. When Mr Blaine seemed overwhelmed about making a vegetable pie, Kurt was only too happy to help... until the incident.

Mr Blaine had looked so adorably frustrated when peeling the carrot - he had absolutely no idea what he was doing. It was only natural that Kurt offered to show him how to use the knife. When he curled his fingers around Mr Blaine’s soft hand and felt the warmth of his body, it made the lesson all that more appealing. However, it was when his face brushed along Mr Blaine’s smooth cheek that his body started to react to their close proximity. So why on earth did he pick that moment to lean forward to grab another carrot and press his cock against Mr Blaine’s buttocks?
Kurt covers his face with his hands in horror, knowing that Mr Blaine must have felt his erection. Of course, Mr Blaine was a perfect gentleman and didn’t comment on the unfortunate incident. He had acted as his usual self and even winked at Kurt during dinner. What does Mr Blaine think of him now? Will he be asked to leave Westerville Abbey in disgrace?

“Hi, Kurt. Are you okay?” Mr Evans asks when he enters their bedroom.

Kurt snaps his head up, startled out of his thoughts, and then collects himself enough to say, “I’m fine, Mr Evans.”

“You don’t look fine. A problem shared is a problem halved. I’m a good listener.”

Kurt knows of Mr Evans’s long-standing friendship with Mr Blaine. It couldn’t hurt to put out feelers to see if Mr Blaine has said anything to him. “I don’t think that Mr Blaine is very happy with me. I’m not sure if he wants my services any longer.”

“Are you kidding me? Mr Blaine loves you, Kurt. He’s always telling me how you’re the best footman at Westerville Abbey. As a matter of fact, I think Mr Blaine was disappointed that I drew his bath last night and not you.”

“It’s probably because he wanted a few drops of chamomile oil in the water.”

“See, what did I tell you? You’re good at your job, Kurt. I didn’t even know that Mr Blaine likes chamomile oil in his bath. What’s happened to make you think otherwise?”

Kurt feels a whole lot better, but he’s not going to relate the incident that happened in the kitchen. “Nothing, I suppose. There’s so much to learn about Mr Blaine. I’m just afraid that I’ll mess up.”

“I think you might be exactly what Mr Blaine needs, Kurt.”

Kurt doesn’t quite understand the playful smile that Mr Evans is giving him, but he’s nervous about where their talk is headed. It’s rare that he has any one-on-one time with Mr Evans, so Kurt decides to change the conversation. “Mr Hudson told me that he went to the village school with Mr Blaine. Did you attend there as well?”

“I certainly did. I’ve known Mr Blaine much longer than Finn has. I came to Westerville when I was eight years old.”

“I was the same age when my mother died. At the time, my father joined Westerville Abbey as the butler and I went to live on my uncle and aunt’s farm in Somerset.”

“It seems that we have a few things in common then. My father was Lord Anderson’s batman in the Boer War. During a battle, my father threw himself in front of Lord Anderson to save him from an enemy shell. He died from damage to his lungs caused by the blast.”

Mr Evans opens the top drawer of his dresser, and takes out something before returning to Kurt. “My father received both the Queen’s and King’s South Africa Medals. He died a hero.”

When Mr Evans opens his hands, Kurt can see the cherished medals. “Your father must have been very brave indeed. Can I ask about your mother?”

“Soon after the Boer War ended, my mother died of influenza.”

“I guess we do have a lot in common then. So how did you end up at Westerville Abbey?”
“His lordship had kept up with my mother, even sending her food hampers every Christmas. When my grandfather wrote to his lordship about my mother’s death, he insisted that I come and live at Westerville Abbey. After assuring my grandparents that there would always be a job for me here, Lord Anderson became my guardian and I moved to Westerville Abbey. It’s been my home ever since.”

“It must have been quite an adjustment,” Kurt remarks.

“It certainly was! I was just a scruffy lad from London’s East End. I’d never seen the countryside before and had never spoken to gentry. But Mr Blaine took me under his wing and helped me settle in.”

“What was Mr Blaine like when he was eight years old?”

“Looking back, I think Mr Blaine and I were exactly what each other needed at the time. I had always struggled at school and could barely read and write. Mr Blaine was so kind and patient, tutoring me on the weekends to help me catch up. Mr Blaine was a tiny shy lad, spending most of his time alone with a nose in a book. I made sure that he joined in the games with the other kids, and he quickly made new friends. The things that Mr Blaine and I used to get up to! Oh, those were the days. Mr Hummel almost had my hide once or twice. And there is nothing scarier than getting a stern talking to by Lord Anderson.”

“Who looked after you?” Kurt asked, wondering if it was his father.

“Mr Densmore, his lordship’s former valet.”

Things start clicking in place for Kurt - why Mr Evans came to Westerville Abbey on his own, Mr Evans and Mr Blaine’s friendship, and how Mr Evans was trained to become his lordship’s valet.

“Do you like your job as his lordship’s valet?”

“I hate it, Kurt. I enjoy looking after his lordship, but I don’t understand the obsession with clothes. I can never remember which cufflinks go with which shirt and with which suit. I’m pretty hopeless. The only thing that saves me are the crib sheets Mr Blaine made for me.”

Mr Evans goes to his dresser once again and takes out slips of paper before returning to Kurt. On each sheet is a drawing of one of Lord Anderson’s outfits, with the items listed below and when it’s to be worn. Kurt’s estimation of Mr Blaine grows tenfold with the efforts he’s made to help a childhood friend.

“If you don’t like being a valet, why don’t you tell his lordship?”

“His lordship gave me the job so that I would be an upper servant, and wouldn’t have to start at the bottom of the pecking order. If I ask for another job, Sebastian will become the valet, and he’ll give everyone downstairs grief.”

“I think you’re right about that,” Kurt chuckles.

“I’m afraid that my valet days may be short-lived, though. Lady Anderson has given me a stack of fashion magazines that Miss Berry brought with her from America. I’m to advise Mr Blaine on his new wardrobe for the London season. I can’t make head nor tail of what style would look good on Mr Blaine.”

“I can help you with that, Mr Evans. I love fashion. Why don’t I look over the magazines and advise you on the appropriate outfits for Mr Blaine’s new wardrobe?”
“You’d do that for me?”

“I’d enjoy it. Besides, it’s in my interests as well to have Mr Blaine look dapper during the London season. I look after him too.”

“Thanks, Kurt. You’re a real mate.”

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Although it’s early afternoon, it looks as if it’s dusk outside, with dark stormy clouds hanging low in the sky. The rain lashes against the windows, reminding Kurt that it’s best to leave the kitchen gardens for another day. He uses the time to pore over the fashion magazines, loving every moment.

“I cannot believe that girl!” Mercedes complains, when she sits down in the servants’ hall for the first time that day. “Miss Berry should be called Princess Berry with all her airs and demands.”

Kurt pours Mercedes a cup of tea and rubs her shoulders gently. “What has Miss Berry done now?”

“It’s the same old thing. I need to bring her tea and honey at 6 a.m. sharp, after she’s done her vocal warm-ups. It can’t be too hot because it might damage her delicate throat. But it can’t be too cold because it won’t have the soothing effect. I then have to draw her a bath after her exercises. The water ends up slopped all over the floor and that girl’s hair clogs up the drain. And this is all before 7 a.m.! She changes her mind what to wear at least a dozen times, leaving the discarded clothes in a heap on the floor. Her bell rings with the silliest of demands. Why, only last night, she rang after retiring to bed, informing me that her pillows weren’t plumped up enough.”

Not for the first time, Kurt is grateful to be looking after Mr Blaine, whose needs are much simpler. “Where is Miss Berry now?”

“She’s ‘braving the elements’ with a visit to the garage. Something about asking Mr Hudson about future excursions around Devonshire. Heaven help Mr Hudson. He’s such a friendly soul. He’ll soon be catering to her every whim and fancy as well.”

Kurt had noticed that Miss Berry was taken with Mr Hudson during their journey from Southampton. It’s rather interesting that she would want to spend time alone with him in the garage on a rainy afternoon.

“What are you reading, boo?”

“I’m looking through the fashion magazines that Miss Berry brought with her. Take a look at this photograph. The trousers are shorter in length than in previous years. They also have turn-ups and are creased in the front and back.”

“I see what you mean,” Mercedes says. After examining the article carefully, she adds, “The trousers look tighter fitting than Mr Blaine normally wears.”

“It’s called perfectly tailored, Mercedes. I think that Mr Blaine would look rather dashing in this sort of style.”

“Who would look dashing?” Mrs Hudson asks as she sits down for her afternoon tea break.

“Mr Blaine. Take a look at what American men are now wearing,” Mercedes replies, sliding the magazine in front of the housekeeper.
“You’re right. Mr Blaine would look very dapper in this suit. Somehow, I don’t think the dowager countess will approve, though,” Mrs Hudson chuckles.

“He’s not dressing for the dowager countess’ approval. Mr Blaine needs to catch the eyes of eligible young ladies,” Sebastian smirks.

They all look up, for they have forgotten that Sebastian was reading the paper at the other end of the table.

“Where did you get this magazine, Kurt?” Mrs Hudson asks.

“Mr Evans lent it to me. He has all the fashion magazines that Miss Berry brought with her. I’m advising him on fashion trends that would look good on Mr Blaine.”

“And where is Mr Evans now?”

“He’s at the stables with Mr Blaine and Wesley,” Sebastian reports. “What I wouldn’t do to be a fly on that wall. I’m sure they’re having a good old natter about things that go on at the abbey.”

“We should be minding our own business and doing less tongue-wagging ourselves,” Mrs Hudson admonishes.

Kurt notices Lord Tubbington rolling around in the corner. Nearby is the cat’s stuffed-pillow toy.

“What is wrong with that cat? It always acts so crazy.”

“That’s one of the universe's great questions,” Mrs Hudson replies.

“Well, Lord Tubbington is Brittany's cat, after all,” Mercedes giggles.

Their conversation stops when they hear the back-entry door open and shut. They all stand to attention when they see Miss Berry and a thoroughly drenched Mr Hudson.

“Finn! What have you done with poor Miss Berry!” Mrs Hudson chides.

“Nothing, Mother. Miss Berry came to the garage asking for information about the area. I only escorted her back to make sure she arrived safely.”

“Miss Berry, hand me your coat and your brolly. You must go upstairs and warm up, before you catch a cold. Mercedes will make you a pot of tea.”

“I’m fine, Mrs Hudson. Your son made sure I kept dry. Mercedes, I’ll need your assistance once you’ve made the tea. I plan to practice for this evening’s performance, and I shall need someone to turn the sheet music for me.”

“Yes, Miss Berry,” Mercedes replies in a clipped voice.

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Two days later…

The rains are still coming down hard, but Kurt cannot neglect the kitchen gardens any longer. The short journey is miserable with rain lashing down, and Kurt takes great care not to step into the puddles and mud. Fortunately, it’s perfectly dry inside the greenhouse. Kurt takes off his wet jacket and takes the old cardigan off the hook to keep warm. The cardigan is a cast off and fits a bit too snug, but it’s so soft to the touch that Kurt doesn’t mind. While he’s pruning the tomato plants, he feels a gust of wind as the greenhouse door opens.
“Mr Blaine! Is something wrong? You’re completely soaked!”

Mr Blaine takes off his cap and Kurt notices little curls forming at the nape of his neck. Kurt cannot stop thinking how messy and adorable Mr Blaine looks.

“I couldn’t stay at the abbey for a single second longer. Cooper and Cousin Rachel are driving me crazy! They are bickering about what songs to perform after dinner. As if that’s not enough, Cooper is trying to convince her to include dancing in their performance. Cousin Rachel firmly believes that the family should only be focused on their voices. I’ve had enough of the two of them!”

“This is the perfect place if you’re avoiding them. Lord Cooper and Miss Berry never come to the kitchen gardens. Let me take your mac and hang it up to dry.”

After Mr Blaine has undone the rain coat’s buttons, he shrugs it off and Kurt hangs it on one of the pegs along the wall. When Kurt notices that Mr Blaine is only wearing a thin shirt over his singlet, Kurt sheds the cardigan and holds it out for Mr Blaine to put on.

“I can’t take your cardigan, Kurt.”

“I was about to take it off anyways. This flannel shirt keeps me toasty warm.”

Blaine chuckles as he puts on the cardigan. “Did you know that this used to be my cardigan? It’s a wonder that it’s not too small for you. Although it now smells like you.”

“And what do I smell like?” Kurt asks.

“Like a dewy field of lavender,” Blaine says with a breathy voice.

“That’s because I use lavender soap. My aunt makes her own soap at the end of every summer. I brought some bars with me to Westerville.”

“So, what were you doing before I barged in?”

“I’m pruning the tomato plants. Why don’t you have a seat on the stool and I’ll get back to work.”

Kurt is surprised when Mr Blaine lifts the stool and carries it over to the workbench, plopping it down next to him. Mr Blaine blushes and says, “It’s much easier to chat when we’re closer together.”

Kurt continues the pruning, and explains, “By trimming all the suckers, the tomatoes will be larger and tastier.”

“May I try?”

Kurt hands over the pruners, and Blaine soon gets the hang of which suckers to trim off. Kurt hums to himself as he watches from a respectable distance.

“It’s so peaceful here. A perfect place to escape from Cooper and Cousin Rachel.”

“This is my favorite place at Westerville,” Kurt confesses. “In the kitchen gardens, I can be myself and escape from the rigid rules of the abbey. Besides, I love growing things that are tasty to eat and flowers that are beautiful to look at.”

“I have a favorite place at Westerville too,” Blaine admits. He takes a deep breath before he continues. “I love it for the exact same reasons. My life is filled with rigid rules as well.”
“But convention works in your favor. You’re not a servant.”

“That might be true, but it’s still stifling. My life is set out for me - what I should do, when and whom I should marry, and how I should conduct myself. Sometimes I need a place to escape and daydream. Perhaps one day, I’ll show you my secret place.”

“I’d like that very much, Mr Blaine. I hope that if you feel the need to escape, the kitchen gardens can be that place too.”

“Thank you, Kurt. I might take you up on that offer one day.”

Kurt returns Mr Blaine’s warm smile and there is a little awkwardness after their conversation. However, his attention is diverted when he sees Lord Tubbington creeping by, low to the ground as if he doesn’t want to get caught.

“Scram, Lord Tubbington!” Kurt cries as he picks up the cat and forces him out of the greenhouse. “I don’t know what it is about that cat. He’s forever sneaking into the kitchen gardens.”

“Well, it is Brittany’s cat. Just when it seems like there is no rhyme or reason to their ways, you discover that they are far cleverer than you give them credit for.”

“Maybe,” Kurt replies with skepticism in his voice. “I don’t understand why Mrs Sylvester allows the cat in the kitchen.”

“Mrs Sylvester will put up with a lot for the best mouse catcher in all of Westerville,” Mr Blaine chuckles.

“By the way, has Mr Evans given you his ideas about what’s in fashion now for gentlemen such as yourself?”

“You mean, has Evans given me your ideas?”

“I might have pointed out a picture or two to Mr Evans.”

“Evans has given you full credit. I do love the shorter trouser length with cuffs. I’m not so sure about the spats. It seems odd to wear an extra layer to hide an ankle.”

“Why don’t you try on a pair of spats when you visit the tailor? I think you’ll find that it completes the look.”

Mr Blaine nods and continues to prune the tomato plants. Kurt is surprised that Mr Evans has given him full credit for ideas for Mr Blaine’s new wardrobe. Other servants - namely, Sebastian - wouldn’t give him a mention. Although he’s enjoying Mr Blaine’s company, Kurt knows it’s probably time to head back into the abbey.

“What time is it, Mr Blaine?”

Mr Blaine takes out his pocket watch. “Goodness me, look at the time. I’ve been here for over an hour. I better get back to the abbey and get ready for afternoon tea.”

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“Come in, son,” Mr Hummel says when Kurt knocks at the butler’s office door before bedtime. Kurt is quick to notice that Mrs Hudson is already there and their tea cups are almost empty.

“It’s been raining cats and dogs the last few days. I hope you weren’t caught in the worst of it when
you went to the kitchen gardens.”

“I was fine, Mrs Hudson. It felt good to get out of the house and into fresh, albeit wet, air. The tomato plants really needed my attention.”

“And the attention of Mr Blaine as well?” Mr Hummel asks.

“No, Mr Blaine came of his own accord. He was escaping from Lord Cooper’s and Miss Berry’s music preparations.”

“I wish I could have escaped too. Mercedes was rushed off her feet all day. I think we’re all wanting the London season to start. It’ll give Miss Berry something to focus all her attention on,” Mrs Hudson remarks.

“How is Mr Blaine?” his father asks.

“When Mr Blaine first arrived at the greenhouse, he was very tense, but he soon relaxed when he realized that Lord Cooper and Miss Berry wouldn’t find him. We talked about the latest fashions in Miss Berry’s American magazines and what he might wish to have made at the tailor’s.”

“Excellent, son. You are gaining Mr Blaine’s trust. I too had an interesting conversation this afternoon. Mr Evans came to me requesting your presence at the tailor’s as well. He informed me that you have an excellent sense of fashion, and have been instrumental in gathering ideas.”

“Mr Evans flatters me,” Kurt replies.

“Nonsense, Kurt. I’ve seen you poring over the magazines while Mr Evans has been having his fun at the stables with Wesley. You deserve to go to Exeter with Mr Blaine and Mr Evans,” Mrs Hudson retorts.

“The trip is set for next month. I’ll inform Mr Blaine that you’ll be accompanying them.”

Kurt can tell that his father’s statement is to be the last words on the matter. He quickly bids his father and Mrs Hudson goodnight, noticing that although everyone has finished their tea, Mrs Hudson isn’t making a move to leave. Kurt is convinced that there’s more going on inside their hearts than discussing abbey matters.

When Kurt retires to his room, Mr Evans is still awake, reading the Night Bird book.

“Mr Evans, thank you for talking to Mr Hummel and Mr Blaine. I’ll be joining you on the trip to Exeter next month.”

“Thank heavens. I’m hoping that you’ll do all the advising,” Mr Evans replies.

Kurt nods. “Don’t worry about it. I’m sure Mr Blaine will leave Exeter with the proper wardrobe for the London season fully planned.”

Kurt goes to the washtub and starts washing his face with his aunt’s lavender soap. He smiles, remembering the conversation in the greenhouse. He’s surprised that Mr Blaine has noticed what he smells like, and judging by his expression, he likes the scent as well. As far as Kurt’s concerned, nothing is better than the scent of Mr Blaine - sandalwood and coffee and something that is uniquely him.

Kurt’s eyes droop and he’s soon fast asleep, dreaming of being in Mr Blaine’s secret special place with him.
I hit the jackpot when I found out that men’s trousers were shorter, cuffed and tighter fitting in this time period!

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: Blaine learns more about his Uncle Hiram and his father confides in him after dinner.
March 1914
Blaine

“Another gloomy rainy day?” Blaine asks when Kurt enters his bedroom in the morning.

“No, the storm has passed. It looks like it’s going to be a glorious day,” Kurt replies, opening the heavy curtains to let the sunlight in.

“Thank goodness for that. I’m going stir crazy inside the house.”

For the past five days, Blaine has been housebound as the rains have been pouring down. He has spent his mornings at the stables with Firebird, Wesley and sometimes Sam, but it has been too wet and windy to ride. In the afternoons, he’s played the piano and read novels. What he wanted to do was spend time with Cousin Rachel, however, she has been otherwise engaged. His mother and Quinn have monopolized her time with talk of the Season, and discussing the various eligible gentlemen that would be attending the balls. Blaine has made a point of avoiding the conversation, for fear that they would switch the discussion to eligible ladies.

When Cousin Rachel wasn’t with the women, she could be heard in the library performing her vocal exercises. It only got worse yesterday, when Cooper decided to join her. Soon they were arguing about what songs to sing and whether to include dance in their performances.

Blaine had walked along the corridors both upstairs and downstairs, hoping to bump into Kurt, but he was never in sight. That was until he’d had enough of his brother and cousin, and escaped to the kitchen gardens. He had enjoyed talking with Kurt, finding out a little more about him. Blaine had surprised himself talking about his special place by the lake. He’s never even told Sam about that. What is it about Kurt that pulls Blaine in like a magnet and makes him feel so at ease that he spills his innermost secrets? Blaine is plotting how he could contrive Kurt coming to the lake when his thoughts are disrupted.

“Will you be riding today, Mr Blaine?” Kurt asks.

“Most definitely. I’m hoping that Cousin Rachel will join me.”
“I’ll set out your riding attire, then.”

While sipping his tea in bed, Blaine carefully observes Kurt taking out his riding gear from the wardrobe. His favorite part is when Kurt bends down to find his boots. However, Blaine frowns when he sees that Kurt winces when standing up again.

“When’s something wrong, Kurt? Did you pull something while you were gardening?”

“No, I tripped and fell last night after dinner. I can be so clumsy. Thank goodness I wasn’t carrying a tray, but of course it had to happen in front of Sebastian. It’s just a bruise on my shoulder, so I’ll be all right.”

Blaine goes to his bathroom and returns with a jar of arnica salve. “I’ve fallen off Firebird plenty of times and this is just the thing to heal bruises. Let me rub some on you.”

Kurt takes off his jacket, unbuttons his shirt and lets the material drop down from his shoulder. Blaine’s mouth goes dry when he sees Kurt’s pale smooth skin and, just for a moment, he wonders what Kurt would look like naked. Blaine immediately stops gawking when he sees the angry-looking bruise.

“That really looks sore,” Blaine observes. He takes a dab of arnica salve and gently applies it to the area. Kurt’s skin really is as soft and silky as it looks. “Why didn’t you want this to happen in front of Sebastian? I would have thought Sebastian would find it highly amusing.”

“Nothing I do is amusing to Sebastian. It just confirms to him that I’m hopeless as a footman... as if he didn’t remind me of that constantly every day.”

“Pay no attention to Sebastian. You’re excellent at your job.”

When the salve has been thoroughly applied, Blaine reluctantly takes his fingers off Kurt before he gets carried away, and wipes his hand on a nearby towel. “Take the salve with you and apply it three times a day. It will be better before you know it.”

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At breakfast, Cousin Rachel confirms that she too wishes to ride and they race each other to see who’ll be ready first. After Blaine has changed into his riding attire, he waits to hear footsteps running along the corridor before leaving his bedroom. Cousin Rachel seems like the type of person who likes to win, and Blaine is nothing but a gentleman.

They quickly mount their horses and set off for the fields where they had ridden last week. “Last one at the lake is a rotten egg!” Rachel shouts, leaning forward and making clucking noises at Bluebell.

Although Blaine has allowed Cousin Rachel to beat him downstairs earlier, he’s absolutely not going to allow her to win a race on a horse. He loosens the reins and his thighs squeeze Firebird, who starts galloping and speeds past Bluebell. When Cousin Rachel arrives at the lake, Blaine has already dismounted and laid out the blanket under the oak tree.

“It’s not fair. Firebird is larger than Bluebell!” Cousin Rachel pouts.

Blaine smirks, knowing that it’s his Sandhurst training and polo tournaments that helped him win the race, but he’s too polite to suggest this to her. As soon as Cousin Rachel is sitting down on the blanket, Blaine pours the hot tea into the mugs and sets out the buttered currant buns.
“Do you swim in the lake during the summer?” Cousin Rachel asks.

“Yes, I do. Although, on a hot summer’s day, we can go to the coast. Devonshire is famous for its beaches.”

“Swell! It’ll be like the Hamptons in Long Island. We have an ocean-front house in Sag Harbor, and Papa, Uncle LeRoy and I always spend the month of July there.”

“I haven’t heard of an Uncle LeRoy before. Is he your late mother’s brother?”

“No, he’s not actually my uncle. He’s like another father to me. Uncle LeRoy is my father’s companion. He’s always been part of the family. Uncle LeRoy came to live with us when I was one year old.”

“I’ve only heard of single ladies having companions. Is Uncle LeRoy more like a manservant?”

“He’s more like papa’s best friend whom he loves and respects. When my mother died in childbirth, Papa wouldn’t dream of taking another wife. He preferred to spend time at his gentlemen’s club, which is where they met. Uncle LeRoy is from a well-to-do family, but as the fourth son, he was struggling with his meager allowance. Papa insisted that he come live with us, and that’s where Uncle LeRoy has been ever since. They enjoy doing the same things, such as attending the opera and the like. It’s quite unusual to see Papa without Uncle LeRoy by his side.”

“Don’t other people find their friendship rather odd?”

Rachel laughs. “It is odd, Cousin Blaine, but they love each other and it works. Mostly, other people turn a blind eye at them, for they are perfectly behaved gentlemen.”

“It’s a good thing they don’t live in England. I’m certain that they would get tongues wagging.”

“Don’t forget that Papa is a very wealthy man and both he and our granny wield influence in New York’s society. There’s one law for the rich and another for the poor.”

“Cousin Rachel, when you say they love each other…”

“There’s all sorts of love, Cousin Blaine. The love of a married couple is public, but there are other loves that are more private. What I’ve learned is that no kind of love is wrong. Hate of our fellow man is what we should be worried about.”

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Blaine is reading the Gentleman's Magazine of Fashion, and considering Kurt’s advice about the trousers. Should he really wear them more tightly fitted? His thoughts are interrupted when Sam enters the library.

“Mr Hummel said that you wanted a word with me. You should know by now that Kurt is the one if you want fashion advice.”

“No, it has nothing to do with fashion. That was well played when you asked Hummel if Kurt could come to Exeter with us. It has to do with something else altogether. Kurt stumbled and fell in front of Sebastian yesterday, and I can’t help but wonder if Sebastian was the cause of it.”

“I wouldn’t put it past Sebastian. He’s always making trouble. He has it out for Kurt…. Constantly telling Kurt how useless he is in front of the other staff, giving him the worst jobs that Sebastian should be doing himself. Things like that.”
“I thought as much, although Kurt is far too polite to say an unkind word about anyone. Do you think it’s because Kurt’s father is the butler? That somehow Sebastian wants to keep him in his place?”

“That has something to do with it, but I think it has more to do with the time he spends with you.”

“With me? How can Kurt not spend time with me? He’s the second footman; it’s his job to spend time with me.”

“It hasn’t gone unnoticed that you spend time together in the kitchen gardens, or here in the library discussing fashion. Sebastian is jealous… He’s not a ladies’ man.”

“Sam, are you telling me that Sebastian is one of those men who likes to be intimate with other men?”

“You got it. I think that Kurt might be inclined that way as well.”

“You surely aren’t suggesting that Sebastian and Kurt are involved!”

“God, no, Mr Blaine. For someone so smart you can be very slow to catch on. The way Kurt talks about you at night in our bedroom, he’s like a schoolgirl with a crush. I’m saying that Kurt is sweet on you and Sebastian thinks of him as a rival.”

It quickly dawns on Blaine what Sam is really telling him, and heat pools in his stomach, thinking that Kurt may actually think of him in that way. “You will tell me if the situation gets worse for Kurt?”

“Yes, I will. You’re not going to get them fired, are you?” Sam asks nervously. “Neither Sebastian or Kurt would make advances on you, and Kurt has learned how to take Sebastian’s jabs in stride.”

Blaine shakes his head. “No, they are both excellent in their jobs. Besides, I think everyone has their own secrets. Speaking of which, how are things going with Mercedes?”

Sam confides to him that no progress has been made, as he’s too shy to let Mercedes know about his feelings. Blaine listens sympathetically, but his thoughts constantly drift to Kurt and how he might feel the same way as he does.

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Blaine has a coughing fit when Cooper lights up his cheroot and blows a puff of smoke in his face.

“Cooper, behave yourself,” the earl admonishes. “Could you pass the port, Hummel?”

Hummel pours the port wine into small crystal-cut glasses for the menfolk, and sets out a platter of cheese and crusty bread.

“That will be all, Hummel. Leave the port decanter on the table and we can help ourselves.”

“Very good, my lord,” Hummel replies. Before he closes the dining room doors, Roly runs in and sits by his master’s chair. The earl scratches behind the Labrador retriever’s ears, which elicits a thumping tail.

“There’s something we need to discuss with you, Blaine. The upcoming Westerville Ball and London season will be significant cash outlays. There are new wardrobes, extra staff needed, and the expenses associated with spending the Season in London.”
Blaine is surprised at his father’s remark, for he’s never spoken about money with him before. Financial matters are usually discussed with his counsel and Cooper behind closed doors in the study. “I’ll do what I can to help; I can forgo the new wardrobe and stay in Westerville during the London season if that helps,” Blaine replies.

“Nonsense, my boy. We’ll have none of that. It’s even more imperative than before that you attend the London season. You see, some of my investments haven’t done so well.”

“Perhaps granny in America can help?” Blaine suggests.

“If only,” Cooper mutters.

“I’d better start at the beginning,” the earl replies. He takes a sip of his port before he continues.

“Your mother brought to our marriage a sizable dowry, that in normal circumstances, would allow the Westerville estate to continue for generations. However, in 1894, the House of Parliament introduced a new type of duty, which the estate would have to pay upon my death and every successor’s. At the time, I appealed to your American granny for additional funds, but she wasn’t able to help. The remainder of her late husband’s estate is tied up in trust and will be passed to your Uncle Hiram upon her death. There is simply nothing she can do.”

“Can some of mama’s dowry be used to pay the estate tax?”

“That’s a good idea, Blaine, but there’s more to the story,” Cooper says shaking his head.

The earl continues the tale. “Based on advice of my good friends in the House of Lords, I invested in the Canadian Grand Trunk Railway, which is laying thousands of miles of new track. It’s supposed to be a financial success when it links with the train network across the border in the United States. And of course, a war would mean a huge expansion of railways everywhere. Every forecast was certain. Rail shares were bound to make a fortune.”

“It sounds like a great investment, so what happened?” Blaine asks.

“A little thing called British Columbia,” Cooper says bitterly. “After British Columbia joined Canada, the government forced the company to extend its railway network to the pacific coast. There was major cash needed to build additional tracks, and it wasn’t managed well. Unfortunately, there’s little income from the cargo using these lines.”

The earl gets up from his seat and starts pacing. “It’s the main railway in British North America, for god’s sake! It wasn't just me. Everyone said we couldn't lose! We knew hard times were coming for estates like Westerville, and this investment would make it secure for the rest of time.”

“What’s changed then? I don’t understand,” Blaine replies.

“Rumor has it that the company will soon go bankrupt and the railway will be nationalized. The investment isn’t worth the paper it’s printed on,” the earl says bitterly.

“Are you really telling me that all the money is gone?” Blaine asks.

“I'm afraid so - the bulk of your mother’s money has been lost. Once again, Westerville’s future is not secure. I have spoken to my counsel at length about this, and their only suggestion is that the estate could be broken up and sold.”

“It sounds very serious,” Blaine remarks.
"I am expressing myself badly if you think it is not serious. I won't give in, Blaine! I've sacrificed too much to Westerville to give in now. I refuse to be the failure, the earl who dropped the torch and let the flame go out."

"But what will you do?" Blaine whispers.

"There is a way around this disaster, and it has to do with you," Cooper chimes in.

The earl sits back down at the dining table and lights his pipe. "Blaine, as you know, you’ll be attending the London season with a view of finding a suitable wife. The suitable wife now must have a dowry of sufficient size to keep Westerville financially secure."

"And do you know an eligible lady that not only has a large dowry but isn’t interested in a title and estate?" Blaine asks.

"Not yet, but both your grandmama and I are putting out feelers about the families whose daughters are coming out this Season. We’ll identify those ladies with large dowries who might be willing to marry a second son."

Blaine doesn’t like the way his father referred to him as a second son, someone who doesn’t have anything to offer. "Does Mama know?"

"I refuse to tell her until we have ladies identified. I can’t be the bearer of bad news without some hope for a speedy resolution."

"I keep telling father that Mama needs to be part of the plan. After all, there’s Cousin Rachel. There’s no law forbidding you to marry her," Cooper says.

Blaine’s eyebrows jump up to the top of his head. Is Cooper really suggesting that he marries Cousin Rachel?

The earl shakes his head. "Your Uncle Hiram sent her to stay with us so that she could find a titled husband, not to marry her cousin with no estate, and move to the backwaters of India. It would be difficult to find an American heiress for Blaine in his circumstances. No, I think we shall try to find a British wife, even if she’s Scottish. Do you understand what is expected of you, Blaine?"

Blaine slowly gulps and nods.

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"Is anything wrong, Mr Blaine? You look rather pale," Kurt remarks as he tends to the bedroom fireplace at the end of the evening.

"I’m just thinking about the discussion I had with my father and Cooper after dinner. There seems to be no end of talk about the London season at the abbey."

"It must be so exciting to think about attending the Westerville ball and the London season."

"It seems to me like endless rounds of parties and teas. Changing numerous times a day and talking idly with young ladies. I’ll be at Mama’s beck and call for all manner of things. I’m also expected to find a suitable wife."

"But what better way to find a wife, Mr Blaine. I’m sure you’ll have the pick of the crop with your dashing good looks and gentlemanly ways." Kurt places a hand over his mouth and blushes.
“You think I have dashing good looks?” Blaine teases.

“Err… I…”

Blaine feels badly that he’s put Kurt in this position, and adds, “Never mind, Kurt. I think you’re handsome too.”

“You do?” Kurt replies.

Blaine can’t believe that he called Kurt handsome to his face. What on earth was he thinking? And does Kurt have a hopeful look on his face? Or is Kurt teasing him back?

“You wouldn’t be a footman if you weren’t handsome.” Blaine quickly busies himself with taking off his suit jacket and bowtie, hoping this will end the awkward conversation.

“Would you like some help washing the pomade from your hair, Mr Blaine?”

“Yes, please. You do a much better job of it than I do,” Blaine replies with a chuckle.

Blaine walks over to the washstand and bends his head forward. He can feel the warm water poured slowly over his crown, and the press of Kurt’s long and slender fingers loosening his curls. Each stroke feels so good that Blaine can feel his body react to it. Kurt places a towel over Blaine’s head and starts to dry his hair.

“All done, Mr Blaine.”

Blaine stands still while Kurt’s fingers comb through his hair, trying to control the craziness.

“Say, Kurt, have you ever heard of a gentleman having a male companion before?”

“No, I haven’t. Why?”

“Cousin Rachel told me this morning that her father has his best friend living with them.”

“Do you think that this male companion might be… well, someone uniquely special to her father? Say, someone whom he loves in an uncommon way?”

“That’s what I thought, but maybe they do things differently in America,” Blaine suggests.

“New York must be a wonderful place,” Kurt sighs.

“What do you mean, Kurt?”

Kurt’s wistful expression changes. “It seems as if our lives are dictated by a rigid class structure, setting out what we can and cannot do… What’s expected of us. It’s wonderful to think that there’s a place in this world where you can be who and what you want to be.” Kurt shakes his head and adds, “I wouldn’t expect you to understand.”

“You’re not the only one whose life is dictated by a rigid class structure. I’m the one who has to find a suitable wife by the end of August, even if I don’t want to.”

Kurt giggles and replies, “I hadn’t thought of it like that before, Mr Blaine.”

“Kurt, you won’t breathe a word of this to anyone, will you?”

“No, I won’t, Mr Blaine. I’m not one for idle gossip.”
“No, of course you’re not. Shall I expect you at the usual time tomorrow morning?”

“Yes. Good night, Mr Blaine.”

Once Kurt leaves his bedroom, Blaine changes into his night clothes and finishes his nightly routine. He climbs into bed, picks up his book and settles in for his usual bedtime read. However, after reading the same paragraph a dozen times, he sets it down and turns off the light.

Like him, Kurt assumed that his Uncle Hiram’s relationship with LeRoy is homosexual in nature. That would explain why Uncle Hiram has never remarried. Kurt hadn’t looked bothered by it at all. As a matter of fact, he seemed to embrace the idea that you could live outside the expected social norms. Blaine likes the idea of having Kurt as a long-term companion, spending days and nights doing things together. He quickly shuts down these thoughts, though, because it could never happen in his lifetime. The Westerville estate is counting on him to find a wealthy wife.

His father and Cooper were very clear about the problems surrounding the estate’s future. Blaine knows what is expected of him, but that doesn’t mean he likes it. Although he adores Quinn and thinks of her as an older sister, he cannot help but wish that she had a large dowry. It would certainly have taken the pressure off him. But no amount of wishing is going to have large pots of money appearing with a magic wand. He’ll do what is expected of him, and seek out the ladies suggested to him. He lets out a deep sigh when he realizes that by this time next year, a wife will be by his side in bed.

Chapter End Notes

Homosexual acts were punishable offenses, in both Britain and the United States in 1914. It’s quite difficult to imagine how two men could be in a committed relationship during this time period. Hopefully, Rachel’s dads’ story is plausible and helps Kurt and Blaine think about their sexuality in a different light. Let me know how I’m doing with it. Positive and constructive comments are appreciated.

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: A trip to Exeter.
Kurt wakes up earlier than usual, far too excited to sleep much last night. Not only will he being visiting Exeter for the first time, but he’ll be going to the tailor’s shop. For the past month, all his spare time has been consumed with what fashionable gentlemen will be wearing at the upcoming London season. Fortunately, this has allowed him to spend one-on-one time with Mr Blaine in the library.

Mr Blaine has proactively sought out Kurt, asking him for advice. They’ve pored over the American fashion magazines, laughing at some of the bold suits and bookmarking others. They spent an afternoon together sorting through Mr Blaine’s wardrobe to see what could still work, and discarding clothes that no longer fit or are outdated. To make up for lost time, Mr Blaine had insisted that he help in the kitchen gardens’ greenhouse. Kurt cherishes these times spent with Mr Blaine, for it seems like they are friends and not a gentleman with his footman. Mr Blaine has a way of making Kurt feel as if his opinion matters.

As Kurt waits in the dining room for the family to come down for breakfast, he gently presses his fingers on his left shoulder. His fading bruise is still tender. His pulse quickens and his face flushes when he remembers the morning last week when Mr Blaine discovered the bruise.

He had felt terribly self-conscious when Mr Blaine asked him to reveal the bruised area. Kurt knows his skin is paler than most, and that he’s often been called skinny. Mr Blaine kept staring at him, and it was all Kurt could do to stand still and not run away and hide in some dark corner. When Mr Blaine began applying the arnica salve, his touch was so gentle and caring. Kurt had no
idea that the brush of the fingertips could feel so sexy.

“Good morning, once again, Kurt,” Mr Blaine greets him, and he quickly piles his plate from the buffet table. Once his plate is laden with toast, eggs, bacon, sausage, cooked tomatoes and mushrooms, Mr Blaine sits in his usual spot at the dining table. Sebastian is quick to grab the teapot and head toward the table.

“Shall you require my services today, Mr Blaine? It only seems right that the first footman accompanies the earl’s son and niece on such an important trip to Exeter.”

“No, thank you, Sebastian. Kurt is well versed in fashion, so he’s the perfect footman to accompany me on the trip to Exeter. Besides, Evans will be there as well, so we shall be in capable hands. It will be a comfort to know that the first footman will be looking after the rest of the family at Westerville.”

Kurt can barely hide a smirk when he sees the sour expression on Sebastian’s face. Kurt decides that now is the time to demonstrate that he is more than capable of tending to Mr Blaine. He takes the small covered bowl that he has hidden away and carries it over to Mr Blaine.

“Kurt! Are these the Heinz baked beans?” Blaine exclaims when Kurt takes off the domed lid.

“Yes, the very ones you purchased in Southampton. It took me a while to convince Mrs Sylvester to open the tin, let alone prepare them for your breakfast.”

Kurt patiently waits for the verdict as Mr Blaine uses his fork to take a mouthful of baked beans. “These beans taste wonderful. They are in some sort of tomato sauce - not too sweet, but not too tangy. I should have bought a hundred tins in Southampton!”

“Why don’t I look for them in Exeter today when you’re busy with Mr Evans at the tailor’s?”

Mr Blaine gives him a questioning look, but smiles when Sebastian comes closer to inspect the beans. “What an excellent idea, Kurt. I can give you the names of grocers that might have them in stock.” Mr Blaine then turns to Sebastian and adds, “Yes, I’ll be in very capable hands during my trip to Exeter.”

Kurt preens at the compliment and he walks with a certain swagger to the breakfast buffet to resume his position. Soon the rest of the family pour in, helping themselves to breakfast, and chatting.

“Do you have the list of outfits and accessories you’ll need to order?” Lady Anderson asks her son.

“Yes, Mama. It’s going to be a busy day judging by how long the list is.”

“Make sure you try on a pair of spats. Cousin Rachel says that all the American men are wearing them,” Lady Quinn remarks.

The earl huffs. “I don’t see the point of having short trousers when you have to wear something to cover up the gap.”

“You wouldn’t expect Blaine to show off his ankles!” Lady Anderson exclaims.

“What are you planning to order in Exeter, Rachel?” the earl asks.

“I had a completely new wardrobe made in New York before leaving, but I’m going to order one new hat.”
“I wish I was going with you. Martin’s Millinery Shop has such wonderful things,” Lady Quinn sighs.

“My dear, you were at the tailor’s at least once a week over the past month ordering new frocks, gowns and whatnots,” Lord Cooper replies. “You know we’re expected at Dower House for luncheon. Grandmama would be most disappointed if you aren’t there,” Cooper says.

“I know, Cooper. Of course I will remain behind and go to Dower House with you.”

“Perhaps Rachel would prefer to go another day, when she won’t need to hang about waiting for Blaine to finish at the tailors,” Lady Anderson suggests.

“Oh no!” Miss Berry exclaims. “I’ve been looking forward to this trip for ages. Besides, my father has ordered a surprise, which I need to collect.”

“Then today you shall go to Exeter,” Lady Anderson states.

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Kurt is grateful that the journey to Exeter takes just under an hour, for he’s wedged in the front seat between Mr Hudson and Mr Evans. Mr Blaine and Miss Berry are comfortably seated in the backseat, and Kurt listens to their chatter.

“Are you sure you don’t wish me to accompany you to the millinery shop, Cousin Rachel?”

“No, I think you’ll need to spend all your time at the tailor’s. Why doesn’t Hudson come with me after dropping you off?”

“But Hudson knows nothing about ladies’ hats.”

“Neither do you, Cousin Blaine,” Miss Berry giggles. “I know exactly what I want. Hudson and I will meet you at the tailor’s at 1 p.m. for lunch.”

“I know the very place to take you, Cousin Rachel. The Royal Clarence Hotel in the Cathedral Yard does a very nice lunch. Did you know that it was the first place to be called a hotel in all of England?”

“It sounds very nice, but can I be honest with you? I could go to the Royal Clarence Hotel with your mother and Lady Quinn any time. I would much prefer to go to an English pub. I’ve heard so much about them, and that way, Hudson, Evans and Kurt could join us.”

“I don’t know…”

“We could take Miss Berry to the Ship Inn,” Mr Hudson chimes in.

“I’m not sure my mother would approve,” Mr Blaine sighs.

Kurt notices a road sign for Exeter and is surprised when they don’t take the turning. “Mr Hudson, the sign we just passed said the road for Exeter was to the right.”

Mr Hudson stops the car to get his bearings. “You’re right, Kurt.”

“Hang on, everybody,” Kurt shouts just before Mr Hudson makes a U-turn.

Once they are on the correct road to Exeter, the conversation continues. “Please, Cousin Blaine. Could we eat lunch at the Ship Inn?” Miss Berry pleads.
“Sir Francis Drake used to drink at the Ship Inn. I guess we could call it a history lesson,” Mr Blaine rationalizes.

“Why don’t we meet at 1 p.m. in front of the Ship Inn, then?” Mr Hudson suggests as they enter Exeter’s town center.

“We’ll be there, Hudson,” Mr Blaine confirms. When the car stops in front of the tailor’s, Kurt and Mr Evans jump out of the car, and Kurt dashes to the back to open the door for Mr Blaine.

“Kurt, I need a word with Mr Evans. I’ll just be a moment.”

While Mr Blaine and Mr Evans talk in whispers, Kurt looks around Winter Street. It’s not as busy as Southampton, but it seems to have every type of shop imaginable. He looks into the shopfront of Thomas Moore’s, the tailor’s, and he can see bolts of fabrics neatly stacked.

“Goodbye, Mr Blaine. I’ll see you at 1 p.m.,” Mr Evans confirms as he heads down the street.

“Isn’t Mr Evans coming with us to the tailor?” Kurt asks.

“No, he’ll be hunting all over Exeter for Heinz baked beans. Sebastian will never be the wiser that you’ve swapped duties for the day,” Mr Blaine says and winks.

When they enter the tailor’s, a bell chimes, and an elderly gentleman comes out from the back. “Mr Anderson, you’re exactly on time.”

“Good morning, Mr Moore. We have a busy day ahead of ourselves. Allow me to introduce you to Kurt. He’s acting as my advisor.”

“Westerville has a new valet?” Mr Moore asks.

“Mr Evans is still the valet; however, he’s otherwise detained today. You’ll find that Kurt is quite knowledgeable about men’s fashion.”

Kurt hands the list of wardrobe requirements to Mr Moore. After studying the list, the tailor suggests, “Let’s start with the formal wear. A black cutaway morning coat with striped trousers is what every gentleman will wear during this Season’s balls. A white double-breasted waistcoat, white bow tie, and white shirt will complete the outfit. I made his lordship a new formal suit only a few months ago and your mother selected materials of the highest quality. May I suggest that we use the same fabrics for you?”

“That sounds like a good idea, Mr Moore.”

“I also see that a new outfit for fox hunts is on the list. The attire is rather traditional. Shall I make it up in the same fabrics as Lord Anderson?”

“Yes. I’ll be expected to have the same outfit as my father… the red one.”

Kurt is becoming increasingly frustrated and restless. What was the point of poring over the magazines if Mr Blaine was going to dress like Lord Anderson?

“I see that you’ll need three outfits for less formal occasions. There is a wide choice of fabrics available.”

“Kurt, what do you suggest?” Blaine asks.

“Mr Moore, do you have any fabrics that are a mixture of cashmere and worsted wool?”
“Excellent suggestion. Worsted wool is hard-wearing and retains its shape, and the cashmere makes the fabric extremely soft and most comfortable during the summer months.”

The tailor sets out numerous bolts of fabrics on the table. After examining and touching the fabrics, Mr Blaine whispers to Kurt, “You have to help me out. I have no idea which fabrics to choose.”

Kurt immediately pulls out a bolt of charcoal-grey material. “I think that a **sack coat, trousers and waistcoat** should be made from this material. And then perhaps Mr Moore could suggest the best quality black material that he has in stock. This way you can mix and match the pieces to suit your mood and the event.”

“Let me get this right. I could wear the black sack coat with the grey trousers and waistcoat, or wear all black for semi-formal occasions?” Mr Blaine asks.

“Exactly,” Kurt confirms.

“What a marvelous idea. It’ll seem as if I have more than two outfits. Any suggestions for the third sack coat?”

“It’s usual to have a tweed sack coat in a gentleman’s wardrobe for visits to country estates,” Mr Moore advises.

“Then let’s look at the tweed fabrics,” Mr Blaine replies.

“Do you have any Harris tweed fabrics, Mr Moore?” Kurt asks.

“Someone has been doing their research. Would you like to see the more traditional herringbone material or the new plaids?” the tailor inquires.

“The plaids if you please.”

The tailor sets out the bolts of Harris tweed fabrics on the table and Kurt notices Mr Blaine’s eye zoom to a **camel-colored material** that is interwoven with lines of blue, green and red. Kurt pulls out the bolt and says, “Do you like this one, Mr Blaine? I think a sack coat in this material would look very good on you.”

Mr Blaine positively beams. “I love this fabric, and it certainly isn’t something that my father or Cooper would wear. It will set me apart.”

Mr Blaine is quiet as Mr Moore and Kurt select a fabric for the trousers and waistcoat to complete the outfit. The tailor looks at the list that was handed him earlier. “The last outfit you’ll need is more informal, for boating or other casual activities. Traditionally, the outfit consists of a navy-blue blazer and a pair of light-colored trousers.”

“Can you show us some navy-blue materials with a pattern?” Kurt asks.

Once again, the tailor brings over bolts of material and Kurt carefully watches Mr Blaine. When his eyes linger on a particular bolt, Kurt quickly picks it out. “Miss Berry told me that **striped flannel blazers** are what gentlemen are wearing in the Hamptons. The white pinstripe in this material is not as bold as what we’ve seen in the American magazines. It’s very fashionable, yet discrete. The vertical stripes will also give an illusion of height.”

“I need all the help I can get,” Blaine chuckles. “I like this fabric. Let’s use it.”

Kurt works diligently with the tailor to select the shirt materials. He takes bolts to the window to
examine the weave before presenting a selection for Mr Blaine’s approval. “I think these materials are the best for your shirts. They are the finest quality and they will launder well.”

Mr Moore nods in agreement. “Kurt really has an eye for fine quality, Mr Anderson.”

“Then these are the materials we should use,” Blaine confirms.

“Kurt has the makings of a tailor himself.”

Kurt blushes at the tailor’s compliment. Mr Moore couldn’t possibly know that his dream was once to be a tailor. However, that ship sailed when his father’s health took a turn for the worse. “Thank you very much, but I’m very happy working at Westerville Abbey as a footman.”

“Perhaps you could be a tailor’s assistant for the next task? I need to measure Mr Anderson and it will be a lot quicker if you record the measurements as I call them out.”

“Certainly, Mr Moore. I would be more than happy to help.”

Mr Moore leads them to the back of the store where there is a fitting area set up with mirrors on three sides. As Mr Blaine strips down to his undergarments, Kurt accepts each article of clothing and carefully folds and places it on the nearby table.

“I can tell that Kurt respects clothes, just by the way he handles them,” Mr Moore observes.

“I couldn’t ask for a better footman,” Mr Blaine boasts.

Kurt’s cheeks flush from Blaine’s words. He pulls out the Gentleman’s Magazine of Fashion. “Mr Blaine and I have discussed it at great length and he’s agreed to have his trousers shortened with turn-ups and a slightly slimmer fit.”

The tailor looks at the picture. “Most of my clientele are older than Mr Anderson, so I haven’t made up many trousers like this.”

“But can you do it, Mr Moore?” Mr Blaine asks.

“Of course. I suspect I’ll be sewing up all the trousers like this in no time at all. This fashion isn’t going away overnight.”

When Mr Moore takes out his measuring tape, Kurt picks up some paper and pencil, ready to record numbers. As measurements and descriptions are called out, he can’t help but admire Mr Blaine’s body. He’s seen Mr Blaine in his underdrawers plenty of times, but has always cast away his eyes. This time Kurt is able to make a closer inspection without worrying about how it might appear.

Mr Blaine’s back is muscular, and if Kurt didn’t know better, he would have thought it was from manual labor. He has well-developed biceps, which no doubt comes from playing polo. His eyes move down to his tiny waist and…

“Kurt, where do you suggest we start tapering the trousers below the buttocks?” Mr Moore asks.

Kurt sets down the piece of paper and pencil to give it some thought. It’s hard to judge with Mr Blaine wearing his old-fashioned, knee-length underdrawers. “Mr Blaine, do you mind if I touch your buttocks and thighs? It’s hard to give a precise location where the trousers should start to taper into the thigh with those loose underdrawers you are wearing.”
“Yy...yes, you may,” Mr Blaine stutters, and Kurt can tell that he’s flustered.

Kurt kneels behind Mr Blaine and places one hand on his lower back. He slowly and gently moves his hand over the swell of the buttocks, pausing when he reaches the end. Kurt has never felt the buttocks of another, but Mr Blaine has the most magnificent pair. It takes all his self-control not to squeeze them. His hand continues down to the upper thigh. He can feel Mr Blaine’s strong muscles tighten.

“Perhaps it would be easier to tell if Mr Anderson took off his underdrawers,” Mr Moore suggests.

“No, I can’t!” Mr Blaine shouts.

When Kurt looks up, Mr Blaine has a worried expression on his reddened face. It’s then that Kurt realizes the problem - the front of Mr Blaine’s underdrawers are tented. Kurt keeps a finger firmly on one spot. “I think this is the place, Mr Moore.”

Mr Moore exchanges his finger with Kurt’s and the measuring continues. Kurt can tell that Mr Blaine has an impressive erection. As he again picks up the paper and pencil, Kurt remembers that Mr Blaine has called him handsome before. He wonders if it was really him that caused Mr. Blaine’s reaction. The mere thought thrills him.

“If you want to wear trousers tailored like this, you’ll need to wear different underdrawers,” Mr Moore remarks. “The current trend is to wear tight-fitting boxers. If you go to Marks and Spencers on Queen Street, you’ll find exactly what you need.”

“We will go there after lunch. Have you seen my grandmama recently?”

The conversation turns to the dowager countess and her good deeds at the Westerville village’s hospital and school. Kurt wonders why Blaine switched the conversation to his grandmother, but realizes it did help with his own problem that had developed in his underdrawers.

Mr Moore inspects the list once again. “The outfit for the fox hunt will be my first priority. Lady Anderson told me that there’s to be a hunt in two weeks’ time. I’ll then work on the formal wear you will need for the Westerville ball. We will need to have several fittings.”

After appointments have been made, Mr Blaine consults his pocket watch. “We’d better take our leave or I’ll be late for my luncheon appointment.”

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: Blaine and Kurt spend the afternoon together in Exeter and Rachel reveals her surprise.
An Afternoon in Exeter

April 1914
Blaine

It's a ten-minute walk to the Ship Inn on Martin’s Lane, and Blaine is grateful that Kurt is too busy gazing at the shop windows to engage him in conversation. He’s got a lot on his mind, and it all revolves around one Kurt Hummel.

In truth, Blaine is not that fussed about his new wardrobe. Planning it was just an excuse to spend more time with Kurt. As they spent hours analyzing the fashion magazines and his current outfits, Blaine watched Kurt gain confidence in his opinions and abilities. It was like seeing a young bud bloom into a rose before his very eyes. Blaine has no doubt that Kurt could do anything he puts his mind to. Kurt is very clever, and it’s a shame that there aren’t more opportunities available to him.

And if all this time together meant that Blaine had to assist in the kitchen gardens… Well, that was an added bonus. Blaine has discovered that there is a different - a freer - version of Kurt outside the confines of the abbey. Once the strict rules of etiquette and roles are left behind, Kurt is friendlier, even teasing Blaine at times.

Kurt was invaluable at the tailor earlier that morning. Even Mr Moore had been impressed with Kurt’s ability to select the fabrics of the highest quality. It all went swimmingly well... until the measuring. As the tailor stretched the tape across various parts of his body, Blaine could see in the mirrors that Kurt was staring at him. In normal circumstances, he would have felt embarrassed, but with the excuse of being measured, he stood that much taller, hoping that Kurt would like what he saw. Of course, it all backfired when Mr Moore asked Kurt for advice.

Blaine had felt the warmth of Kurt’s hand as he placed it on his lower back, and slowly stroked across his buttocks and upper thigh. It had felt so good that his cock started stirring and quickly
grew fully erect and hard. He was absolutely mortified when the tailor suggested that he take off
his underdrawers, for it would cause them to realize the effect Kurt had on him. He only hopes that
Kurt didn’t notice his tented underdrawers. Blaine had quickly changed the conversation to his
grandmama to cool his body down.

“I see the Ship Inn up ahead,” Kurt says, pointing to the hand-painted wooden sign hanging from
wrought iron brackets in front of the establishment. When they don’t find the others waiting in
front, Kurt opens the door and they step inside. The inn has low ceilings that have horizontal dark
wooden beams. The walls are made of old stones from a local quarry, and one wall has a fireplace
big enough for both Blaine and Kurt to walk into. To the right of the fireplace is a long table, where
Cousin Rachel, Hudson and Evans are sitting, enjoying St Anne’s, the locally brewed ale.

“Only one pint for you, Hudson. You’re driving us back home,” Blaine reminds him.

“Don’t worry, Mr Blaine. I’m a big lad and I can handle my liquor.”

“Have you ordered any food yet?”

“No, we were waiting for you,” Cousin Rachel replies. “What do you suggest?”

“Shepherd's pie and peas for the lads and I’ll find something more suitable for you.”

Blaine goes to the counter to order lunch and a round of ginger beers. He can’t go home with a
group of drunken servants on account of the ale. When Blaine returns to the table, he can see
Cousin Rachel giggling at something Hudson said. He wonders, not for the first time, what she can
possibly see in the chauffeur. Sure, Hudson is an affable chap, but he is most certainly not a ladies’
man.

“Were you successful this morning, Cousin Rachel?” Blaine asks, sitting beside Kurt.

“Yes, I found the perfect hat. The milliner still needs to sew on the trimmings; Hudson and I will
collect it next week. This afternoon, I’m going to collect my father’s surprise for the family. I’ll
need Hudson’s assistance as the box will be heavy, and he’s so big and strong.”

Blaine can barely stop himself from rolling his eyes. Cousin Rachel is not particularly discreet
flirting around Hudson. Maybe that’s what it takes to gain someone’s attention, but he can’t
imagine flirting so openly with the ladies during the London season.

“Mr Blaine, I’m supposed to collect provisions for Mr Hummel and Mrs Sylvester today,” Hudson
says.

“If you give me the list and look after Cousin Rachel this afternoon, I’m sure that between Kurt
and Evans, they can make it to all the shops. I’ve finished at the tailors, but I still need to go to
Marks and Spencers, and Lugets.”

The waiter arrives at their table with their luncheon. The shepherd's pies and peas are set down in
front of the men. “I’ll be right back with the lady’s order.”

“What did you order me, Cousin Blaine?”

“Welsh rabbit. I think you’ll like it.”

“Rabbit is a type of meat,” Cousin Rachel whispers through gritted teeth.

Blaine starts chuckling. “There is no rabbit in the dish. It’s just a hot melted cheese mixture poured
over toasted bread.”

“Then why is it called Welsh rabbit?”

“There are many theories about that. The most popular one is that Welsh peasants were not allowed to eat rabbits caught in hunts on the estates, so they had to make do with cheese.”

“I love English cheese.”

“You haven’t tried the cheese from Somerset, Miss Berry. It’s the very best,” Kurt chimes in.

When the Welsh rabbit is placed in front of Cousin Rachel, they are silent, busy eating their lunch. Judging by how quickly the others are eating the minced lamb topped with mashed potato, Blaine thinks he made a wise choice with the shepherd's pie. Once they have finished their meals and get set to leave, Blaine steers Cousin Rachel to a wall that has Sir Francis Drake’s words inscribed.

“Next to my own ship I do most love that old Ship in Exon, a tavern in Fish Street, as the people call it, or as the clergy will have it, St. Martin's Lane.”

Blaine tells Rachel the tale of the English explorer. “Sir Francis Drake is well known for sailing around the world in a single journey. What us Brits fail to talk about is that it was also a pirate expedition and he looted along the coast of the new world.”

“Britain has such a long and colorful past.”

“That’s how you become a great empire, Cousin Rachel. Now that I’ve shown you this, you can report back that the Ship Inn was part of a historical tour.”

They join the others outside the inn, and when Cousin Rachel and Hudson have disappeared from view, Blaine gives the list of collections to Evans. “Meet us at the cathedral ten minutes before four. No-one will be the wiser that it wasn’t Kurt who made the rounds.”

“Yes, Mr Blaine. By the way, I managed to find the Heinz baked beans this morning.”

“Excellent. Here’s some money for tea and a treat, but only when you’ve finished the errands.”

As Evans heads down the street, he whistles and flips the half-penny. When he disappears from sight, Kurt asks, “Where to next, Mr Blaine?”

“We best go to Marks and Spencers as Mr Moore suggested,” Blaine replies and they turn onto Queen Street.

“What type of store is Marks and Spencers?” Kurt asks.

“It’s a bazaar that sells all sorts of goods for a penny or a little more. It started in Leeds and they opened a shop in Exeter two years ago. It’s a bit like Woolworth’s in that the wares are set out on the counter. The quality is excellent because everything is British-made.”

After entering the shop, they head to the men’s undergarments section, and Blaine immediately examines the long undergarments.

“Mr Blaine, I think Mr Moore was recommending that you wear underpants like these.”

Blaine turns around and his eyes pop wide open when he sees Kurt holding the smallest pair of underdrawers he has ever seen. They are so short that they would only cover the top of the thigh. Why, they’re even shaped like a box. “I can’t wear underdrawers so small,” Blaine whispers.
“Yes, you can, Mr Blaine. Your longer underdrawers will only bunch up under your new trousers and feel uncomfortable. If you wear these boxer briefs, it will allow for a clean line along your trousers. And you must admit that this style is much better suited for hotter climates if you are posted to India.”

What Kurt says makes sense. The shop assistant helps Kurt select the right size. Blaine blushes from head to toe when he sees how tiny they are. “I suggest you try these on. I’ll help you undress and give you my opinion on the size.”

“No…. err… That won’t be necessary,” Blaine exclaims. Kurt would be sure to notice if he gets a stiffy when wearing these tiny boxer briefs. “Please hand me a few sizes and I’ll try them on by myself.”

Blaine enters the changing room, quickly undresses and puts on the new underpants. He has to admit that they are quite comfortable. When Blaine looks in the mirror, he can see how snugly they fit, showing each body contour both in the front and back. They certainly don’t leave anything to the imagination. He takes a deep breath and decides to move with the times and wear the new type of underdrawers.

After buying a dozen pairs, they head to Lugets, the men’s outfitters in Cathedral Yard. Blaine tries on dozens of hats, and Kurt laughs when some of them are so big they fall down to his nose. In the end, Blaine purchases a top hat for formal evenings, a bowler hat for the sack suits, a tweed hat for country visits, and a boater straw hat with a red and blue striped ribbon around the rim. Ties and several pairs of gloves are also selected, for a proper gentleman is never seen without them.

It’s three o’clock by the time they leave Lugets, and Blaine is absolutely exhausted. They’ve been on their feet most the day and he has found it tiring to make so many decisions.

“Do you think we have time to order your new shoes, Mr Blaine?”

“I think not, Kurt. My feet are so sore at the moment. Besides, I’ll need to return for the fittings at the tailor’s. I can get them then. Why don’t we find a bench in the Exeter Cathedral Green? That way, we’re close to where we need to meet the others in an hour.”

The Exeter Cathedral Green is relatively empty in the late afternoon, and Blaine quickly finds a bench for them to rest.

They are silent as they watch young children play leapfrog. When Blaine glances at Kurt, he can practically see him thinking. Kurt has a faraway look that he hasn’t seen before. “A penny for your thoughts?”

“I keep forgetting that soon you’ll be far away from Westerville, leading a rather exciting and adventurous life.”

“That is true. I can hardly believe it myself at times. It’s impossible to imagine until my future is decided. In some ways, I would prefer to receive a commission in the British cavalry. At least that way, I can visit Westerville and my future wife on home leaves.”

“If you were in India, you could be with your wife more often.”

“It’s hard enough to imagine my future wife, let alone spending time with her. I’ve rather enjoyed spending time with you the past month. I’ll miss you when I leave.”

Blaine can see that Kurt’s eyes have become watery, so he gives Kurt’s upper arm a gentle squeeze.
“I’ll miss you too, Mr Blaine.”

Blaine bows his head, not knowing what to say. In such a short time, he’s grown closer to Kurt than to anyone else he’s ever known. Kurt moves him in ways that he’s never felt before. Somehow, he needs to make sense of it all before he leaves Westerville.

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“How many ties did you buy today, Blaine?” Pamela asks.

“Six.” Blaine feels as if he’s being interrogated at dinner, with questions about his new wardrobe ordered that day.

“You’ll need two more. Make sure you go back to Lugets when you have your first fitting at the tailors.”

“I presume you ordered the formal evening wear?”

“Yes, Father. Mr Moore recommended that my suit be made in the same style and material as the one you ordered recently.”

“Very good. It’s very expensive, but I consider it a wise investment. There will be ladies you need to impress at the balls.”

Blaine smiles weakly, trying to control the bitterness he feels inside. He knows that his father is counting on him to marry a wife with a large dowry. Every single day, he’s reminded that the future of Westerville weighs heavily on his shoulders. But that doesn’t mean he likes being treated as chattel that can be so easily manipulated.

The dowager countess sets down her wine glass and shakes her head. “In my day, it didn’t matter what the gentlemen looked like. A lady was incapable of feeling physical attraction, until she had been instructed to do so by her mama.”

Blaine smiles at his grandmama, for she’s always able to lighten the mood, even without knowing it. She squeezes Blaine’s hand gently before adding, “Anyway, my grandson will be the most handsome gentleman in London this Season.”

“I have a special surprise for this evening’s entertainment. Aunt Pamela, can the ladies stay with the gentlemen here while I set it up in the drawing room?” Cousin Rachel asks.

“It’s most unusual, but we’ll be happy to stay,” Pamela confirms.

Cooper stands up from his chair. “I’ll help you set up, Cousin Rachel. You didn’t warn me that we’d be putting on a performance.”

“Sit back down, Cousin Cooper. We won’t be performing this evening. I want this to be a special surprise for you as well. Hummel, can Kurt help me set up?”

“Yes, Miss Berry. Sebastian and I will be able to tend to everything here.”

Cousin Rachel stands up, looking as excited as a kid in a sweet shop, and Kurt follows her out of the dining room. When Cooper picks up a cheroot, his father quickly motions for him to put it away. The after-dinner routine will not include smoking with the ladies still in attendance.

“It’s hard to believe that today is the second anniversary of the sinking of the Titanic,” Quinn
“When it made its maiden voyage, it was impossible to imagine its fate. Those poor passengers who didn’t get off the ship in time,” Pamela reflects.

“You mean the passengers who weren’t in first class, my dear. God help the poor devils below decks,” Michael says with compassion.

“Enough of the Titanic and deaths. It’s not the type of talk that helps with digestion,” grandmama chides. “Does anyone know what Rachel’s surprise is? I hope it’s not a ghastly American song she is going to perform. Music from this continent is much more refined.”

“I’m not sure what Cousin Rachel has in store for us this evening, Grandmama. There was a rather large box strapped to the top of the car when we left Exeter today,” Blaine replies.

Before they can guess what could be in that large box, Kurt enters the dining room and whispers in Hummel’s ear.

“Miss Berry requests your company in the drawing room,” the butler announces.

When Sebastian pulls out the dowager countess’ chair, Blaine helps her up and links her arm under his to escort her. When they arrive in the drawing room, there is a large gramophone sitting on a table in the corner, with a dozen discs nearby.

“What on earth is this?” grandmama asks.

“A gramophone, Grandmama Anderson,” Cousin Rachel replies.

“I’m Lady Anderson to you, young lady.”

Blaine will have to remind Cousin Rachel later about protocol. Why, even his mother calls his grandmama by her formal title. But for now, he’s far too excited to see the gramophone he’s been wanting for some time. “Please play a disc, Cousin Rachel!”

Kurt winds the mainspring by turning the crank on the side of the machine, and soon the disc is spinning. Grandmama moves them into the opposite direction of the gramophone. “We shall stand well clear away when you light it.”

“It won’t explode,” Blaine reassures.

When Cousin Rachel carefully places the stylus needle on the disc, music sounds out from the horn.

Come on and hear, come on and hear
Alexander’s Ragtime Band
Come on and hear, come on and hear
It’s the best band in the land

“I love this song! Tell me that you’ve brought more ragtime music with you.” Blaine grins broadly when he sees Cousin Rachel nod.

When the song is over, the dowager countess gives her verdict. “It all sounds rather like screeching to me.”

“Grandmama, let me select something that you might like,” Blaine suggests and goes to the corner
to examine the discs. Kurt quickly takes one out of the pile. “Excellent choice, Kurt. It’s old-fashioned, just like grandmama,” Blaine whispers.

Blaine exchanges the discs on the turntable, and Kurt winds the mainspring and places the stylus needle on the disc. When the song’s prelude begins, Blaine walks over to his grandmama, and asks “Will you do me the honor of dancing with me?”

The dowager countess flutters her eyelashes and stands up to accept Blaine’s hand. “This song is more like it,” she pronounces, before they start to dance.

*The ballroom was filled with fashion's throng*
*It shone with a thousand lights*
*And there was a woman who passed along*
*The fairest of all the sights*

Cooper and Quinn get up and start dancing, and even his parents join soon after. As Blaine gently sways his grandmama to the music, he finds Kurt in the corner staring at him. He has an expression of longing, and Blaine wishes that Kurt was in his arms instead of grandmama. Their gazes don’t break away as the song continues.

*A girl to her lover then softly sighed*
*There's riches at her command*
*But she married for wealth, not for love, he cried*
*Though she lives in a mansion grand*
*Cho: She's only a bird in a gilded cage*
*A beautiful sight to see*

When the song finishes, Blaine notices Cooper giving Quinn a soft and loving kiss. If only he could kiss Kurt like this at the end of a dance. He feels as if he’s the bird in a gilded cage, wishing he could break out and be free.

“I think I’ve had enough excitement for one evening,” the dowager countess announces. “I will retire to Dower House and let the young ones play what they wish.”

Blaine escorts his grandmama to the family’s car, and gives her a kiss on the cheek before Sebastian closes the car door. The cool night air sharpens his senses.

“Is something wrong, Mr Blaine? You look as if you just saw a ghost,” Sebastian remarks.

“Not at all. I’m just overwhelmed that Cousin Rachel would give us such a wonderful gift as a new gramophone.” Blaine forces a smile on his face, for he won’t reveal to Sebastian who and what he was thinking about. It’s how gossip and rumors start downstairs.

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“I think the gramophone was a huge success,” Kurt says, as he stokes the embers in the bedroom fireplace before adding more coal.

“I’ve been begging father for months for one. Cousin Rachel is simply the best. I loved all the music she played when grandmamma and my parents left.”

“You cut a fine figure dancing with the dowager countess. I was trying to imagine what you would look like in your new formal attire.”

And I was imagining what you would look like in my arms. “We shall see next month at the
Westerville ball. In the meantime, I can practice dancing with Cousin Rachel.”

“I’m willing and able to keep the gramophone wound up and change discs.”

Blaine quickly takes off his trousers and hands them to Kurt to hang up. “Thank you for selecting that song for my grandmamma. I don’t think she’ll ever like ragtime music.”

“Why, Mr Blaine, you’re wearing your new underpants. Let me see… Oh, they’re the perfect fit.”

Blaine blushes when he remembers how they show off every contour of his body, and quickly turns around to grab his dressing gown. “I thought I’d better get used to them before the new suits are ready.”

“That’s a good idea, Mr Blaine. Is there anything else you need tonight?”

“No, thank you, Kurt. Sleep tight and don’t let the bedbugs bite.”

Chapter End Notes

Songs used in the chapter
‘Alexander's Ragtime Band’ song by Irving Berlin
‘A Bird in a Gilded Cage’ performed by Steve Porter

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: Blaine examines his feelings.
April 1914

Blaine

Once Kurt has left the bedroom, Blaine takes off his dressing gown and looks at himself in the mirror, moving this way and that so he can see himself from all angles. The new boxer briefs certainly hug his body, leaving nothing to the imagination. He’ll have to be more careful around Kurt to avoid embarrassing situations. One question starts to form in his mind.

What does Kurt think when he sees him scantily clad?

Blaine takes a closer look at himself in the mirror. He’s been called ‘handsome’ before, mainly by family members, such as his mama, Quinn and grandmama. He knows that he’s not classically handsome like Cooper, but pleasant-looking. Many have commented on his eyes in a favorable way, despite his unruly eyebrows. Although they seem to have a life of their own, Blaine knows that they contribute to an expressive face.

Whenever Blaine attends social events, ladies his age flock around him and flirt, so he must appear handsome to others. However, they also tease him relentlessly about his old-fashioned ways and manners. “The Victorian era finished in 1901, Mr Anderson. King Edward is fun-loving and enjoys life to its max. You need to loosen up a bit.” Times might have changed since Queen Victoria’s death, but across the estates in the west country, manners and the like are still highly valued.

Blaine feels comfortable with how he looks. Sure, he would like to be taller, but he’s a practical person - no amount of wishing is going to make him six feet tall. His grandmama always says that good things come in small packages.

Blaine’s eyes move from his face to his upper body. He might have a small frame, but he’s strong, thanks to his regular horse riding and summers spent in military training. Why, he’s stronger than Cooper, even, and can lift three times his weight.

He then glances at his waist, which is tiny. Blaine grimaces when he sees his small stubborn belly pooch. He knows that he’s been eating too many of Mrs Sylvester’s special treats throughout the day, but they’re too delectable to resist. What does Kurt think when he sees that belly pooch? That he’s self-indulgent and doesn’t look after himself?

Blaine consoles himself with the thought that special treats will be a thing of the past soon. His diet
will change when he joins the Indian Civil Service or the military. But for now, he’s going to enjoy every tasty morsel that Mrs Sylvester has on offer.

Blaine’s eyes quickly pass the boxer briefs to his legs. The muscles bulge, and he knows that his thighs are quite powerful. It’s a result of all the horse riding he does. Does Kurt see that as well? How would it feel to wrap his legs around Kurt?

Blaine finally directs his attention to the boxer briefs that hug his body. He turns around and looks over his shoulder at his butt. He’s always thought that his butt sticks out too much, but now he sees something different. While it does protrude, his butt is round and firm; not at all flat or misshapen like some others he’s noticed. He squeezes his cheeks and appreciates that they are firm. He thinks back to the comment Kurt made about the boxer briefs being a perfect fit. What was Kurt thinking to himself at that moment?

Blaine turns around to face the mirror and focuses on the area covered by the boxer briefs. Although he doesn’t have much chest hair, he can see a little trail of hairs starting from below his belly button to below the briefs’ waistband. His cock is semi-hard and already the bulge is noticeable under the boxer briefs. He slowly palms himself until it becomes thick and hard. It looks as if his cock is going to burst out of his briefs. He’s never really thought of himself as a sexual being before. As he looks at his impressive erection, he feels sexy - even desirable. Does Kurt see him that way as well?

Blaine glances at his face, which is flushed red with desire. Blaine knows that he needs to take care of himself tonight. Ever since the onset of puberty, Blaine has taken care of his sexual needs. It’s usually a rushed affair, and his thoughts are distracted with finishing quickly without being caught. A few squirts of lotion underneath layers of bedding with a handkerchief to capture the cum is all he needs. He giggles when he recalls the numerous lectures from Mrs Hudson about always losing his hankies. Imagine what Mrs Hudson would think if she found out why he goes through so many!

Blaine takes one last glance at himself in the mirror. He notices that his nipples are erect, and can’t remember seeing that before. He makes a mental note to investigate this further when he’s in bed. His glance goes downwards, and he can see the abdominal muscles on either side of his torso that look like a V. He wonders if Kurt has them as well and decides that he must. After all, Kurt has been doing farm work for years, and the footman’s uniform covers far too much of Kurt’s body for his liking. Blaine imagines what it would be like to trace Kurt’s V-line with his fingers, then his lips.

Blaine climbs into bed and gets out the lotion and a handkerchief. Before he takes off the boxer briefs and touches himself, he decides that he wants to do things a little bit differently tonight. He knows that no one will barge in his bedroom this late at night, so why not take things more slowly?

Blaine’s fingertips start at his neck and slowly move down across his chest. He uses his thumb to circle his right nipple, and soon the nub is protruding and stiff. Although the whole area feels sensitive, Blaine experiments with the speed of the strokes and how much pressure to use - slow and soft, hard and fast, and every different combination. He brushes the tip as he completes full circles. Dear lord, that feels good. Why haven’t I done this before?

His hands brush up and down his sides once, and Blaine gets a tingly sensation that goes all the way to his cock. As much as he wants to stroke himself until he climaxes, he takes a moment to breathe and cool down, before concentrating on his left nipple. He rubs around the areola, using the speed and pressure that he has just figured out he enjoys. However, instead of just rubbing the tip, he gently pinches it. Blaine softly moans at the sensation and he can feel a wet patch forming
in his boxer briefs by the tip of his leaking cock.

Blaine wonders if other men find their nipples an erogenous zone as well. More specifically, he wonders if it feels just as good - or even better - if someone else were to do this to his body. As he rubs his hands up and down his torso, his thumb brushing against a nipple every so often, he imagines that it’s Kurt doing this to him....

Blaine is hot during the night so he removes his pajama top and pulls down the eiderdown to his waist. In the morning, he stirs to the sounds of the second footman quietly stoking the fire. Kurt walks to the window but before he opens the curtains, Blaine hears a quiet gasp. He isn’t entirely awake so he’s not sure whether it’s a real sound or something in his dream. Gentle footsteps approach the bed and for a minute or two, he hears nothing. Blaine then senses the brush of fingertips across his chest, and it feels tentative and somehow reverent. The fingertips move towards a nipple, and stroke exactly how Blaine likes it. The next thing Blaine feels is the softness of lips on his nipple, then a warm wet sensation as Kurt licks around his quickly hardening pebble. Kurt flicks his tongue back and forth over it, finishing up with a gentle bite. Blaine moans as his hips jerk upwards, chasing the climax caused by Kurt’s ministrations.

… Blaine opens his eyes and takes deep breaths, willing himself not to climax from the fantasy of Kurt touching and tasting his nipples. He doesn’t want this session to end just yet. What perplexes Blaine is that he usually doesn’t think of anyone or have a fantasy encounter when he’s taking care of himself. His mind is normally blank and he focuses on the end result. He hasn’t realized until now how much more pleasurable it feels when he’s thinking of Kurt. He feels ashamed that he’s using the second footman in his fantasies, but it just can’t be helped. He knows that he’s physically attracted to Kurt, so it feels completely natural.

Once his erection has softened a bit and he’s in control of his body once more, Blaine continues his self-exploration. His hands move along his torso, and massage his inner thighs. Every once in a while, his finger brushes just under the boxer briefs, which makes his cock dribble precum. Not once does he touch his cock, which is desperate for attention, and that makes everything feel more urgent, heightened, and hotter. When he feels the tell-tale sign that he’s about to explode, he stops.

Blaine’s mind feels fuzzy as he focuses on his breathing. He’s never done anything like this before - never knew that he could have this type of control over his body’s pleasure. It’s empowering that he can make himself feel so good, yet delay the inevitable. Blaine knows that he can’t stretch this out too much longer. His balls are heavy and full, and his erection has only deflated a small bit. He takes off the boxer briefs and tosses them to the floor. He’ll deal with them later.

Blaine lets his hand brush lightly against his cock. He looks down and notices that it’s now fully erect and throbbing. He gives himself a couple of quick hard strokes to take off the edge, then his fingers roam down to his balls. He cups each one and massages it in his hand. He knows he doesn’t have long before he’ll need to ejaculate. All the foreplay is making it hard to cool down. He wonders if he could make another person feel like he does at the moment - needy and desperate. He can’t help but wonder what it would be like to pleasure Kurt.

He slowly strokes his cock, and wonders what Kurt’s is like. He imagines that Kurt’s cock is longer than his, but just as thick. It would feel silky and slightly heavier in his hand. Blaine twists his hand at the next upstroke and his hips jerk up at the sensation. He imagines what Kurt how would feel. Blaine, you know exactly what to do. I feel so aroused and I’m getting hotter and hotter. Please … More.

Blaine tugs at a ball as his strokes become more erratic. Gggh. Faster… Harder… I need you, Blaine.
Blaine imagines Kurt whimpering as his hand flies along his cock, pulling at each ball. Blaine takes one thumb and brushes it against the skin just underneath his balls. His toes curl and he feels so turned on that his body snaps. Kurt… Kurt…. Kurt. Cum with me.

Long ropes of cum fly across Blaine’s body - the hot semen lands on his chest and shoots up towards his neck. He can’t recall ever climaxing this long or this hard. He slows down his strokes until he is finished and his cock becomes oversensitive. He lies boneless and panting heavily for a long while until he can feel himself slowly come down from the high. It’s like nothing he’s experienced before. It takes roughly five minutes for Blaine to open his eyes. He then abruptly sits up, cursing that he didn’t use the handkerchief, for there are wet spots all over the bed.

Blaine quietly gets up and goes to the water pitcher and pours some into the porcelain bowl. He dampens a washcloth and cleans his stomach, before trying to clean up the bedsheets. He blushes imagining what the laundry maids will think when they see his sheets the next day. However, he’s absolutely certain that Cooper kept them amused when he was a teenager as well.

Once he’s put on his night clothes, Blaine climbs into bed and tries to plump up the pillows just like Kurt does. He lies his head on one pillow, and takes the other one and hugs it against his body. Now that he’s fully sated, he pretends that he’s snuggling with Kurt. You’re a fantastic lover, Blaine. It has never felt that incredible before. You make me so happy and all I want is to be held in your arms forever. I love you, Blaine.

Blaine’s eyes snap open and he feels let down when he realizes that he’s holding a pillow and not Kurt. He’s known for a while that he’s physically attracted to Kurt, but this evening’s activities have left no doubt in his mind that he wants to experience that kind of sexual pleasure with him.

But it’s more than that.

Blaine enjoys the one-on-one time they have. Earlier in the evening, he had wanted to romance Kurt… Take him in his arms and dance … and never let go. Why, he even wanted to end the dance with a kiss. And judging by the way Kurt was staring at him, Kurt might have had similar thoughts. Is something wrong with them that they feel this way?

It’s one thing to lust after someone, but it’s another thing altogether to fall in love. Is that what is happening to him? Is that even possible with another man? Blaine’s thoughts drift to his recent conversation with Cousin Rachel. She related the story of her father and ‘Uncle’ LeRoy. Hearing the story of these two companions was fascinating, but it would be so helpful to see it in practice. Not for the first time, he wishes Uncle Hiram and LeRoy could visit Westerville.

All of a sudden, Blaine’s dreams of romancing and experiencing physical pleasure with Kurt go pop. Blaine can’t picture how Kurt could fit in when his family needs him to marry a lady with a considerable dowry. He thinks that Kurt deserves better than to be his bit on the side. He deserves someone who can romance him, love him and provide for him. Not someone married with children. No, the whole situation is impossible, and that thought leaves an empty feeling inside of him.

Eventually, sleepiness overtakes him and he closes his eyes. As Blaine drifts off to sleep, the last image he has is of dancing with Kurt.

Chapter End Notes
Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: Blaine’s 18th birthday
May 1914
Kurt

After Mr Blaine has left the abbey for his usual morning horse ride, Kurt goes upstairs to his bedroom to clean combs, brush down jackets, and fold clothes and put them in drawers. He inspects the room to make sure that the housemaids have cleaned it properly and all is in order. When Kurt makes his way along the back corridor, he hears muffled moans coming from the large broom cupboard beneath the stairs. Worried that someone might be in danger, he rushes to open the door, and he’s startled by what he sees.

Miss Lopez has Brittany pushed against the wall and is holding her arms above her head. Brittany has her eyes closed and is moaning as Miss Lopez kisses her neck. “Oh!” Kurt cries out and then covers his mouth.

Miss Lopez looks up at Kurt, then releases Brittany from her hold. “What are you staring at, Lady Lips? Don’t you have anything else better to do? You better not whisper a word to anyone, or else…”

“I do beg your pardon, Miss Lopez. I thought someone was trapped inside the cupboard.”

“Yes, we were trapped, in case anyone asks, and don’t you forget it,” Miss Lopez threatens before leaving the broom cupboard and hastily making her way along the corridor.

Meanwhile, Brittany spends time making sure her hairpins are properly in place. Before leaving, she winks at Kurt. “Don’t worry. The abbey has plenty of hidden places for you and Mr Blaine.”

Before Kurt can ask her what she means, Brittany descends the back staircase. Kurt really isn’t surprised that Miss Lopez and Brittany are lovers. He’s seen the way that Miss Lopez ogles the kitchen maid. What is surprising is that they are bold enough to kiss in a large cupboard when there are others about.
What did Brittany mean about other hidden places inside the abbey? And why does she think that he and Mr Blaine need one?

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Kurt can hear a knock on Mr Blaine’s bedroom door and quickly goes to see who it is. It’s his father, who looks rushed.

“Mr Blaine better come down soon. Mrs Sylvester is on the rampage. You know how she gets when the family is late for a special luncheon. Mr Evans will help Sebastian bring up the first course. Join me in the drawing room once you’re done here.”

Kurt nods. “I’m almost finished dressing Mr Blaine. Tell Mrs Sylvester he’ll be down in a few minutes.”

Kurt closes the door and returns to his knees in front of Mr Blaine, fastening the spats to his shoes. He marvels that even Mr Blaine’s ankles are perfectly formed. When Kurt gets up, he slowly walks around Mr Blaine to ensure that everything is perfect. “I think you’re ready. You cut a rather dashing figure. Do you want help with your hair, Mr Blaine?”

“No, you go down to the drawing room and tell Hummel that I’ll be just a moment. I have to make a dramatic entrance after all,” Mr Blaine says and then gives Kurt a wink.

Kurt scurries down the back staircase and quickly makes his way into the drawing room. He takes his position next his father as the family wait for Mr Blaine to appear.

“I was right about my maid. She’s leaving… to get married. How could she be so selfish?” the dowager countess grumbles.

“Never mind, Lady Anderson. Denker in the village can help out until you find a suitable replacement. Whatever is holding Blaine up? It’s his birthday luncheon, after all,” the countess wonders.

“He was going on about his new suit at breakfast,” Lord Cooper reminds everyone.

“We’d better go in without him; it’s not fair on Mrs Sylvester,” the earl decides.

“Oh, is her cooking so precisely timed? You couldn’t tell,” the dowager countess quips.

“I think her food is delicious,” Miss Berry replies.

“Naturally.”

When Kurt hears footsteps quickly descend the stairs, he goes to the drawing room door and opens it for Mr Blaine to enter.

“Good afternoon, everyone.” Mr Blaine struts into the drawing room wearing his new black suit, and slowly twirls around to give everyone a view. All jaws drop, except for Lady Quinn’s, who is grinning.

“I say, Blaine, you look handsome! So grown up,” Lady Quinn exclaims.

“Aren’t those trousers a bit tight? They look as if they are hazardous to his health,” the dowager countess tuts.

“It’s the fashion for the London season. All the gentlemen will be wearing them, Lady Anderson,”
Lady Quinn politely replies.

“And what’s that on your ankles? It’s a wonder you can even walk with those things on.”

“They’re called sprats, Grandmama. Quinn is trying to convince me to order a pair. Seeing them on Blaine, I think they look rather smart,” Lord Cooper says.

“I like them too. And if you’ll allow me to escort you to the dining room, Grandmama, you’ll find that I am quite capable of walking with them on,” Blaine says, offering his hand.

The family is soon settled in the dining room, and Kurt is rushed off his feet during the dinner service. It’s a proper Sunday lunch, with roast lamb, mint jelly, roast potatoes, and even fresh asparagus that Kurt picked earlier that morning. He takes the empty plates away and hurries downstairs to the kitchen.

“They’ve finished the main course, Mrs Sylvester. Sebastian is now serving the cheese and biscuits.”

“Is the cake ready, Brittany?”

“Yes, Mrs Sylvester.”

Brittany retrieves the Victoria sponge cake from the pantry. The light vanilla cake has whipped cream and jam between its two layers and is topped with a mountain of berries, which Kurt picked from the gardens earlier.

“You forgot to dust the top with powdered sugar, Brittany. Whatever am I going to do with you?”

“Sorry, Mrs Sylvester.”

Once Brittany sifts the powdered sugar on top, Kurt carefully lifts the cake platter to take it upstairs. He leaves it in the small butler’s pantry next to the dining room and joins the others. Mr Blaine is unwrapping a long thin parcel and Kurt presumes it’s his birthday present.

“A sword! Thank you, Father.”

“This is the very sword that my father gave me before I left Westerville for the Boer War. It kept me safe, and it will do so for you, whether you join the cavalry or encounter beastly Indians in your district. You’ll see that the Anderson name is carved into the handle.”

“I don’t know what to say, Father. I’ll take it with me wherever I go.” Mr Blaine takes the sword out of its sheath and lunges as he points it away from the table. Kurt admires the view, for Mr Blaine’s new trousers cling to his muscular thighs.

“Stop gawking and get the cake,” Sebastian hisses.

The cake is served, and Mr Blaine seems to enjoy it, judging by the huge grin on his face.

“Oh look, I got the coin!” Mr Blaine shouts as he cleans it off with his linen napkin.

“It’s only fitting that the birthday boy find the coin,” Lady Quinn remarks.

“It must be a good omen, Blaine, for finding the coin in your slice means that you’ll be wealthy one day,” Lord Cooper remarks.

Kurt doesn’t understand why that comment makes Mr Blaine give Lord Cooper a weak tight-
lipped smile.

“I’ve got something as well!” Miss Berry cries out. She holds up a small silver thimble and asks, “What does this one mean?”

The room is silent, and Kurt knows that it’s believed that the unlucky finder of the thimble will never marry.

“It means that you will have the most magnificent clothes,” Lady Quinn explains.

“Perhaps Blaine should have received that slice,” the dowager countess retorts.

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In the late afternoon, Kurt is kneeling in the vegetable garden, carefully planting the small seedlings that he propagated in the greenhouse during the colder months. It feels good to be truly outdoors again and warmed by the heat of the sun. He methodically plants the seedlings of carrots, cabbages, and onions into separate rows. It’s only when Kurt is planting the broad beans, that he realizes he is humming a ragtime song that was recently played on the gramophone. Traditional musical performances are given when the dowager countess attends dinner. On other nights, Mr Blaine, Miss Berry, Lord Cooper, and Lady Quinn play songs on the gramophone and dance.

Behind closed doors, Miss Berry teaches them the tango, a new kind of dance from Argentina that is taking America by storm. Kurt wishes that he could also learn the tango, a dance he can only describe as sensual. Chest close to your partner’s… dramatically dancing cheek-to-cheek then snapping your head away…. And the long dips. Mr Blaine is quite a natural dancer and even surpasses Miss Berry’s skills. What he wouldn’t do to dance with Mr Blaine so intimately. And this is the crux of his problem...

For Kurt has fallen in love.

Mr Blaine is so kind and thoughtful to everyone, but particularly to Kurt. He treats Kurt like a real person, and not like the lowly servant that he is. Mr Blaine seeks his advice at every opportunity, and really listens to him. If that isn’t enough, Mr Blaine is the most handsome man he’s ever laid eyes on. Kurt has no end of difficulties diverting his eyes when Mr Blaine is only wearing his tight-fitting boxer briefs. Mr Blaine gets adorably flustered and turns around so that Kurt doesn’t see his front. But what Mr Blaine doesn’t realize is that the back view is just as interesting. His buttocks look like firm bubbles, perfectly round and muscular. Kurt’s cock stirs at the memory of feeling those buttocks at the tailor’s shop last month.

“Kurt, you look a million miles away. Do you mind if I join you?”

Startled, Kurt falls face forward into the garden bed. Thoroughly embarrassed, Kurt stands up and brushes the dirt off his clothes. “Not at all, Mr Blaine. I’d enjoy your company.”

Mr Blaine moves in front of Kurt and stares into his eyes. His hand brushes gently across Kurt’s cheek and Kurt feels as if he’s about to self-combust.

“Err… You had some dirt on your face,” Mr Blaine whispers.

Kurt touches his cheek where Mr Blaine’s soft hand had stroked only seconds ago, trying to remember that wonderful feeling. “I’m such a clumsy clodhopper.”

“No, Hudson is a clumsy clodhopper. You are quite graceful.”
“Then I shall gracefully get the chair for you to sit on.”

“You don’t want my help?” Mr Blaine asks.

“Not when you’re wearing your brand-new suit. It’s a wonderful fit, by the way.”

“I have to admit that it’s very comfortable. Did you see how my father and Hummel kept staring at my spats at lunchtime?”

Kurt chuckles. “Our fathers are a lot alike in that they prefer the old-fashioned ways. I think they make you look like a dandy. Are Lord Cooper and Miss Berry at it again?”

“My grandmama will still be at the abbey this evening, so they are preparing for their after-dinner performance. It’s so noisy listening to them rehearse - their voices get louder and louder, trying to drown out the other.”

Kurt can feel Mr Blaine’s eyes on him as he leans forward to plant the last seedlings. He wonders what Mr Blaine is thinking about.

“You must have a beautiful singing voice, judging from the way you talk,” Mr Blaine observes.

Kurt laughs. “I do enjoy singing. I was the only one in the Wiveliscombe Church boys’ choir who didn’t have to stop during their teenage years. I have quite a high voice.”

“I would say that you have a wonderful voice, so pleasing to the ear. Perhaps one day you might sing for me?”

Kurt can see Mr Blaine’s cheeks redden, as if he didn’t mean to say that out loud. “Perhaps one day I might, Mr Blaine. In the meantime, I must water these seedlings I’ve just transplanted outside.”

“You looked so deep in thought when I entered the gardens. What were you thinking of?”

It’s Kurt’s turn to blush as he thinks of Mr Blaine’s boxer briefs and what’s underneath them. “The tango. I’ve never seen a dance like that. I think that you’re an excellent dancer, why, even better than Miss Berry.”

Mr Blaine chuckles. “Don’t let Cousin Rachel hear you say that, otherwise she’ll lock me into the drawing room until I agree that she’s the very best. We’re going to stop dancing the tango and focus on those ballroom dances that will be featured at balls during the London season. Lady Quinn has agreed to be our teacher and make sure that we know every step.”

“Lady Quinn is such a graceful dancer,” Kurt admits. Something that Brittany mentioned earlier that day has made him curious, and he decides to ask Blaine if it’s true. “I’ve been meaning to ask you something...”

“Go on,” Blaine urges.

“The abbey is such a large house. There must be plenty of nooks and crannies that I don’t know about.”

“There certainly are. When I was a child, Cooper and I would explore to find secret passages and hidden chambers. The abbey even has a priest hole.”

“Your mean a place where priests used to hide when Catholics were persecuted hundreds of years ago?”
Blaine nods. “I don’t think my parents even know about some of the secret places. They must be dirty and filled with cobwebs now. Why don’t I show them to you on the next rainy day?”

“Yes, please, Mr Blaine.”

When Kurt is satisfied with his work in the gardens for the day, he sets down the watering can. “Stay right here, Mr Blaine. I’ll be right back.”

Kurt sprints to the greenhouse and takes an object from his jacket pocket, and returns to the garden. Kurt smiles and says, “Happy birthday, Mr Blaine.” He moves his right hand from behind his back, and opens his hand, which contains a miniature horseshoe.

Mr Blaine takes the small horseshoe and inspects it. “This is beautiful, Kurt. You didn’t need to give me a present. When did you buy it?”

“It caught my eye when we were in Marks and Spencers. Mr Hudson purchased it for me when he drove Miss Berry to Exeter to collect her hat. A horseshoe is supposed to bring you good luck. And I do hope you have good luck in your future adventures.”

“I love how you spent the time thinking of a present that also expresses a sentiment. I shall keep this in my pocket when I leave Westerville. It will not only bring me good luck, but it’ll be a reminder of you.”

“You don’t think it’s silly, Mr Blaine?”

“It’s not silly. I think it’s rather special.”

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Once Kurt has collected all the shoes upstairs and placed them in the footman’s pantry after dinner, he joins the others in the servant’s hall. He’s surprised to see Mr Hudson, Miss Lopez, and Brittany with their fingers delicately placed on the top of a planchette on a Ouija board.

Brittany wiggles in her chair and claps her hands. “Yes! Miss Berry will get married. I think the spirits know better than a thimble. Let’s find out whether Mr Blaine will find a wife by the end of the Season.”

Their hands return to the planchette, and it quickly comes to life. The first letter it goes to is ‘Y’, but then it speeds to the ‘N’. The planchette ends up hovering in the center, and after five minutes they give up.

“I wonder what that means,” Mr Hudson ventures.

“It means that the Ouija board is a bunch of tommyrot!” Mrs Sylvester snaps. “Why, that board is as barmy as objects mixed in with a cake batter.”

“I was just thinking…” Brittany says in a dreamy voice.

“Blimey, everyone button down the hatches,” Mrs Sylvester snorts.

“I think that it means that Mr Blaine will find a true love, but won’t marry. What do you think, Kurt?”

All eyes turn to Kurt, who isn’t sure how he should reply.

“I think it means that Mr Blaine will have trouble deciding between all the ladies wishing to marry
him,” Mr Evans suggests.

Kurt smiles at Mr Evans, grateful that he offered an explanation first.

“Mark my words, Mr Blaine will be married by the end of the year,” Sebastian predicts. “No lass will be able to resist him wearing those trousers.”

When the butler enters the servant’s hall, everyone rises from their seats. “I’ve posted the list of who will be going to London for the Season,” Mr Hummel announces.

Kurt follows the stampede down the hallway to the posted list.

“Boo, I’m going to London!” Mercedes cries out. “So are you!”

Kurt is the last one to view the list. Although his father had previously told him that he would be going to London, it’s still reassuring to see his name up on the board. As Kurt scans the list, he realizes that most everyone he knows will be going to London as well. He returns to the servants’ hall, and there’s a loud buzz of excitement as everyone talks about London. Kurt greets Mr Evans at the entry and motions for him to sit down with him next to Mercedes.

“Are you going to London as well, Mercedes?” Mr Evans shyly asks.

“Yes! I thought I would be picked because I look after Miss Berry. It seems that I’ll also help Miss Lopez look after the dowager countess.”

“I think those two will keep you rushed off your feet,” Kurt chuckles.

“I’d be happy to be of any assistance. I’m quite good at polishing shoes,” Mr Evans says.

“Mr Evans, I might take you up on your kind offer. I can’t see Miss Lopez doing the hard work to look after the dowager countess.”

Kurt listens to the conversation between Mr Evans and Mercedes. Although they are both sweet on each other, they are too shy to let their feelings show. When Kurt feels confident that they’ll keep talking without his presence, he excuses himself to join his father and Mrs Hudson in the butler’s office.

“Good evening, my son. I trust everyone is thrilled to bits about going to London for the Season?”

“I don’t see why,” Mrs Hudson remarks. “The downstairs of the London townhouse is not very much different to the downstairs of the abbey.”

“I know our duties will be the same, but it’s the excitement of going to London and being close to Mr Blaine and Miss Berry during the Season,” Kurt offers as an explanation.

Mrs Hudson tops up the tea cups. “It’s good that everyone is happy. Before you know it, we’ll be rushed off our feet with the Westerville fox hunt and then the ball.”

“Father, doesn’t Anderson House in London already have staff? And who’s going to look after Westerville Abbey with everyone in London?”

“Those are excellent questions, Kurt. His lordship feels that with both Miss Berry and Mr Blaine attending the Season, all hands will be needed. There will be endless teas and light suppers that the family will host. The dowager countess will also be staying at Anderson House, which is most unusual.”
Mrs Hudson sets down her cup of tea. “I suspect she wishes to ensure that all goes smoothly for Mr Blaine. She has a soft spot for him.”

“Be that as it may, the dowager countess does expect a first-class service. It’s been decided that Dower House will be closed while she is in London, and her staff will work at Westerville Abbey to ensure that it’s ready for our return. They’ll hire locals from the village to help out if necessary.”

That makes sense to Kurt, and he’s not surprised that his father and his lordship have a carefully thought-out plan. After bidding his good nights, he heads up the two flight of stairs to the male servants’ dormitory, and collapses into bed after changing into his night clothes and performing his washing routine.

Mr Blaine was certainly appreciative of his good luck horseshoe charm. Kurt’s heart squeezes when he thinks of Mr Blaine carrying it in his pocket long after he leaves Westerville. It will be only a matter of weeks before Mr Blaine is swept up in the Westerville ball and then the London season, and they’ll have little chance of spending any special time together. Kurt vows that he’ll take any opportunity available to spend time with Mr Blaine until then. Even though he can’t have Mr Blaine, those times will be stored in his memory and heart forever.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: The Westerville fox hunt.
May 1914
Blaine

After breakfast, Blaine rushes to his bedroom to change into his hunting attire. Once he’s stripped off his morning suit, there’s gentle knocking at the door.

“May I come in, Mr Blaine?” Kurt calls out.

“Yes, I most definitely need your help.”

Kurt enters the bedroom and his eyes roam over Blaine’s body. Although Blaine likes the attention, he’s thankful that he’s not wearing the tiny boxer briefs. The older knee-length underdrawers are more practical for riding.

Blaine steps into his beige riding breeches, and then Kurt helps him put on his white shirt and makes quick work knotting the white tie around his neck. Blaine practically bounces in place as he patiently waits for Kurt to bring out the next article of clothing from the wardrobe - a red woolen hunt coat with a black velvet collar and cuffs. Kurt holds the coat open so that Blaine can slip his arms inside the sleeves. Blaine looks at himself in the mirror, smiling like a cat who got the cream.

“Do you like how it fits, Mr Blaine?”

“Do I ever! But I’m more excited about having my first red hunting coat. You see, Kurt, it was
only last December that I received my hunting button in recognition of my skills and helpfulness. Not even Cooper has managed to receive this honor. Now everyone will be wearing black coats except the hunt master, my father and me.”

Kurt assists Blaine with putting on his new custom-made black riding boots, then hands him the beige leather gloves that complete the outfit. “It’s a good look on you, Mr Blaine.”

“Thank you, Kurt. I best be off, for the rest of the hunting party are due to arrive here any minute.”

As Blaine rushes out the door, Kurt shouts out, “Don’t forget your top hat, Mr Blaine!”

Blaine turns around to accept the black top hat. “What would I do without you, Kurt? You’re a real treasure.”

As Blaine passes along the corridor, Cousin Rachel appears from her room.

“Cousin Blaine, you look so dashing in your red coat. I wish I didn’t have to wear all black today.”

“Why, you look simply beautiful, Cousin Rachel. All the other ladies on the hunt will pale in comparison.”

“You always know what to say, Cousin Blaine,” she replies, giggling. “Do I really have to ride sidesaddle?”

“Yes, you must. The etiquette of the hunt field is as intricate and strict as that of the ballroom. Now, shall I escort you downstairs?” Blaine asks, before linking his arm with hers.

“I’ve never worn a top hat riding before,” Cousin Rachel remarks.

“My word of advice is to lower your head when passing under trees.”

“Cousin Blaine, do I dare ask what happens to the foxes?”

“The foxes will either find an underground den for safety, or the hounds will wear them out and overtake them in a kill.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Cousin Rachel says, scrunching up her nose.

“Foxes are pests on English country estates. It’s a way to cull them - otherwise the farmers would have fewer animals grazing in the fields.”

When they reach the bottom of the staircase, Blaine notices Sam Evans in full livery at the front entrance. The valet is expected to help out as a footman when needed.

“You look rather dapper in that new red hunting coat,” Evans compliments Blaine, as he opens the door for Blaine and his cousin to pass.

“Thank you, Evans. I must say I love wearing it.”

There are about 20 people on horses assembled, ready to participate in the hunt. It’s very noisy, with 40 hounds barking and running about. They quickly find Wesley, who has Firebird and Bluebell, and they mount their respective horses.

Blaine notices Quinn nearby, on her beloved horse Beth. He tips his hat to her and gives her a weak smile. Although Quinn is one of the finest lady riders in the west country, she never rides when she is with child.
Pamela walks over to them and affectionately pats Firebird. “I’m so proud to see you wearing the red hunting coat, Blaine. You certainly deserved to receive the hunting button.”

Blaine preens at his mother’s compliment.

“You’ll look after Rachel during the hunt?”

“Yes, Mama. I’ll make sure she is not in any danger. I think we’ll stay behind the main group.”

“That doesn’t sound like fun,” Cousin Rachel pouts.

“I see Mr Kiehl is coming over towards us. I shall bid you farewell, my dears,” Pamela says.

Blaine moves Firebird closer to Cousin Rachel and whispers, “He’s the oldest son of the Baron of Padstow. He will inherit the title and the estate when his father dies.”

“Where’s Padstow?” Cousin Rachel asks.

“It’s in Cornwall, which is farther west than here. Between you and me, Padstow is a small unimportant fishing village. It amazes me that the family can afford the upkeep of Prideaux Place.”

“Good morning, Mr Anderson.”

“Good morning, Mr Kiehl. Let me introduce you to Miss Berry, my cousin from America.”

“How do you do, Miss Berry?” Mr Kiehl asks, taking off his hat and bowing his head. He returns his focus to Blaine, who feels self-conscious when Mr Kiehl gives him a once over. “I didn’t realize you had received the hunting button, Mr Anderson. May I say that you look absolutely divine in the red hunting coat. The image will be etched in my mind forever.”

Blaine blushes at Mr Kiehl’s compliment. “I received my hunting button at the end of last year.”

“Then I’ll be sure to stay by your side during the fox hunt. I might need special assistance.”

Kurt walks over to their group carrying a large tray filled with pewter goblets filled with juice. Blaine admires the footman’s long lean legs, which the perfectly-tailored livery uniform shows off. Kurt appears so confident and graceful while he offers drinks to the party. When Blaine takes a goblet off the silver tray, he can’t help notice that Kurt has a shy but special smile only for him and warmth rushes through him.

Blaine uses this opportunity to change the subject, hoping that Cousin Rachel will join the chat. “Later this month, Westerville will be hosting a ball for Miss Berry. Afterwards, we’re heading to London for the Season. Will you be joining us?”

“I will most definitely be attending the Westerville ball,” Mr Kiehl confirms. “However, Papa hasn’t decided about London for the Season. Cornwall has a rather short summer and Padstow is rather busy that time of year.”

Blaine knows it means that the baron hasn’t decided yet whether the money required to have his son attend the London season will pay off with a fruitful marriage. Blaine hopes that Mr Kiehl won’t be attending, for then there will be one less person to compete with for wealthy eligible ladies. Blaine may have the coveted red hunting coat, but Mr Kiehl has the all-important title and estate, even if it’s in the backend of nowhere.

“If it isn’t Shrimpy in a red hunting coat. My word, you’ve grown taller since I last saw you. I’ll
have to find a new nickname for you.”

Blaine turns around and sees Lady Katherine and her younger sister, Lady Marley. A respectable length of time after his first wife’s death, Count Wilde married the widow Rose, who also has a daughter. Blaine finds it hard to believe that these step-sisters were raised together in the same family home. Lady Marley is of a sweet and shy disposition, while Lady Katherine has a sharp and acid tongue. No wonder Kitty is her nickname. Blaine often comes across the stepsisters at society events held in Devonshire. Ever since Blaine was a young boy, Lady Kitty has made his life hell, teasing him about his short stature and taunting him with the fact that he’s only the second son.

“Good morning. Let me introduce you to Miss Berry, my American cousin. Cousin Rachel, this is Lady Katherine Wilde and Lady Marley Rose.”

“How do you do, Miss Berry? You can call me Lady Kitty, like everyone else. Mr Anderson is even stuffier than his father.”

“I’m pleased to meet you. Do you live nearby?” Cousin Rachel asks.

“We live about an hour’s drive away, at Powderham Castle in Kenton,” Lady Marley informs her.

“You live in a castle? How exciting! You must tell me all about it. I’ve never visited a real castle before.”

Lady Marley and Cousin Rachel are soon deep in conversation about moats, dungeons and the like. Lady Kitty smirks and turns her attention to Mr Kiehl. “I haven’t seen you since the new year celebrations at Hartland Abbey. I see that you’ve been practicing flirting since then.”

“I wasn’t flirting, Lady Kitty! Why, I was merely chatting to Mr Anderson about today’s fox hunt and the London season.”

Lady Kitty has only confirmed in Blaine’s mind that Mr Kiehl was flirting with him. He’s surprised that Mr Kiehl didn’t focus his efforts on his wealthy Cousin Rachel.

Lady Kitty arches one eyebrow and smirks. “I shall be presented this Season. My papa will be hosting a ball at our London townhouse. No doubt your mother has already accepted the invitation.”

Blaine shudders at the thought that his father might consider Lady Kitty as a possible wife for him. It’s one thing to uphold the family honor, but it’s quite another to be married to such a disagreeable lady. Blaine makes a mental note to ask his grandmama about Count Wilde’s wealth.

Lady Quinn joins the group and confirms, “We have received and accepted the invitation.”

The master of the hunt blows his horn to signal the start of the hunt. The hunt servants take off with the hounds in pursuit of the fox scent. The hunting party quickly follow, and Blaine is careful to make sure that he and Cousin Rachel are in the rear of the pack.

They follow the hunting party across the first field and into the neighboring forest. The hounds are diligently sniffing in the rough and bushy shrubs, trying to pick up the scent of nearby foxes. Blaine lurches to one side as Firebird stumbles, but he expertly regains his balance and control of the horse. When Blaine pulls at the reins to restart, Firebird walks slowly with a limp.

“Cousin Rachel, please wait. There’s something wrong with Firebird,” Blaine calls out. Both Quinn and Cousin Rachel ride over to see what’s the trouble.
Blaine dismounts Firebird and quickly realizes the problem - a nail has become dislodged on one horseshoe, and it’s rubbing against the hoof. “I’ll have to return to the stables to have the horseshoe tended to.”

Quinn dismounts and inspects the horse’s foot. “Poor Firebird. He’s in pain. I’ll ride with Cousin Rachel while you get this sorted. If you can’t find us, we’ll meet you in the west field where luncheon will be served.”

Grateful that Quinn will be looking after Cousin Rachel, Blaine slowly returns to the stables. He wonders how he’ll fix Firebird’s horseshoe with every stable boy out on the hunt. He enters the barn and is surprised by who he sees.

“Kurt! What are you doing here?”

“Mr Hudson is driving runs between the abbey and the west field with tables, chairs, crockery, and food for the luncheon. Apparently, a spare stirrup is needed and I offered to get it. Mr Hudson knows a lot about cars, but not so much about horses.”

“By chance, is Wesley anywhere about?”

“I haven’t seen him all day.”

“Oh dear, I was afraid of that. Firebird has a problem with a horseshoe.”

“I could have a look at him,” Kurt offers.

“Do you know about horses?”

“I used to look after the horses on my uncle’s farm.”

Kurt inspects the horseshoe and immediately identifies the problem. Blaine comforts Firebird by stroking his neck and gently cooing as Kurt works on the horseshoe. Before he knows it, Kurt has set down Firebird’s leg, and Blaine can tell that the problem is sorted as Firebird walks about the stable.

“Is there anything you can’t do, Kurt? I’m in awe of all your talents.”

“There’s plenty I can’t do, but I’m not going to tell you what. I’ll always try my best to do what you ask of me. I best set off, Mr Blaine. I’m walking to the west field to help set up for the luncheon.”

“You’re walking to the west field? Why that’s five miles away! Why don’t you ride in the car on one of Hudson’s trips?”

“Sebastian told me there’s no room in the car with all the things that need to be transported to the west field. I’m a pretty fast walker so it will take me an hour and a half. Besides, I enjoy being outdoors.”

“Let me give you a ride to the west field, Kurt. It’s the least I can do after you mended Firebird’s horseshoe.”

Blaine holds Firebird steady as Kurt mounts and slides toward the back of the saddle. He collects a couple of spare stirrups and places them in the saddlebag. Blaine mounts Firebird and sits at the front end of the saddle, and picks up the reins. Blaine can feel Kurt’s warm touch on his sides as they leave the stables and it feels nice and reassuring. Initially, Blaine takes it slowly to ensure that
Firebird is in no discomfort, but the problem seems to be solved as the horse gently trots on the dirt tracks used by the farmers.

Blaine shivers when he feels Kurt’s warm breath on his ear. “I didn’t realize how much I’ve missed horse riding until now. Is there any way we can go faster, Mr Blaine?”

“Hold on tight, Kurt.”

Blaine leans forward, making clucking noises, and Firebird expertly gallops across the fields he knows so well. Blaine can feel Kurt pressed against his back, with arms wrapped around him tightly. It makes his heart soar and his lower belly stir. When Blaine senses that Firebird is tiring, he slows the horse down to a canter. Firebird shifts his head as if pointing to the path that leads to the lake.

Blaine makes an instant decision and steers Firebird along the path. After all the hours they have spent together in the kitchen gardens, Blaine wants to share his special place with Kurt. Firebird automatically stops when they arrive at the lake. Blaine dismounts and takes off his leather riding gloves.

“Is something wrong with Firebird?” Kurt asks with concern.

“No, I want to show you something.”

Blaine offers his hand to Kurt to help him dismount and notices that Kurt’s hand is so warm and soft, and it fits perfectly into his. Blaine lets go as he retrieves the carrots from the saddlebag and feeds them to Firebird.

Once Firebird is taken care of, Blaine takes the woolen blanket in one arm, and grasps Kurt’s hand again. He leads Kurt to the old oak tree, and sets out the blanket before they sit down. “The kitchen gardens are your special place at Westerville. This is mine.”

Blaine carefully watches Kurt take in the view of the lake, pastures and hills beyond. “This place is so special, Mr Blaine. I wish I had a canvas and paints so that I could capture the colors and textures all around us. It means a lot to me that you have shared this special place with me.”

Then Kurt does the most curious thing… He takes Blaine’s hand into his. They sit there in silence, holding hands, and it is in that moment that Blaine has an epiphany.

He’s in love.

There is no other word to describe the way his heart feels. In spite of their social standings, Blaine has never felt as close to anyone as he feels to Kurt. It’s as if their souls are intertwined in a bond that can never be broken. Kurt makes him feel things that he’s never felt before. All the romance novels he’s read are totally wrong about stirrings in the stomach. It’s more like a heat that pools in his lower belly and squeezes his heart.

Blaine can feel Kurt’s eyes on him, so he turns his head. The same tender feelings are written all over his face, and when Kurt smiles, he is simply beautiful.

A lock of hair has flopped onto Kurt’s face, so with his free hand, Blaine gently brushes it to one side. Kurt’s face is as soft as it looks, and for the life of him, Blaine can’t let go. He cups Kurt’s face with his hand, his thumb gently caressing the cheek. Blaine closes his eyes, lost in the sensation, and his body automatically leans toward Kurt. Their lips touch as if that’s exactly where they belong.
Kurt’s lips are warm and soft, and Blaine feels as if firecrackers are going off inside him. He hears Kurt’s breath hitch and his lips move against Blaine’s. The world falls away as they kiss. There’s no right or wrong, no duties, and all thoughts disappear. It’s just the two of them caught up in this special moment.

When he needs air again, Blaine pulls away from Kurt and takes shaky shallow breaths. He leans back in so that their foreheads touch, needing to be connected in any way possible. Blaine can’t think straight with Kurt flooding his senses, but the one thing he is certain of is that he has crossed the line.

There’s an invisible line etched inside his brain, setting out rules of acceptable decorum. Kissing a man, no less a servant, breaks every rule in existence. What have I done?

Blaine quickly pulls away from Kurt and twists his hands in his lap. “I’m sorry, Kurt. I shouldn’t have done that. My behavior is unforgivable.”

Kurt stands up and takes a deep breath. “I’m not sorry at all, Mr Blaine. That was my first kiss, and it couldn’t have been more wonderful. I know that society thinks it wrong for me to like men, but I do. It’s simply something that I have always felt deep inside me. Don’t worry, I won’t push myself on you. I know this can’t happen again and I promise it won’t. Now if you’ll excuse me, Mr Blaine, I’m expected at the west field.”

When Kurt briskly walks away, Blaine cries out, “Do you want a ride?”

Kurt turns around and shakes his head. “The west field is only half a mile from here. It may raise eyebrows if I arrived with you on Firebird.”

Blaine watches Kurt walk down the path until he disappears from view. He then turns toward the lake and runs his finger along his lips. It was Blaine’s very first kiss as well, and Kurt is right - it couldn’t have been more wonderful. It had sparked something inside him that he has never felt with anyone else. For the first time, Blaine had followed his heart and instincts. How could it be wrong when it felt so right?

Blaine takes out his pocket watch and decides he has given Kurt sufficient time to walk to the west field. He mounts Firebird and quickly joins the hunting party for luncheon. He laughs at Mr Kiehl’s jokes, but doesn’t really listen to them. Blaine’s thoughts are on the second footman, serving tables at the other end of the field.

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“Where’s Kurt?” Blaine asks when he enters his bedroom later that afternoon.

“He’s sniffling in bed; something about hay fever after walking to the west field. It’s strange to think Kurt would suffer from pollen if he was raised on a farm,” Sam replies. “Your bath is ready now.”

Blaine considers what Sam has said as he strips off his riding attire. “Do you think Kurt might be upset about something?”

“No, Kurt is pretty thick-skinned. He doesn’t let Sebastian get to him.”

Blaine steps into the bath and Sam takes a seat on a nearby stool. “Is Sebastian still giving Kurt grief?”

“At every opportunity, but honestly, Mr Blaine, it’s quite amusing.”
Blaine picks up the soap and uses the face cloth to clean his body. Sam looks at Blaine and starts laughing. “Mr Kiehl was hilarious flirting with you today. I almost dropped the platter of strawberries and cream when he went on about how you should visit him in Cornwall while his parents are away in Guernsey.”

“Cousin Rachel thinks that Mr Kiehl is someone who likes other men.”

“Miss Berry is pretty smart, although it isn’t hard to guess… not with the way Mr Kiehl was looking at your arse in those riding breeches.”

Blaine splashes water from the bath at Sam. “He was not!”

“You keep telling yourself that, Mr Blaine, but you know I’m right. When you wear those new sack suits in London, every lady and man will be appreciating the trousers.”

“Have you finished with your joking, Sam?” Blaine asks when he steps out of the bathtub.

Sam hands him a towel. “It’s so easy to get you riled up, Mr Blaine. That’s half the fun. Is there anything else you need before I leave?”

Blaine shakes his head, puts on his night clothes and slips into bed. It was an exhausting day of ensuring that Cousin Rachel met each guest and making small talk with his grandmama’s friends.

Blaine smiles when he recalls his bath-time conversation with Sam, who always tries his best to lift his spirits. Mr Kiehl was really ridiculous with all his innuendos. However, Sam innocently hit on a sore subject.

Do other men find him attractive? Do they know that he’s attracted to other men? More specifically, do they realize that he’s attracted to Kurt?

Blaine touches his lips and closes his eyes, remembering their kiss by the lake. If Blaine is really honest with himself, he’s been wanting to kiss Kurt for some time, but up until today, he’s been able to control himself and let his head rule. It’s getting increasingly harder to be around Kurt and not let his emotions loose.

Kurt must have been very upset about the kiss if he went to bed early. Kurt has never shown symptoms of hay fever in the past. Kurt told him that it was a wonderful first kiss, but what if he now has second thoughts? Will Kurt report him to Hummel, or even worse, his father? What would the family think of him if they found out that he’s in love with the second footman? Would they be shocked that he loves a man?

They would remind him about duty and honor… and finding a wife. They would dismiss his love for Kurt as silliness and a passing phase. And then they would dismiss Kurt to remove any temptation from Blaine.

Blaine doesn’t want Kurt hurt in the process. At all costs, Blaine will ensure that Kurt’s position in the household staff isn’t compromised. As hard as it might be, perhaps it would be best to limit their time alone together. It would allow him to regain control of his emotions. There is simply no other option available. Sometimes you can’t follow your heart.
Since 2005, fox hunting with hounds has been illegal in Britain. Opinions about fox hunting in this chapter are not those of the author.

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: Kurt and his father have a significant talk.
May 1914
Kurt

Kurt quietly enters Mr Blaine’s room the next morning, sets down the breakfast tray and adds more coals in the fireplace. While the room is warming up, he watches Mr Blaine sleep. He’s curled into a tiny ball on one side of the bed. The sheet and eiderdown are so disheveled, it’s as if he’s wrestled a tiger in the middle of the night.

Taking care not to wake up Mr Blaine, Kurt goes to the adjoining bathroom to check that Mr Evans tidied up after Mr Blaine’s bath last night. He shakes his head and tuts when he sees the open bottle of chamomile oil haphazardly placed on the window sill. Doesn’t Mr Evans know that it’s expensive?

Kurt finds the cork stopper and before he places it on the bottle, he takes a whiff of the chamomile oil. The heavenly scent soon fills his head and evokes memories of how the fragrance lingered on Mr Blaine when Kurt was pressed against him on Firebird during their ride yesterday. Kurt smiles when he recalls almost every single detail of their detour to the special place by the lake.

When they had sat down under the oak tree by the lake, Kurt had understood why the spot is Mr Blaine’s favorite place at Westerville. The rich colors and the open vista are simply breathtaking. It’s the perfect backdrop for daydreaming and being anyone that you want to be. In that moment, Kurt had never felt so connected to another person, sharing something so precious. He couldn’t help but take Mr Blaine’s hand in his, and was relieved that it was a welcomed gesture.

Kurt had thought his imagination was running away with him when he felt the pressure of Mr Blaine’s lips against his. When it dawned on him that it was really happening, he pressed his own lips closer. Their first kiss was everything Kurt had dreamed about and so much more. It was the perfect combination of sweet and tender, and had caused heat to quickly move through his body. It felt like the most natural thing in the world. It had only confirmed how he always felt about his attraction to men… and one man in particular.

When they pulled apart for air, Kurt could tell that while Mr Blaine enjoyed the kiss, he immediately regretted it. Mr Blaine’s apology came as no surprise. Despite Mr Blaine’s remorse,
Kurt somehow found the courage to tell Mr Blaine that he is attracted to men. Not wanting to make things between them awkward in the future, Kurt reassured Mr Blaine that he wouldn’t pursue him. But Kurt wants... Oh, he wants.

Kurt suddenly shivers and realizes that he has spent too long reminiscing about yesterday, and he can’t let Mr Blaine’s breakfast get cold. He returns to the bedroom, opens the curtains and says, “Good morning, Mr Blaine.”

“Humph,” Mr Blaine replies, burrowing his head further into his pillows.

“What time is it?” Mr Blaine asks groggily.

Kurt smiles when he sees Mr Blaine turn over and rub his eyes. He looks simply adorable with his curls tousled this way and that. “It’s ten o’clock. Her ladyship suggested that we let you sleep in this morning. It was quite a late evening by the time the last of the hunting guests left the abbey.”

Mr Blaine sits up in bed and Kurt sets the breakfast tray on his lap. There’s a soft-boiled egg, toast cut into ‘soldier’ strips, sausages, tomatoes, and wild mushrooms. Once Mr Blaine has had a few sips of tea, he seems to be more alert.

“Evans told me that you were sick yesterday from the pollen in the fields. I trust you feel better this morning?” Mr Blaine asks.

“I feel much better, thank you,” Kurt replies.

“I hope it had nothing to do with my behavior at the lake. I owe you an apology, Kurt.”

“You have nothing to apologize for, Mr Blaine.”

Blaine hangs his head low. “Yes, I do, Kurt. It was an abuse of my position at Westerville. Kurt, I really care about you, and I refuse to be the reason for you to leave Westerville. You have my word as a gentleman that it won’t happen again.”

Mr Blaine has confirmed Kurt’s biggest fear... that he considers their kiss a mistake. Kurt isn’t certain how to reply to Mr Blaine, without professing his love. Before he can reply, Mr Blaine adds, “I think that’s all there’s to say on the matter. It’s best to put it behind us.”

Kurt nods and turns his attention to the wardrobe, pulling out the morning outfit.

It’s not exactly what Kurt wishes to do, but he really has no choice in the matter. Mr Blaine is the son of the earl, and he’s in control. Kurt might not like Mr Blaine’s decision, but it’s better that his heart breaks now rather than later when he’s in deep over his head.

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Kurt’s day is filled with the regular routine of serving, and gardening, and serving again. He does his work efficiently, but his mind is elsewhere. Kurt wishes that he had someone to confide in, and to give him advice. After the family has retired to their respective bedrooms, Kurt collects the shoes and stacks them in the footman’s pantry. It is then that Kurt realizes that there is somebody in the household who could counsel him. He goes to the butler’s office and knocks on the door. When he enters, he finds his father sitting behind his desk, pouring over the household accounts.

The butler glances at the clock on the wall. “You’ve finished early tonight, my son. After the late
night yesterday, everyone has retired early. Come have a seat. Mrs Hudson is still sorting out
tomorrow’s menu with Mrs Sylvester. I wanted to have a private word with you about your future.”

Kurt slowly gulps, dreading the conversation they are about to have. Did his father already get
wind of his and Mr Blaine’s kiss?

“In a matter of months, you have firmly established yourself in the household. You have surpassed
all my expectations during your trial period. Not only have you performed your required tasks
efficiently, but you have taken on additional duties, such as tending the kitchen gardens. The
family members have commented on how well you’ve settled in, and how important you will be to
Mr Blaine during the London season.” His father stands up and walks towards Kurt, and gives him
a pat on the back. I’m really proud of you, Kurt. I wish your mother could see you… you know,
alive.”

These were not the words that Kurt was expecting to hear. “Thank you, Father. I shall try not to let
you down. I’ll work especially hard to look after Mr Blaine in London.”

The butler sits down on a nearby armchair. “It hasn’t gone unnoticed how you assisted in creating
Mr Blaine’s new wardrobe. The tailor made the most complimentary remarks to both the earl and
the countess. If you do a good job acting as a valet for Mr Blaine during the London season, I will
recommend you to be the valet for the earl.”

“I’m flattered to hear that the tailor mentioned my efforts to the earl and the countess. I would love
the opportunity to be a valet, but what about Mr Evans?”

His father shakes his head with a smile. “It’s no secret that Mr Evans’s talents do not include the
duties of a valet. I shall find him more suitable employment. Although Mr Evans was raised in
Westerville, he’s a city lad at heart. There will be a position available at the end of the year at
Anderson House in London. I think that will be more to Mr Evans’ liking.”

They hear a loud hiss and heavy footsteps outside the door. His father stands up and investigates.
Kurt can hear the conversation from the corridor.

“Sebastian, is there something the matter? Were you wanting to see me?”

“No, Mr Hummel. I’m just going outside to have a smoke.”

“Very well. Make sure you lock the door on your way back in.”

Mr Hummel returns to the office and sits down again in his chair. “Now, where were we before we
had that interruption? Ah, yes…your future plans. If you become the official valet for the earl and
viscount at the end of this year, you will be an upper servant, with more pay and privileges. The
natural progression is to take over as butler when I retire. We’ll be the start of the Hummel line of
butlers serving the Anderson family for generations to come.”

Kurt can see the future that his father is proposing for him quite clearly. He feels honored that his
father thinks enough of his capabilities that he could be in charge of Westerville Abbey’s male
servants. There’s just one little hitch to the vision that his father has outlined. He takes a deep
breath and hopes he is making the right decision in confiding in his father.

“Father, I have something I want to say. I’m glad that you’re proud of me, but I don’t want to lie
anymore. Being part of the Westville Abbey staff has really shown me that I can be anything. But I
will never have a wife and there won’t be future generations of Hummels. You see, I’m attracted to
men.”
“I know.”

“Really?” Kurt squeaks in surprise.

“I’ve known since you were three. I’m not totally in love with the idea, but if that’s who you are, there’s nothing I can do about it. And I love you just as much.”

The butler stands up and pats Kurt on the shoulder before giving him a long embrace. “Thank you for telling me, Kurt. Is this what has made you upset recently? I’ve noticed that you seem to have a lot on your mind.”

They sit down and Kurt pours them a cup of tea. It’s one thing for his father to know about him liking men in theory, but an entirely different thing for him to know that he loves Mr Blaine. However, he’s come this far and he can’t back down now. “I do have a lot on my mind, Father. You see, I have fallen in love,” says, and he can’t stop a sweet smile from forming on his face.

The butler takes a sip of tea, considering the latest bit of news. “Sebastian? I find that rather surprising. Is that why Sebastian was hovering at the door earlier? Waiting for you to break the news to me?”

“Lord, no. Sebastian despises me. Wait… you know that Sebastian likes men as well?”

“There is very little that goes on at Westerville that I don’t know about. I’ve even had words with Miss Lopez and Brittany about their midday absences.”

Kurt should have known that his father knew of all the goings-on in the household. However, it seems that his father hasn’t figured out who the object of his affection is.

“I’ve got a confession that you are not going to like, Father. It’s Mr Blaine,” Kurt replies nervously.

The butler nods and purses his lips. “Has Mr Blaine given you any reason to think that these affections might be returned?”

Kurt blushes and replies, “Only once. Yesterday, Mr Blaine insisted that he give me a ride on his horse to the west field. We stopped for a wee break and he kissed me… and I kissed him back. Mr Blaine apologized immediately afterwards and has since promised that it will never happen again.”

His father sits further back in his seat and is silent for a minute or two in deep contemplation. Kurt is nervous about what his father will do with this new information.

“It’s not really surprising that Mr Blaine might like men as well. I’ve known him since he was a young lad, and he’s never shown interest in ladies. You and Mr Blaine are alike in many ways, and I can see why you might hold affections for one another. I doubt very much that Mr Blaine really understands what this means for him. I might accept you for who you are and who you like, but I guarantee you that the earl will not tolerate it.”

“Is it because Mr Blaine is a member of the gentry?” Kurt asks.

“Without giving away the earl’s confidences, I can only say that there are expectations of Mr Blaine that include a career and a suitable wife. No good can come of any future liaisons between you and Mr Blaine. By the end of the year, he’ll be married and living far away from Westerville.”

“It’s not going to be easy,” Kurt says.
“It might be easier than you think. Mr Blaine is first and foremost a gentleman. He’s as good as his word, so if he says it won’t happen again, it won’t. You’d be wise to hide away your affections and let them slowly slip away.”

Kurt knows that his father’s advice is sound, however, it’s easier to say than to do.

After saying goodnight to his father, Kurt goes to the kitchen for a glass of water. Just as he’s leaving, he’s startled by a hand grabbing him and shoving him outside. The next thing Kurt knows, Sebastian has him pushed against the stone wall by a fistful of his shirt front.

“I can’t believe I’ve been passed over for you. The valet job should be mine. I’ve been biding my time waiting for Mr Evans to make such a whopping mistake that not even the earl could excuse it. What I want to know is what you did to get this opportunity. Is it because your father is the butler or because you bat your eyes at Mr Blaine?”

“I do no such thing!” Kurt cries out.

Sebastian leans in and crowds Kurt’s space even farther. “Don’t play all innocent with me. I see how you look at Mr Blaine… how you get all breathy and your voice gets higher like a young girl’s. If Mr Blaine needs a good rogering, I’m the man to do it, not some pathetic boy like you.”

Usually, Kurt can put up with Sebastian’s sneering and snide remarks, but it makes him see red when Sebastian talks about Mr Blaine as a sexual object. Kurt takes Sebastian by surprise and turns them so that Sebastian is flush against the stone wall.

“You can say what you want about me. It’s like water off a duck’s back. But don’t you ever talk about Mr Blaine like that. Now listen, you filthy little rat. If you lay a single finger on him, I’ll punch your shiny horse teeth into the back of your skull.”

Sebastian pushes Kurt off him and brushes down his jacket. “Is this meant to frighten me? Because if it is, it’s not working. I wonder what would happen if I whispered in the earl’s ear about the afternoons you spend together alone in the library or the kitchen gardens. One word and you would be gone.”

“We’ve done nothing improper, so that would be a very uninteresting story. Now why don’t you crawl back under your rock,” Kurt huffs before returning inside of the abbey.

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Days later…

Kurt takes his gardening gloves off and admires his handiwork. He’s been thinning the gooseberry bushes to allow the remaining berries to grow large and succulent. The days since the fox hunt have passed quickly. Sebastian has been keeping up a never-ending stream of criticism and barbed remarks. The only respite Kurt gets is when he’s working in the kitchen gardens.

Kurt hasn’t seen very much of Mr Blaine of late. He’s taken to waking up early and going for long rides on Firebird before breakfast. There are lengthy morning walks with Wesley, the stable boy, and then luncheon with the dowager countess at Dower House. During the afternoons, he plays the piano with the drawing room door closed. Evenings are spent with Lady Quinn and Miss Berry, perfecting ballroom dances.

Mr Blaine spends an increasing amount of time with Mr Evans, who has even taken over the bath-time duties. When Kurt silently sets out Mr Blaine’s black tie attire to wear, he can hear chatting and laughing behind the closed bathroom door. It makes Kurt pea green with envy. Doesn’t Mr
Kurt misses Mr Blaine.

It is only now that Kurt realizes how much time they have spent together, talking about all manner of things - the latest music Miss Berry has brought from America, men’s fashion, and books they both have enjoyed. Kurt thinks they are two kindred spirits caught in a complex web of etiquette and what society expects of them.

Kurt returns to the abbey and quickly changes from his dungarees and flannel shirt into his livery uniform, for he needs to serve afternoon tea in the drawing room.

“Take it! Don’t dawdle,” Mrs Sylvester shouts at Sebastian, sliding the three-tiered silver serving stand towards him. It’s filled with egg with cress and cucumber sandwiches, cut into squares with the crusts cut off, scones, and other savories and sweets.

Mrs Sylvester then turns to Kurt. “Mr Hummel is serving the tea in the drawing room. His lordship and Mr Blaine are in the study. Now go bring this tray up to the men before I grow old and die.”

“Yes, Mrs Sylvester,” Kurt replies, and lifts the heavy silver tray laden with afternoon tea for two. He carefully makes his way to the study and shifts the tray onto his hip while he knocks on the door.

“Enter,” his lordship calls out. When he sees Kurt with the large tray he adds, “Ah, Kurt. Is it already time for afternoon tea?”

“Yes, my lord,” Kurt replies. He places a teacup and saucer in front of both the earl and Mr Blaine, and pours the tea from the silver teapot. He then takes the tiered serving stand and offers the selection to the gentlemen.

“You can put the stand down over there. We can help ourselves if needed. Blaine and I haven’t finished our talk,” the earl says.

“Very well, my lord.” Kurt bows slightly before leaving the study. Once he closes the door, he stands against it, grateful that he didn’t make any mistakes in front of his lordship. In this position, Kurt can’t help but hear the conversation between the earl and Mr Blaine.

“You saw Quinn at the fox hunt only this week. Cooper assures me that they are trying for a baby, but it doesn’t appear to be going well.”

“I believe these things take time, Father.”

“They’ve had plenty of time. I think that Quinn might be barren after all her past difficulties. We’ll have to make sure that your future wife is from a line with plenty of healthy male children.”

“It seems as if the list of requirements for my future wife is never ending.”

“Don’t be smart with me, young man. You know the honor of Westerville is at stake! If you don’t marry by the end of the year, I’ll be forced to raise the rents for our tenant farmers before the next harvest. Their livelihoods depend upon us to be fair with them.”

“I know what is expected of me, Father. Have you any thoughts about which ladies might be suitable for me to marry?”

“The Marquess of Tweeddale has only one daughter, Lady Rebecca Jackson. It’s rumored that she
has a substantial dowry, if only to take her off his hands. Your mother’s sources say that the marquess is agreeable for her to live somewhere in the British Empire.”

“Grandmama has already told me about Christina Cohen-Chang.”

“That would be a very unusual match, but her father has made a fortune importing porcelain and silks from China. Miss Cohen-Chang is an only child and will inherit it all. We’re not in a position to discount the idea totally. Both ladies will attend the Westerville Ball.”

“I hope that Lady Kitty isn’t on the list of potential wives.”

“Don’t worry, my son. Their entire estate is tied up in a very messy entail. It looks as if a distant relation - a third cousin once removed - is the heir to the fortune. He’s a solicitor living in Manchester - can you imagine! The count is hoping that Lady Kitty will marry him.”

“Thank god for small miracles.”

Kurt has heard enough of the conversation between the earl and Mr Blaine. He silently walks down the corridor before he is caught eavesdropping. He tucks away the new information in the back of his mind, to fully analyze at the end of the day.

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Kurt crawls into bed bone-tired. Sebastian had him rushing up and down the stairs during the dinner service, while he leaned against the wall ‘overseeing’. Kurt is thankful that he hasn’t had another run-in with Sebastian since his confessions to his father. Kurt has enough on his mind as it is.

Kurt misses the old Mr Blaine, who would actively seek his company. The new Mr Blaine does everything he can to avoid him. In spite of how wonderful the kiss was, Kurt wishes that it hadn’t happened and they could go back to how they used to be.

Mr Blaine has always made off-the-cuff remarks about duty and expectations that his parents have of him, but Kurt had no idea that extended to marrying a wife by the end of the year. It makes sense that his lordship wants a male heir to carry the Anderson line at Westerville. What he didn’t realize is that this duty might extend to Mr Blaine, as Lady Quinn might be barren.

No wonder Mr Blaine has been spending time with Wesley and Mr Evans, his closest friends at Westerville. A little voice inside wishes that Mr Blaine would take him into his confidences as well. Now understanding the pressure Mr Blaine is under to be married, all thoughts of being the valet for the earl and Lord Cooper are forgotten. Kurt will do everything possible to help make the London season easier for Mr Blaine. And if that means Kurt needs to bury his feelings for Mr Blaine even deeper, then so be it.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: The Westerville Ball
Chapter Notes

There are hyperlinks in the chapter that provides photos for some outfits that are described.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

May 1914
Blaine

Blaine gets out of the bathtub, quickly grabs his towel and faces away from Kurt. Since the day of the fox hunt, it’s been difficult to stay away from the second footman, knowing how sweet and luscious his lips taste. Blaine doesn’t trust himself around Kurt, because all he wants to do is take Kurt in his arms and kiss his senseless… confess his undying love… and ride off with him into the sunset. Blaine bends down to dry off his shins and feet as Kurt drains the bathtub and tidies up.

“Nice arse, Mr Blaine. Don’t you think so, Kurt?” Sam jests when he walks into the bathroom.

“Uh…I-I… I wasn’t really looking, Mr Evans,” Kurt stutters.

“If you say so,” Sam replies with a cheeky grin.

Blaine turns beet-red, thinking that he probably did give Kurt quite a show. “What are you doing here, Sam? Are my father and Cooper already dressed?”

“They’re downstairs, greeting the first guests. His lordship asked me to remind you that you’ll be expected at the front entrance in 30 minutes, when your grandmother will arrive. Hudson is about to leave to collect her. Also, his lordship asked me to give you this gift to wear this evening.”

Blaine slips into his dressing gown, and inspects the gifted cufflinks. He immediately notices that the family’s coat of arms is engraved on the gold. His father’s heirloom cufflinks will be handed down to Cooper upon his death, so his father must have had this pair made especially for him.
“They are simply stunning, Mr Blaine,” Kurt exclaims, looking over his shoulder.

Blaine feels heat rush through his body with Kurt leaning against his back. His cock is starting to take interest, and… No, this simply cannot happen.

Blaine jumps away from Kurt as if he’s been singed by fire. “I best get dressed if I’m to meet my grandmama on time.”

“I’ll see you downstairs, Mr Blaine. I’m expected to help greet the visitors,” Sam says as he leaves the bathroom.

Blaine enters his bedroom, and notices that Kurt has carefully laid out every piece of his formal attire. Blaine takes the pair of tiny boxer briefs and gives Kurt a pointed look.

“I know you can wear your knee-length underdrawers with the suit, but these will give a clean line to your trousers.”

“Nobody will notice, Kurt.”

“I will. I… I mean… I’ll know that the suit could have looked better. And you want to look your best for Miss Berry’s first formal appearance. And who knows, you might meet the lady of your dreams tonight.”

“Enough, Kurt. You’ve convinced me,” Blaine chuckles, and he puts on the tight boxer briefs while still wearing his dressing gown. What Kurt doesn’t seem to appreciate, is that physical attraction has very little to do with the business of marriage, at least in his case.

Was it just his imagination that Kurt’s eyes darkened for a brief moment as he talked about clean lines to his trousers? A little voice inside hopes that Kurt will think he looks handsome in his new formal suit.

Once the trousers are on, Kurt assists Blaine into his dress shirt. Kurt slowly but carefully pushes the shirt studs into the holes. Each time Blaine feels Kurt’s fingers brush against his chest, his cock stirs. Blaine closes his eyes and wills his body to calm down before Kurt notices. The newly-gifted cufflinks are next poked into the shirt’s cuffs, and it’s all he can do to suppress the urge to stroke Kurt’s soft hands.

When Blaine feels Kurt pull his trousers tightly around his waist and do up the top button, he squeaks, “I can do the rest of the buttons.” As much as he wants Kurt’s touch near his cock, he must err on the side of caution. He wouldn’t want to embarrass himself and explode in his boxer briefs.

After Kurt has helped with the waistcoat and bow tie, he walks over to the washstand. “I’ll help you with the pomade.”

Blaine nods and slowly gulps because Kurt’s long slender fingers in his hair will not help the growing problem in his briefs. When Blaine nears the washstand, he asks, “Kurt, could you do the swoop in the front like you do for your hair? I rather like that look.”

“Certainly, Mr Blaine,” Kurt replies. The footman takes a small dab of pomade from the jar and rubs it in his palms. Then his fingers loosely comb Blaine’s hair, ensuring that the curls are controlled, but not plastered to his head. Blaine closes his eyes and basks in the feeling, for Kurt must have the most magical fingers anywhere in the British empire.

The next thing Blaine feels is Kurt’s warm breath on his face as fingers carefully swoop up the
front of his hair. Logically, Blaine knows that it’s Kurt’s job to dress him, but with his eyes still closed, it feels more intimate, like a lover looking after him in a tender moment. Blaine opens his eyes when Kurt turns him around.

“I don’t want you to look in the mirror until we’re finished,” Kurt remarks.

Kurt assists Blaine with putting on the black-tailed coat, and deftly does up the buttons. “You may look now, Mr Blaine.”

Blaine opens his eyes and looks into the mirror. His hair has been perfectly primped and styled for this evening’s ball. Kurt is closely standing behind him, brushing the coat’s shoulders for imaginary lint. In that moment, Blaine wishes he could walk into the ballroom arm in arm with Kurt for everyone to see whom he truly loves.

But he can’t.

“I’ll see you downstairs,” Blaine whispers, before exiting his bedroom.

Blaine descends the main staircase and can see guests mingling in the variety of rooms open for tonight. His grandmother’s butler Spratt is collecting fur stoles, coats and hats from guests to store in the nearby cloakroom. The front parlor is set up as a tea and light refreshment room. The drawing room has card tables set out for games of whist, and the dining room has a light supper buffet ready for when guests are hungry. The grand ballroom in the east wing, which is normally closed, has been cleaned and polished for tonight’s event.

Blaine heads to the main entrance, where Sam is positioned to open the door for guests.

“You’ve made it down just in time,” Sam whispers as Hudson stops the Renault in front of them.

Blaine straightens his bow tie and smoothens down his black tailed coat as Hudson opens the rear door. His grandmama is looking splendid, albeit a little old-fashioned, in her gown from the bygone Victorian era. Blaine offers his arm to help her out and states, “Grandmama, you look so elegant. You’ll be the belle of the ball.”

“I’ll most certainly be the belle of the ball on your arm. Blaine, you look so handsome in your new suit. I should have brought my brolly to beat off the fair maidens that will be flocking around you.”

“You flatter me, Grandmama, but I’m just the humble second son. We’ll see if anyone takes interest.”

Blaine slowly walks to the ballroom entrance with his grandmother. Hummel is there and puffs out his chest before announcing, “The Honorable Blaine Anderson and the Dowager Countess of Westerville.”

All eyes in the ballroom turn to the couple, for the dowager countess is firmly established in high society. The large ballroom is well lit by the many crystal-cut chandeliers, and the light bounces off the highly polished oak floors. The music hasn’t started yet, so there are small groups mingling and chatting on the dance floor.

Blaine escorts his grandmother to a nearby table, where her friends are watching the goings-on. Kurt immediately comes over with a tray and serves her a glass of champagne. Once Blaine has ensured that his grandmama is comfortable, he heads over to his friends from the Sandhurst Military Academy.

“Moneybags and Valley. I’m so glad that you could make it.” Blaine greets his friends and slaps
his hand on their backs.

“Unless you want us to call you ‘Shrimpy’ all night, I think it’s better to stick to our proper names,” Mr Duvall replies.

Jeff Sterling and Nick Duvall have been his very best mates at Sandhurst during the summers of military training. “Of course. If I’m not mistaken, you’ll both soon be graduating. Have you had any news about the future?”

“I’ve been selected to lead the first commission of the 9th Queen's Royal Lancers,” Mr Duvall proudly boasts. “It was worth all the hours studying and practicing on the training field.”

“My father has purchased me a commission with the 4th Royal Irish Dragoon Guard. It seems as if my antics and pranks at Sandhurst have caught up with me. I only hope that I can understand a thick Irish brogue,” Mr Sterling replies. “Mr Anderson, do you have an eye on someone at the ball?”

Blaine looks around the ballroom, and Kurt quickly catches his eye. “There is someone that I’m interested in, but I’m not revealing their identity. Otherwise, you’ll be swarming towards them like bees to the honey.”

“You’re no fun,” Mr Sterling pouts. “How about that blonde beauty over there?”

“That’s Lady Katherine Wilde, otherwise known as Lady Kitty. Be careful of her - she’s got claws and she bites.”

“Ooh, I do like a challenge. I bet I can get her to kiss me before the end of the night.”

Blaine laughs, “Be careful what you wish for, Mr Sterling.”

“When will you find out about the Indian Civil Service?” Mr Duvall asks.

“I’ll receive the exam results any day now, but it’ll take a little bit longer to find out if there is a position available for me. Father has also been making inquiries about military commissions,” Blaine replies.

“Is it selfish for me to wish that you’ll join the 9th Queen's Royal Lancers with me? I could use someone like you by my side,” Mr Duvall insists. Their conversation is interrupted when Blaine sees who’s at the ballroom entrance.

“Miss Rachel Berry and the Countess of Westerville,” Hummel announces as Blaine’s mother and cousin enter the main ballroom. Blaine’s eyebrows shoot up when he sees Cousin Rachel. She is wearing a mint-green gown made of crepe fabric with bands of white frilly lace. In a different color, Blaine thinks it’s something that his grandmama might wear. No wonder the English ladies follow the Parisian couture. Pamela and Rachel make their way over to Blaine.

“Cousin Rachel, your hair looks beautiful piled up on top of your head. I can see Mama has lent you some of her jeweled hair pins,” Blaine says as he gives her a kiss on the cheek.

“Yes, they look lovely on her,” Pamela says with a sweet smile.

“The ballroom looks so grand,” Rachel observes. “Why, there’s even a five-piece band in the corner. And the crystal chandeliers shine so brightly.”

“Cousin Rachel, allow me to introduce you to my good friends, Mr Nick Duval and Mr Jeff
Sterling.”

“How do you do, Miss Berry?” Messieurs Duval and Sterling greet her as they bow.

“Cousin Blaine has told me so many wonderful things about you and his summers spent at the Sandhurst Military Academy.”

“We’re like the three musketeers,” Mr Duvall confirms.

“One for all, all for one,” Mr Sterling shouts, raising one arm.

The band starts to play a popular waltz. “Would you do me the honor of dancing with me, Miss Berry?” Mr Duval asks. Once she has nodded to indicate her consent, she is whisked onto the dance floor.

“If you’ll excuse me, I see that Lord St James has arrived. I need a word with him,” Mr Sterling announces before taking his leave from Pamela and Blaine.

Pamela looks around and smiles when she spots whom she’s looking for. “I see Lady Rebecca Jackson is already here. Let me introduce you to her.”

Blaine follows his mother through the crowded ballroom and smiles at Kurt when they pass each other. “Lord and Lady Jackson, I’m so glad that you and your daughter could make it to Westerville this evening. I’d like to introduce you to my second son, Blaine Anderson.”

After bowing to the pair, Blaine turns his attention to their daughter. Lady Rebecca is a petite blonde, as his grandmama has already informed him, but she has a twinkle in her eye and a smirk on her face. “How do you do, Lady Rebecca?”

“You’re very handsome, Mr Anderson. I could definitely envision you in my bed.”

Blaine’s face flushes with embarrassment. He’s never met any lady so forward about things better left unsaid. Desperate to change the topic, Blaine asks, “What do you do to pass the time in Scotland, Lady Rebecca?”

“I play the xylophone at the church services on Sundays.”

“I enjoy music as well, Lady Rebecca. Perhaps we could play a duet together sometime?”

“Let’s dance, future husband,” Lady Rebecca orders.

Blaine is shocked that Lady Rebecca already considers him as her future husband. Why, they’ve only just met. Blaine schools his face into a pleasant expression and remembers that this lady may be the key to Westerville’s future. Blaine bows low before he takes Lady Rebecca’s hand and leads her onto the dance floor. No sooner than when they finish one turn of the waltz, Blaine feels a smack on his buttocks.

“You’ll do,” Lady Rebecca shouts before slapping Blaine’s buttocks again. The guests all around them snicker and whisper to one another. Blaine can see Countess Jackson approaching and that can’t mean anything good.

“Indoor voice, Rebecca,” Countess Jackson gently reminds her. Under Lady Rebecca’s mother’s watchful eye, they resume dancing without incident until the waltz draws to a close.

“Rebecca, please join me in the parlor for tea and light refreshments,” the Countess Jackson
suggests.

“They better have fairy cakes with pink icing and sprinkles or else! Will you be joining us, Mr Anderson?” Lady Rebecca asks.

“I’m afraid I must remain here in the ballroom as one of this evening’s hosts. I might seek you out later, perhaps?”

“You better!” she replies, and with one long pinch of his right buttock, Lady Rebecca follows her mother out of the ballroom.

Blaine has never felt so uncomfortable with a lady in his life. He only hopes that other potential wives on his parents’ list are more agreeable and to his liking. He shudders at the thought of being married to Lady Rebecca. Just as he’s contemplating whether to run away and join the circus, he hears a familiar voice behind him.

“You’ll have your hands full with that Lady Rebecca.”

Blaine turns around and smiles broadly at his dear friend from Carmel. “I think you’re right about that, Lord St James. It’s been ages since you’ve visited Westerville.”

“I’ve been in Austria and Germany.”

“How intriguing,” Blaine remarks. It’s well known that the next Duke of Carmel is interested in social and political issues, but is truly in his element when finding out other people’s secrets and using them to his advantage. Therefore, it’s not surprising that Lord St James has been engaged in high-level diplomatic talks on the continent.

“Interesting… and worrying. The Kaiser is such a mercurial figure - one minute the warlord, the next a lovelorn poet,” Lord St James relates.

“But a poet in need of an empire,” Blaine adds.

Lord St James chuckles. “That’s very good, Mr Anderson. I say, there’s a rather good turnout at the ball. It seems that all the usual suspects are here tonight.”

“Have you met my American cousin, Miss Rachel Berry? She arrived recently from New York City. This is her debut ball. I’m sure you’ll both get along like a house on fire.”

Blaine finds Cousin Rachel and introduces her to Lord St James.

“Enchanté, Miss Berry,” Lord St James greets her. When Rachel offers her hand, he bows and gently kisses it. “I say, Mr Anderson, where have you been hiding her?”

“I arrived in March from New York City to attend the London season. Will you be there as well, Lord St James?”

“I will now, Miss Berry.” After a few minutes of idle chit-chat, the couple leave for the dance floor. It only confirms to Blaine that Lord St James and Cousin Rachel would be a very good match.

Blaine is about to find his grandmama to see if she is in need of anything, when he hears Hummel announce, “Mr and Mrs Cohen-Chang and their daughter, Miss Christina Cohen-Chang.”

Blaine looks towards the ballroom entrance as the new guests enter, and sets his eyes on the most
exotic-looking lady he has ever seen. Miss Cohen-Chang is wearing a voluminous red silk skirt and a long-sleeved shirt with gold threads woven into it, forming intricate patterns. Her long hair is loosely pinned at the nape of her neck, and loose curls fall along her back. The earl nudges him and whispers, “Let’s welcome them together.”

“Mr and Mrs Cohen-Chang, welcome to Westerville. I trust the trip from London was uneventful?”

“It was indeed, Lord Anderson. This is my daughter, Miss Christina Cohen-Chang.”

“Welcome, Miss Cohen-Chang. Allow me to introduce you to my second son, Mr Blaine Anderson.”

Blaine bow to the young lady.

“Mr and Mrs Cohen-Chang, let me take you to the dining room where there’s a light supper buffet. I assure you that your daughter will be well looked after by my son.”

As they watch their parents leave the ballroom, Kurt arrives with a serving tray filled with drinks.

“Would you care for some champagne, Miss Cohen-Chang?” When Blaine sees her nod, he lifts two flutes off the tray and mouths ‘thank you’ to Kurt.

“Cheers. Here’s to new friendships,” Blaine says before they clink their glasses together and take a sip of the bubbly beverage.

“I’ve never seen such an exquisite ball gown before. May I ask where it’s from?”

“It’s called a hanbok. It’s what Korean women wear at formal events. I would much prefer to wear something like the other English ladies, but mama insisted I wear something more traditional.”

“Are you from Korea, Miss Cohen-Chang?”

“It’s a long story, Mr Anderson. We’re originally from Seoul, but when the Japanese occupation started four years ago, my family fled to Hong Kong. It was there that my father expanded his export business to include selling Chinese porcelain and silks to Great Britain. My mother and I live in London, while my father travels back and forth to Hong Kong.”

Blaine can now understand how the Cohen-Chang family made its fortune. “What an exciting life you must lead. Do you enjoy traveling, Miss Cohen-Chang?”

“I love traveling to new places, Mr Anderson. But I also love to dance,” she giggles.

Blaine takes the cue, offers Miss Cohen-Chang his hand and they are soon doing the polka in time to the music. His partner is a wonderful dancer, light and quick on her feet. However, his eyes dart around the ballroom until he can see Kurt against the wall staring back at him. Although he’s dancing a hundred feet away, Blaine can tell, by Kurt’s posture, that he’s sad.

“You are perhaps the best partner I’ve had the opportunity to dance with,” Miss Cohen-Chang whispers.

Blaine snaps his attention back to the young lady. “Thank you. I’ve always enjoyed music, singing and dancing. I’ve also been practicing with my Cousin Rachel.”

They dance together for the next four musical pieces, until they are both tired and thirsty. “Shall we have some tea and refreshments?” Blaine suggests.
“I thought you’d never ask,” Miss Cohen-Chang replies, batting her eyelashes.

Blaine takes her arm and links it into his as they make their way to the drawing room. He can see his grandmama at the corner table playing whist with her friends. The dowager countess smiles brightly when she sees them, and Blaine winks back at her before leading Miss Cohen-Chang over to an empty settee. Once they are seated, Sebastian comes over and pours them two cups of tea.

“My family has been singing your praise for the last few weeks - how you have a solid future in either the British cavalry or the Indian Civil Service. Tell me, Mr Anderson, which avenue do you most wish to pursue?”

Blaine is astonished by her question, for no-one has ever asked him about his own personal choice. “I’d be happy with either, but if I had a choice it would be the British cavalry. Although I’d be away for long periods of time, I’d have the opportunity to return to Westerville on home leaves.”

“Is it Westerville or your family that you would miss the most?” Miss Cohen-Chang probes.

“It’s a combination of both,” Blaine admits. I enjoy spending time with my family, but I also enjoy being outdoors at Westerville. It’s part of who I am.”

Kurt comes over and offers a selection of sandwiches on a silver platter. Blaine finds it difficult to read the footman’s expression. He is polite and cordial, but seems rather distant.

“I can imagine you horse riding on the estate. You must cut a fine figure in your hunting coat.”

“My red hunting coat,” Blaine boasts.

“Then you’ll match me in my old-fashioned Korean skirt,” Miss Cohen-Chang replies, and they both start giggling.

As they continue talking, Blaine realizes that she’s smart and she asks him very good questions. He’s impressed that she really listens with interest to his replies. Miss Cohen-Chang is quick-witted, and several times Blaine bursts into laughter as she relates a story.

“Will you be attending the entire London season with your cousin Miss Berry?”

“Yes, I will,” Blaine confirms.

“Good, I enjoy your company. I look forward to seeing you at times,” Miss Cohen-Chang wistfully replies.

“I enjoy your company as well. Is it impertinent of me to ask my mother to talk to your mother... to make sure we’re attending the same events?” Blaine asks.

“What a splendid idea, Mr Anderson. I’ll let mother know that I’m agreeable to this arrangement,” Miss Cohen-Chang eagerly replies.

“Then consider it done, Miss Cohen-Chang.”

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When the last of the guests leave Westerville and the visitors that are staying have retired to their rooms, Blaine heads upstairs and takes off his shoes. He massages his sore feet - he’s been standing up or dancing for most of the night.

He found Miss Cohen-Chang to be good company when they paused their dancing for a light
supper. For a woman, she’s really good company, and he can see that they could be very good friends.

But there are no stirrings in his belly.

Blaine can appreciate Miss Cohen-Chang’s beauty - all the gentlemen were staring at her at the ball. But she doesn’t ignite desire or passion in his heart. Despite being desperately out of reach, there is only one person that Blaine feels attracted to, like a magnet to iron. As much as he tries to close his heart and suppress his desires, he’s still madly and deeply in love with Kurt.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: Kurt and Blaine have the last dance of the evening.
May 1914
Kurt

When everyone has retired to their rooms, Kurt goes around the drawing room collecting the used crystal-cut glasses. It seems that the Westerville Ball has been a huge success, judging by the number of people who have attended, dancing and chatting until the wee hours. He spots Mr Blaine’s top hat on the side table, and makes a mental note to bring it upstairs when he wakes him up tomorrow morning.

It had been difficult to watch Mr Blaine with Miss Cohen-Chang all evening. They had looked as if they belonged together when they were dancing in the ballroom. Jealousy had pooled in the pit of his stomach, and so he had asked his father if he could serve in the drawing room for a little while. Of course, this was minutes before Mr Blaine and Miss Cohen-Chang decided to take a rest for tea and refreshments. And so there Kurt was stuck in the drawing room, watching Miss Cohen-Chang flirt with Mr Blaine, and judging from Mr Blaine’s expressions, he was thoroughly enjoying himself. Kurt hears footsteps approach the drawing room and turns around to see Mr Blaine.

“Kurt, have you seen my…”

“Here’s your top hat, Mr Blaine,” Kurt says as he retrieves the item from a side table. “I was planning to bring it up to your room in the morning.”

“Thank you, Kurt. I can just imagine my father scolding me for forgetting such an expensive accessory.” Blaine consults his pocket watch and exclaims, “Kurt, what are you doing still working? It’s two o’clock in the morning! You’ve been rushed off your feet all evening.”

“The drawing room needs to be cleaned before the guests awaken in the morning. I volunteered to
do it. I didn’t think I’d get much sleep tonight anyways.”

“And why is that, Kurt?”

Kurt isn’t about to admit the true reason to Mr Blaine - that he’ll be up thinking of him and Miss Cohen-Chang. He smiles when he finally decides on what to say. “I’m still thinking about this evening. I’ve never seen such a ball as Westerville hosted tonight. All the ladies wore such fine gowns and the men were so well-groomed. Although, I must say that you stood out amongst the crowd in your new formal suit. You were by far the best dancer on the ballroom floor this evening. I could have watched you dance all night.”

Blaine’s cheeks tinge pink at the compliments. “I guess all the practicing with Cousin Rachel and Quinn paid off on the dance floor.”

Kurt continues, “The lady from the Orient looked so graceful dancing in your arms. It was as if you belonged together. I could also tell that you enjoyed each other’s company very much.”

“Miss Cohen-Chang is quite a remarkable lady. There is a pleasantness about her that I don’t usually find in English ladies. I think that Cousin Rachel will get on splendidly with her. Perhaps I’m destined to marry a woman from foreign lands.”

Kurt’s body slumps and he purses his lips. He can’t believe that Mr Blaine has already found a woman who he’s considering to be his wife. It only confirms to Kurt that he fits nowhere in Mr Blaine’s life, either now or in the future. “Well, that’s splendid, Mr Blaine. Just splendid. I hope that you have an enjoyable London season together.”

Kurt didn’t mean for that to come out sounding so bitter, but it really hurts. Kurt’s eyes are pooling with tears so he quickly turns around and busies himself plumping up the sofa cushions. He can’t let Mr Blaine see how sad he really feels. Kurt can hear Mr Blaine take a deep breath before asking, “Do you know what I was thinking when I was dancing with Miss Cohen-Chang tonight?”

When Kurt shakes his head, Blaine answers his own question. “I was thinking how heavenly it would be if you were the one dancing in my arms.”

Kurt turns around quickly and squeaks, “Really?”

He’s surprised by Mr Blaine’s admission. Maybe he has overestimated Mr Blaine’s feelings for Miss Cohen-Chang. Kurt ducks his head and admits, “I was thinking of that too.”

Blaine walks to the corner of the drawing room and places a disc on the gramophone. After turning the crank a few times, he guides the needle stylus onto the disc. As the initial soft crackling noise starts up, Mr Blaine walks over to Kurt, bows and offers his hand. “May I have the last dance?”

Kurt wants to swoon like a schoolgirl, for this is the most romantic moment he’s ever experienced. Kurt takes the offered hand. “Yes, you may, Mr Blaine,” Kurt replies in a breathy voice.

There’s a bit of confusion of where to place arms and hands, for neither has danced with another man before. “How about if you lead and I follow?” Mr Blaine suggests.

You made me love you
I didn’t want to do it
I didn’t want to do it
You made me want you
And all the time you knew it
I guess you always knew it
Mr Blaine whispers in Kurt’s ear, “I’ve tried to forget about the kiss at the lake, but I can’t. It’s filled me with a deep happiness that I’ve never known before, and will probably not experience again with anyone else in my lifetime.”

*You made me cry for*  
*I didn’t want to tell you*  
*I didn’t want to tell you*  
*I want some love that’s true*  
*Yes, I do, ’deed I do*  
*You know I do*

“I feel it too, Mr Blaine.” Kurt pulls Mr Blaine into his arms and holds him tightly. Their dancing turns into gentle swaying as they both revel in the embrace.

*Gimme, gimme, gimme, gimme what I cry for*  
*You know you’ve got the brand of kisses*  
*That I’d die for*  
*You know you made me love you*

Mr Blaine tips Kurt’s chin up and gazes into his eyes. Kurt can see the hazel orbs reflect a swirl of emotions. When Mr Blaine smiles, his whole face lights up with happiness and he’s simply beautiful. In that moment, Kurt lets his feelings lead him, and he presses his lips against Mr Blaine’s. Kurt can feel Mr Blaine’s heartbeat quicken against his chest. The knowledge that he did that to Mr Blaine makes warm happiness blossom inside his own chest. Mr Blaine pulls Kurt closer and deepens the kiss. It feels as if this is exactly where he belongs. It’s the kind of kiss that one can lose himself in.

Kurt hopes to never be found.

Kurt is jolted back to reality when he hears someone swiftly passing along the corridor. He quickly pulls away from Mr Blaine. “Did you hear that, Mr Blaine? It sounded like someone’s footsteps.”

“I can’t say I heard anything, Kurt.”

“Never mind, then. It must have been my imagination.”

Kurt wants to return his attention to Mr Blaine’s lips, but he can’t help wondering if someone is prowling the corridors at this very moment. Kurt clears his throat and passes Mr Blaine his top hat.

“You best get off to sleep and I’ll finish tidying up the drawing room.”

“Do we really have to go?” Mr Blaine whines.

“I really think we do, Mr Blaine. Mr Evans will soon be hunting me down, wondering why I’m not already in bed.”

“Perhaps we can carry on where we left off, soon,” Mr Blaine hopefully suggests.

“Perhaps we can,” Kurt repeats softly.

Mr Blaine goes over to the gramophone and switches it off. “Thank you, Kurt, for the last dance. It made my evening perfect.”

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Dinner the next day is a simple affair of cold meats and salads left over from the Westerville Ball.
It makes it much easier for Mrs Sylvester and the kitchen staff, but it doesn’t reduce the number of
times Kurt must go up and down the backstairs. Once the main course has been served, Kurt stands
against the back wall and listens to the family’s conversation.

“As much as I enjoyed entertaining the overnight guests today, I’m glad the last party left before
dinner. I’m simply exhausted,” the countess exclaims.

“It was worth it though, my darling. The Westerville ball was a huge success, and I defy any family
to host anything like it this season,” the earl responds before raising his glass and taking a sip of
claret.

“And what did you think, Blaine? Lady Rebecca was quite taken by you. I’m surprised you have
no problems sitting down today after her slapping and pinching your buttocks,” Lord Cooper
 teases.

“Stop it, Cooper. It’s not funny at all,” Lady Quinn chides. “Everyone noticed her behavior and her
obsession with Blaine’s buttocks. It really was shocking. No wonder Lady Rebecca can’t find a
husband despite of her sizeable dowry.”

Kurt bites his bottom lip and looks down, for he can barely contain his laughter. Lady Rebecca’s
behavior was inappropriate, but so very funny. Poor Mr Blaine’s face is reddened with
embarrassment.

“Awe, poor Blainey. You don’t like to be the butt of people’s jokes,” Lord Cooper says and roars
with laughter.

“Enough!” the earl exclaims. “Blaine, I think you did a marvelous job entertaining Lady Rebecca
during her brief appearance in the ballroom.”

“Entertaining is exactly the right word,” Lord Cooper chimes in.

Mr Blaine sets down his cutlery and gives his older brother a pointed look. “Have you had your
fun, Cooper? Get it out of your system now because I don’t want to ever hear about it ever again.
Marrying Lady Rebecca is my worst nightmare. No wonder her father is willing for her to join me
in India.”

“I don’t think it will come to that, sweetie,” the countess says, trying to comfort her son. “It
appeared as if Miss Cohen-Chang was keen to know you better. How do you feel about her?”

Mr Blaine uses his napkin to dab his lips before speaking. “I like Miss Cohen-Chang. Not only is
she beautiful, but she’s witty and smart. I’m not saying it’s love at first sight like Cooper and
Quinn, but I enjoyed spending time with her. She’ll be in London for the entire Season as well. I
suggested that you could arrange with her mother that we attend the same events. Miss Cohen-
Chang was most agreeable to that.”

The earl stands up and pats Mr Blaine’s shoulder. “Excellent news, my son. Although it’s highly
unusual for an English gentleman to marry a woman from the Orient, you did make a handsome
couple on the dance floor last night. Pamela, will you start the discussions about the Season with
Mrs Cohen-Chang?”

The countess nods and quickly changes the topic. “Rachel, did any gentleman catch your eye last
night?”

Rachel sets down her water glass. “Mr Duval was very friendly and introduced me to so many
people.”
“Duval… hmm… I can’t seem to recall his family,” the earl ponders.

“He’s a friend of mine from the military academy at Sandhurst,” Mr Blaine reminds his father.

“Ah, yes. Isn’t his father a doctor in Birmingham? He’s not landed gentry,” the earl recalls.

“That’s the one, Uncle Michael. However, I spent most of the evening with Lord St James. He’s quite a dynamo, with dashing looks.”

“Now, Lord St James is landed gentry, and he’s the eldest son. His father is the Duke of Carmel. I’ve met the duke on many occasions in the House of Lords. Jolly good chap.”

Miss Berry nods. “Yes, I thought his son was too.”

“So you wouldn’t mind me inviting him to afternoon tea at Anderson House when we move to London?” the countess asks.

“That would be perfect, Aunt Pamela,” Miss Berry replies.

When the butler nods, Sebastian and Kurt quickly clear the dinner plates. While Sebastian serves dessert, Kurt is left racing up and down the back staircase with the used plates, cutlery and serving platters. Once his duties are performed, he begs off to bed early, for there’s a lot he wishes to think about.

Not only was the Westerville ball considered a success by the guests, but it seems that Mr Blaine and Miss Berry have also found possible future prospects for a wife and husband, respectively. Kurt wants to hold on to that feeling of dancing in Mr Blaine’s arms, and of kissing him.

Mr Blaine had seemed so disappointed that their dancing was cut short, and indicated that he wanted them to spend more time with each other soon. But what could come of them when his efforts are clearly directed in the pursuit of Miss Cohen-Chang? Is Kurt setting himself up for nothing but heartbreak with Mr Blaine?

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Two weeks later

There’s always a week in England during May when the weather is brilliant - warm sunny days without a cloud in the sky. The weather then quickly turns to the usual damp and drizzle, but that one week in May keeps the English going until summer.

Kurt has foregone his usual warm flannel shirt for an old short-sleeved T-shirt and it fits tighter than he can ever remember. Kurt’s body shape continues to change even though he’s 19 years old, and he puts it down to working long hours in the kitchen gardens. Using a hoe, he digs up weeds between the rows of carrots and cabbages.

Kurt finds Lord Tubbington sneaking into the kitchen gardens once again. That cat is nothing but a nuisance. Just as Kurt follows the cat to pick him up and throw him out, he hears a voice call out to him.

“I finally escaped from the abbey.”

Kurt turns around and sees Mr Blaine closing the door to the walled kitchen gardens. He’s wearing his old day suit and is looking hot and bothered. Kurt immediately forgets about Lord Tubbington and focuses on the man in front of him.
“Good afternoon, Mr Blaine. Let me take your jacket. It’s far too beautiful outdoors to wear it. Have they been keeping you busy inside the abbey?”

“Between Cooper teasing me about Lady Rebecca, Cousin Rachel pumping me for information about Lord St James, and mama going through the plans for the London season, it’s unbearable. I couldn’t wait until I could flee to the kitchen gardens while you’re working.”

“You know, it’s only going to get worse when the family goes to London next week.”

Mr Blaine lowers his head and nods. “I know. If it wasn’t the thought of you going to London as well, I don’t know how I would cope.”

“I’m sure that any decent footman could look after your needs,” Kurt replies.

“But it’s not a footman I’m looking for. You see, I’m looking for someone whom I care for very deeply… a person who moves me like no other. I find in you a kindred spirit, who really understands me. I don’t feel like the second son - the second best - when I’m in your arms, I feel like the luckiest man alive. I’ve been looking for you forever.”

Kurt’s chest swells hearing these words from Mr Blaine. He’s surprised by the conviction and emotion in Mr Blaine’s voice. Why would Mr Blaine be so transparent about his feelings when he is about to go to London and pursue Miss Tina Cohen-Chang?

“I’ve stayed awake at night wondering how this could work… How we could work long term. If it was just me that I had to think about, I would gladly give up my life at Westerville and run away with you. But life isn’t so simple. My family is depending upon me to find a wife with a substantial dowry, one that will make Westerville financially secure for generations to come. And if Cooper and Quinn can’t have children, I’m expected to produce the heir for the Westerville estate and titles. I simply can’t turn my back on my family and duties.”

Kurt’s mind drifts to the thought of them running away from Westerville and finding a place that would accept their love. However, he quickly shakes the daydream from his mind for Mr Blaine would never dishonor his family. “I never expected that you would, Mr Blaine. Your kindness and loyalty are two of the many things that I admire about you.”

Mr Blaine reaches into his pocket, and takes out a small plain ring.

Kurt is shocked that Mr Blaine is serious enough about him to give him a ring and make such a declaration. “What are you promising, Mr Blaine?” Kurt asks. It takes all his self-control to not rush into Mr Blaine’s arms and really listen to the answer.

“I promise to always love you. To defend you even if you’re wrong. To surprise you. To always make the time to talk with you when you need me. To kiss you when I can, but cherish you always. Mostly, to make sure you remember how perfectly imperfect you are. I know this ring isn’t grand…”

“I love it! I love you,” Kurt exclaims, caught up in the romance of it all.

“I love you too, Kurt. Really, really do.”

Mr Blaine places the ring on Kurt’s finger and it’s a perfect fit. Kurt looks at how the light glitters off the simple silver band, engraved with a Victorian-style scroll pattern.

“I didn’t want to give you something so grand that others would question where you got it. The simple design has a special meaning for me. The engraved scroll is never ending, like my love.
We’ll have to figure out how this is going to work, but I want you in my life now and for always.”

“I want that too,” Kurt confirms. “I’ve always known that I’m attracted to men, but I didn’t realize what that really meant until I came to Westerville and saw you. Even with your family obligations of finding a suitable wife, we’ll make this work somehow.”

Mr Blaine takes Kurt’s face in his hands, and gazes lovingly into his eyes. Kurt almost melts into a puddle of goo. Never in a million years did Kurt expect that a man would love him, but here he is, with a dashing young man looking at him as if he was the most precious person on earth.

Kurt can feel Mr Blaine’s lips press gently and sweetly against his. It feels like a promise of a future ahead for the two of them together. Kurt wishes to remember this moment forever. He grabs on to Mr Blaine’s upper back and presses his body closer so they are touching everywhere. Kurt deepens the kiss and licks Mr Blaine’s lips, which immediately open for him. Kurt explores with his tongue and it’s getting him excited. He can feel Blaine’s hard cock against his thigh and Kurt is glad that he’s not the only one. Remembering where they are, Kurt pulls away. “I think we should both cool down.”

“Don’t want to. I want to hold you and kiss you and feel you all over. The way that T-shirt looks on you does things to me,” Blaine murmurs close to Kurt’s ear.

“Perhaps we can find some alone time together another day. But right now, I need to go to the kitchen and report back to Mrs Sylvester which vegetables are ripe so that she can plan dinner.”

Blaine groans. “Tell her that the Brussels sprouts got a disease and it’s too late to grow another crop this year.”

Kurt bursts into laughter. “Even Mrs Sylvester knows that Brussels sprouts aren’t harvested until late autumn. Why do you think they’re standard fare on the Christmas dinner menu?”

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By the time Kurt has consulted with Mrs Sylvester and picked the vegetables required for the upstairs dinner, it’s time for the servants’ meal. He quickly washes himself and changes his clothes into the evening livery clothes before arriving at the servants’ hall.

“Let me see that ring, Kurt,” Mercedes calls out when she sees him. Kurt sits down next to her and she grabs his hand. “Oh, it’s a beauty. Where did you get it?”

Kurt slumps in his seat and looks down, wondering how he’s going to answer the question. How could he have been so stupid not to have taken off the ring before entering the servants’ hall?

Mr Hudson immediately chimes in. “Kurt bought it when we were in Exeter. Mr Blaine gave him some pocket money that day after being so helpful selecting his outfits for London. Didn’t you buy it at Marks and Spencer, that new bazaar from the north that sells things for a penny or a little more?”

Kurt is shocked at Mr Hudson’s statement. Surely he knows that this wasn’t the case at all. Yet it gets him out of a pickle, so Kurt smiles and nods. “That’s right, Mr Hudson. We went to Marks and Spencer so that Mr Blaine could buy some essentials. Whilst he was busy inspecting the underdrawers, I couldn’t help but admire the ring. With the few coins in my pocket, I bought it.”

“The ring looks as if it’s made with real silver. It’s definitely worth more than a penny,” Mercedes suggests.
“Nope. Marks and Spencer prides itself at selling high quality goods at a sensible price,” Kurt replies. “Besides, it was the last one in the shop so they sold it to me for a bargain price,” Kurt adds, because he doesn’t want the others to inspect the jewelry section of Marks and Spencers.

Mr Hummel shakes his head. “We’ll have words about this later in the evening, Kurt. No-one can accept extra money from the family for doing what is expected of them. Now everyone, quit your chatter and start eating. The family will be down soon for pre-dinner drinks.”

Kurt is relieved when the servants’ hall quiets down as everyone scarfs down their meal. When he sees Mr Hudson make for the back exit to return to the garage, Kurt follows him out.

“Thank you, Mr Hudson. I was caught off guard with all the questions.”

“You’re welcome, Kurt.”

“What do you know?”

“I know plenty, Kurt. I drove Mr Blaine to Exeter last week. The only stop he wished to make was at Brufords Jewelers. Given how much you and Mr Blaine enjoy each other’s company... Let’s just say I put two and two together when you entered the servants’ hall wearing a ring.”

“I hope you’ll keep this to yourself, Mr Hudson.”

“Don’t worry, Kurt. I’m very loyal to Mr Blaine. I wouldn’t dream of gossiping about either of you.” Mr Hudson slaps his back before he walks back to the garage.

Kurt has always thought of Mr Hudson as a bit daft, but actually he’s smarter than anyone gives him credit for. To Kurt’s knowledge, no one else at the abbey has figured out the true feelings between him and Mr Blaine. Kurt returns inside the abbey and bumps into Sebastian.

“Watch it, loser,” Sebastian snarls.

“I do beg your pardon, Sebastian. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll go set up the dining room for dinner.”

“Make it snappy. Remember I’ll be inspecting it as soon as you’re finished.”

Kurt closes his eyes and wills himself not to reply to the barbed comment. He only prays that Sebastian hasn’t overheard the conversation with Mr Hudson.

Chapter End Notes

Song that Kurt and Blaine dance to is ‘You Made Me Love You’ performed by Al Jolson (1913).

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: The Dowager Countess receives a letter
June 1914
Blaine

Blaine straightens his tie and smooths down his hair before knocking on the door of Dower House. At breakfast that morning, his grandma sent him a message that he must come visit her today for afternoon tea. Her scrawly handwriting indicated that the message was hastily written, which isn’t at all like her. Blaine can only conclude that whatever is on her mind, it’s important.

When Blaine knocks on the door, it’s immediately opened by the butler. “Do come in, Mr Blaine. The dowager countess is expecting you.”

“Thank you, Spratt,” Blaine replies, handing the butler his hat, and he enters the drawing room.

“Grandmama, what an honor it is that you have invited me to afternoon tea by myself. Judging by the message, I take it there is something you wish to discuss with me?” Blaine asks. He gives his grandma a kiss on the cheek and sits down on the settee.

“We’ll wait until after tea is served. This conversation is private and not for the servants’ ears.”

Blaine is intrigued about what they might discuss all alone, but waits until Spratt has poured the tea and served the sandwiches and scones. Once his grandma has finished her tea, she gets up and retrieves some papers from her mahogany writing bureau.

“I received a letter you need to see,” the dowager countess reports as she hands Blaine the leaves of paper.

“Who’s it from?”

“Susan Flintshire.”
Blaine racks his brains before he remembers that Lady Flintshire is a distant relative of grandmama. “What did she say?”

“Prepare yourself for the worst. Skip the first page. My poor niece never uses one word when twenty will do. Start there. I’m sorry…”

“I’m sorry to tell you that Hugh has told me a vile story about your grandson, Blaine.”

“Sorry? She’s thrilled!” the dowager countess bitterly remarks.

Blaine reads the letter about how on the night of the Westerville ball, Hugh came downstairs to investigate music he had heard from his room directly above the drawing room. He discovered Blaine intimately dancing with a footman. The letter goes on to say that they finished the dance with a passionate embrace and kiss.

Blaine realizes that Kurt was right when he said he had heard footsteps along the corridor that evening. He sets down the letter and tries to compose himself, in spite of how much his stomach is churning. What will his grandmama do with this information?

The dowager countess clears her throat to grab Blaine’s attention. “Now, first I must ask, and I want you to think carefully before you answer, is any of this true?”

Blaine looks up at his grandmama with tears welling in his eyes. He can’t seem to find the words to tell her.

“How much is true?” the dowager countess asks.

Blaine remains silent, hoping that the questions will go away.

“I see. Some of it is true,” the dowager countess remarks.

Blaine’s tongue feels all twisted and he can’t get a word out.

“Oh dear.”

Now that his grandmama knows that the letter is factually correct, he wants to tell her how he feels. “I know this is hard for you to hear, Grandmama, but I do love him.”

“I wondered about that. Blaine, do your parents know?”

“They don’t and they’re not going to,” Blaine says with a fierce tone to his voice. “I know that marrying and possibly producing an heir is expected of me. I won’t back away from my responsibilities to Westerville and my family.”

The dowager countess is silent as she absorbs the news.

“Please, Grandmama…”

The dowager countess holds up a hand. “Blaine, I can’t listen to your attempts to try and justify yourself. It’s all terribly wrong. I don’t know how a relationship with a second footman could possibly have a happy ending.”

Blaine stands up. “I know this is hard for you to hear. God knows, sometimes it’s hard for me to believe it myself. If you expect me to stop loving Kurt, I’m afraid you’ll be very disappointed… Even if that means that you’ll no longer love me. Good day, Grandmama.”
Blaine leaves the drawing room and Dower House, wondering if he will ever see his grandmama again.

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“What are we going to do, Mr Blaine?” Kurt asks, after he’s heard the entire conversation between Mr Blaine and the dowager countess. They are alone in the kitchen gardens, with the door firmly bolted so that there can be no interlopers.

“For one thing, can you call me Blaine when we’re alone together like this? I would like to think that we’re partners and not master/servant.”

Kurt nods. “It might take me some time to get used to it, Blaine.”

“We have our entire lifetime for you to get used to it, Kurt. Grandmama spoke to me yesterday afternoon and she hasn’t yet informed my parents. That says something in itself.”

“But how do you know that she hasn’t said anything?”

“Because if my parents knew, you and your father would be on the first train back to Somerset.”

“I wish my father didn’t have to be involved. His job at the abbey means everything to him. Do you think I should warn him?”

“Not yet. I don’t think grandmama will make her move until she has spoken to me first. She doesn’t act impulsively. She’ll need to digest what I’ve told her and formulate her plan.”

“Why do you think she’ll come up with a plan?”

Blaine chuckles. “Grandmama always has a plan. I can only think of one plan that she’s had that was poorly conceived.”

“What was that, out of interest?” Kurt asks.

“The plan to introduce me to Lady Rebecca Jackson as a possible wife,” Blaine shudders.

“Perhaps I should leave Westerville Abbey. I could always ask Mr Moore if his offer as an apprentice at his tailor shop still stands. At least I would still be close to you.”

“For now, but what happens when I go to London with the family for the Season? Or maybe even India? No, if we want this...us...to last a lifetime, we’ll have to learn how to figure out problems together.”

Blaine presses his lips against Kurt’s, and butterflies stir in his stomach. It’s the confirmation he needs that what he feels for Kurt is real. Kurt pulls him closer and deepens the kiss, and time is soon forgotten.

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“You don’t know how to play croquet, Cousin Rachel?” Quinn exclaims, hardly believing the fact.

“It’s not very popular in New York City. Although we have a townhouse in the upper east side near Central Park, our back garden is rather small.”

“Never mind, Quinn. Whilst you and the family play croquet, I’ll keep Cousin Rachel company,” Blaine suggests. “Perhaps a stroll around the rose garden? The first blooms are out.”
“That would be most wonderful, Cousin Blaine,” Rachel replies enthusiastically.

“Excellent. I’ll arrange for afternoon tea to be served to us in an hour at the rose garden pavilion. Shall we meet at the main entrance in 15 minutes?”

Once Rachel nods her agreement, Blaine makes arrangements with Hummel for their afternoon tea. He turns toward the staircase to rush up the stairs, but a tap on his shoulder stops him in his tracks. Blaine turns around and sees Kurt. The first thing Blaine notices is Kurt’s huge grin, and then he realizes that Kurt has his straw boater hat and walking stick in his hands.

“Are you looking for these, Mr Blaine?” Kurt suggests with a twinkle in his eye as he hands the items over.

Blaine shakes his head and blushes. “Why, yes, I was going to retrieve those from upstairs, Kurt. How do you always know what I need before I do?”

“I’d like to say that I consult the Ouija board, but that’s a lie. When my father informed me that you and Miss Berry would have afternoon tea in the rose garden in an hour, I figured you would need these.”

“I thank you, kind sir.”

They both turn as they see Cousin Rachel coming down the stairs. Blaine blinks several times as he takes in the outfit she’s wearing. He first sees the black jumper with a red and brown owl applique sewn to the front. Then, he notices that she is wearing a bright red skirt to complete the outfit. Blaine briefly looks at Kurt and quickly turns his head, for he’s afraid that he’ll burst out in laughter at Kurt’s expression. Blaine knows Kurt well enough by now to be aware that when Kurt bites his lower lip, it means that Kurt is struggling to maintain his usual pleasant expression.

Blaine looks Cousin Rachel over one last time and at last finds a compliment to give. “I do love the way you style your hair, Cousin Rachel. It looks so complicated but elegant. Does Mercedes help you with it?”

“You always mention my hair, Cousin Blaine. Never my choice of clothes,” Cousin Rachel pouts.

“You manage to select the single most interesting outfits in all of England. Every man you encounter will notice them.”

Blaine hears a quiet snort coming from Kurt, but tries to ignore it. He can see Cousin Rachel preen at the compliment and her smile goes a long way to soothe his conscience about his remark. Blaine offers his arm to Cousin Rachel and they walk outdoors into the warm afternoon.

The rose garden has been a part of the Westerville estate for generations. Over time, numerous varieties of English rose bushes have been propagated and thrive in its soil. Blaine explains the history of some rose bushes to Cousin Rachel, based upon what his grandmama has told him on similar strolls. He stops in one section that has half a dozen bushes that have roses blooming.

“This is my favorite rose bush,” Blaine confides. “It’s a hybrid that was propagated 100 years ago by the estate’s head gardener. You can see that the outer petals are ruby red, but the tight inner petals are a brilliant yellow. It’s called the ‘Devon Rose’ after the county.

“It’s perhaps the most beautiful rose I’ve ever seen, Cousin Blaine. It’s hard to imagine that anyone can create a rose so unique.”

“It takes a lot of patience and care. I don’t understand everything about hybriding plants, but it’s
about taking the pollen from one plant and fertilizing another,” Blaine replies.

Once they’ve strolled through the entire rose garden, Blaine guides Cousin Rachel to the white-painted wooden pavilion. It not only offers the perfect view of the roses, but it also provides very welcomed shade. Even more welcomed is Kurt with afternoon tea for two set up. Kurt pulls out the chairs for them to sit upon, and then pours the tea. Kurt then picks up the three-tier stand and offers the selection of sandwiches and scones with strawberry jam and Devonshire’s famous clotted cream. Once the pair is settled with their afternoon tea, Kurt departs for the abbey to serve the rest of the family.

“I don’t know how I managed to live until 18 years old without sampling an English afternoon tea,” Rachel exclaims after taking a bite of a scone.

“I don’t know how you did either, Cousin Rachel,” Blaine giggles. “However, I have no doubt that New York City has tasty offerings.”

Rachel hums in agreement as she sips her cup of Earl Grey tea. “We could talk about food all afternoon, but now that we’re alone, I’m more interested in talking about potential suitors. Did you meet anyone at the Westerville Ball that took your fancy? Please, please don’t tell me you fell in love with Lady Rebecca Jackson.”

Blaine chuckles as he sets down his teacup. “No, I didn’t fancy Lady Rebecca at all. My buttocks are still sore from all her slaps and pinches.”

“Thank goodness for that, Cousin Blaine. I don’t care how much money she has, Lady Rebecca was simply ghastly.”

“I did meet someone whose company I enjoyed,” Blaine adds.

“Was it that girl who is from the Orient?” Cousin Rachel asks.

“Yes, it was. But even though Miss Cohen-Chang was interesting to talk to, there wasn’t that spark in my heart. We’ve left it that we’ll see each other during the London season. Who knows what will come of it,” Blaine wistfully replies.

Feeling uncomfortable about the conversation focusing on women suitable for himself, Blaine decides to switch the direction of the conversation. “How about you, Cousin Rachel? Did you meet any man that you fancied?”

“I truly enjoyed the company of your friends from the military academy, but I doubt very much my father would approve of any courtship. He’s made it perfectly clear that any suitable husband would have to come with a title.”

Blaine has heard this many times before, which is why Cooper was a catch, but he is not.

Rachel continues, “Lord St James seemed interested in me. I thought he was rather smug and egotistical, but he was very good company. As I told your parents, I’d like to see him more during the London season before I make up my mind about him.”

“I’ve known Lord St James since we were children. Yes, he’s full of himself, but he’ll inherit a large estate, and of course the family’s title.”

Rachel looks out across the rose garden, and Blaine can tell that she’s thinking very hard.

“We’re the best of friends, Cousin Blaine?”
“The bestest,” Blaine confirms.

“Can I let you know my best-kept secrets?”

“Of course you can, Cousin Rachel. You can confide in me and your secrets will be safe.”

Cousin Rachel takes a few deep breaths before she starts to speak. “I have absolutely no desire to live in England and marry a man who has a title and an estate. I’m sorry to say this, but this lifestyle seems extraordinarily dull. It’s full of protocol, dress changes, and minding your P’s and Q’s. It might be what my father wishes for me, but I know what I’d rather do.”

Blaine can appreciate Cousin Rachel’s sentiment, but now his curiosity is peaked. “And what might that be?”

Cousin Rachel takes a deep breath. “I want to be a star on Broadway. It’s the main theatre district in New York City. There are musicals that can showcase an actress’ acting and singing abilities. Just this week, I received a letter from my friend Harmony. She’s landed the leading role of Eliza Doolittle in Pygmalion this autumn. I was born for that sort of role. It should have gone to me and not her!”

Blaine often feels the same way as Cousin Rachel. If it was up to him, he would consider pursuing a musical career. “I’m not familiar with Pygmalion, but if the starring actress needs both acting and singing skills, I can’t imagine anyone better suited than yourself.”

Cousin Rachel gives Blaine a long hug. “I knew that you would understand exactly how I feel.”

“But what about love, Cousin Rachel? Surely this Broadway wouldn’t keep you away from marrying and raising a family.”

Cousin Rachel sighs. “No, landing the lead role in a Broadway musical isn’t the only thing I want out of life. Are you sure that you’ll keep my secrets safe?”

Blaine takes hold of his cousin’s hand and nods. “We all have secrets, Cousin Rachel. I assure you that your secrets are safe with me.”

“I’m In Love With Finn,” Rachel blurts out.

“Sorry, I didn’t understand that. Was it something about Finn, the chauffeur?” Blaine asks.

Rachel nods. “Yes, I’m in love with Finn. He’s simply the most caring and gentle man I’ve ever met. And he feels the same way about me. If I had the perfect life, I would be on Broadway as Eliza Doolittle in Pygmalion, with Finn in the front row cheering me on every night.”

Blaine takes a moment to think about it. It’s surprising that his cousin is in a similar predicament to himself, namely loving someone who is forbidden, given their status in life. However, Blaine isn’t ready to reveal his secret to his cousin, namely being in love with Kurt.

Cousin Rachel sighs. “Of course, I’ll never be able to fulfill my dreams. My father is most insistent about how my life should unfold. And that means marrying a titled gentleman in Great Britain.”

Kurt returns to clear the table of the afternoon offerings. Blaine is too absorbed in his conversation with Cousin Rachel to consider what he says in front of the footman.

“I know exactly how you feel, Cousin Rachel. My life has been mapped out even before I was born. All my education and training has led me to taking a position in the British cavalry or the
Indian Civil Service. Even my choice of a wife is dictated by my family. At times it can feel overwhelming, however, I feel a sense of duty and loyalty to them. I mustn’t let them down.”

“So you’ll marry a woman that they pick out for you, and potentially move to another country or put your life in danger in the military… all for your family?”

“Yes, I would,” Blaine confirms.

Blaine hears Kurt’s breath hitch at this sentiment.

“I’m not sure whether I have the same sense of family duty, Cousin Blaine. As an American, I’ve been raised a little differently. After all, ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’ is written into our constitution.”

“It’s a wonderful sentiment, Cousin Rachel. I just don’t know how it could possibly fit into my world.”

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“Mr Blaine, the dowager countess is in the parlor. She needs to speak to you urgently.” Hummel reports.

“I shall be there in a few minutes. Please have Kurt bring us some tea.”

“Very well, Mr Blaine,” Hummel replies before heading down the stairs to the kitchen.

Blaine takes a few moments to think about how this meeting will go. Although his grandmama is his strongest ally in the family, she can be quite formidable when she wants to be. He certainly doesn’t want his grandmama to inform his parents, who would quickly fire Hummel and Kurt. This is certainly an unforeseen bump in the road, but Blaine is sure that there will be plenty ahead for them. Blaine thinks that if Kurt is in the room with him, then maybe she can understand how he feels. It’s better to work together through the difficult times from the beginning.

Blaine walks into the parlor and closes the doors, for he doesn’t want the conversation overheard.

“Good afternoon, my dear,” the dowager countess greets.

“Good afternoon, Grandmama,” Blaine replies. He sits down on the blue velvet French armchair and sits up straight. He takes a deep breath and waits for his grandmama to speak.

“Blaine, there’s no need to look so grim. I come in peace. Now, I’ve been thinking… I confess that I don’t know how you’re feeling about the footman.”

“His name is Kurt,” Blaine chimes in. “And I’ve told you exactly how I feel about him. I’m in love.”

The conversation is interrupted by Kurt knocking on the door before entering, carrying a silver tray of tea and afternoon treats. Blaine can see Kurt’s surprise that his grandmama is also in the parlor. Kurt sets down the tray and pours the tea. After offering the sandwiches and scones, he sets out to leave the room.

“Please stay, Kurt,” Blaine pleads. “Whatever my Grandmama is going to say affects the two of us.”

The dowager countess clears her throat. “So tell me, Kurt, how do you feel about what Blaine told
me a few days ago? No doubt, you’ve discussed it.”

Blaine can see Kurt shift in his spot, no doubt bracing himself for what he’s about to say. He can just imagine how nervous Kurt must be. Blaine holds his breath until Kurt clears his throat and starts to speak.

“I’m in love with your grandson, Lady Anderson. Nothing or nobody will change how I feel,” Kurt bravely admits.

Blaine’s heart swells when he hears Kurt’s words. He’s so impressed with how courageous Kurt is to confess his feelings to his grandmama.

The dowager countess stares at Kurt for a full two minutes before she speaks again. “I don’t know if I would have had the emotional strength both of you have shown to tell me that you’re in love.” She pauses before continuing. “I believe in rules and traditions and playing our part. But don’t worry, there is something else more important.”

“And what is that, pray?” Blaine asks.

“I believe in love. I mean, brilliant careers, rich lives, are seldom led without an element of love.”

“Grandmama, you do surprise me,” Blaine replies.

“Oh, I’m glad. So this trip wasn’t wasted. I must say that I don’t know if I would have had the courage to love someone knowing it could land me in jail, but I hope I would have done so. Kurt, why don’t you lock the door and have a seat with us while we figure out a plan.”

Kurt’s body stiffens at the request, as if he’s too nervous to follow her instructions. Blaine rises from his chair and locks the parlor door, before taking Kurt’s hand and leading him to the settee where they both sit down together. Blaine notices that Kurt still looks uncomfortable at the thought of the upcoming conversation, so he immediately starts rubbing his thumb over the top of Kurt’s hand. Blaine knows he has done the right thing when he can sense Kurt relax.

“So you’re not going to tell father and mama?” Blaine asks tentatively.

“No, I’m not, unless you want me to.”

“Most certainly not,” Blaine confirms. “They don’t suspect a thing. I wish that Hugh hadn’t heard the music that night.”

“When something bad happens, it’s no good wishing that it had not happened. The only option is to minimize the damage to your reputation.”

“Or try to. But if your niece knows…” Blaine suggests.

“I’ve spoken to Susan Flintshire. I told her that Hugh drank too much whiskey at the ball and was very drunk when he retired to bed. What he saw was in his imagination, and it would be best if she stopped him spreading spiteful gossip. Even if she doesn’t believe me, she won’t tell anyone in case it reflects badly on her.”

“Oh, I should hope not,” Blaine sighs.

“Of course this matter would be easier if Kurt wasn’t a servant. There are ways gentlemen can get around society’s conventional marriages without undue attention.”
“You know about these things?” Kurt blurts, then looks down as if ashamed about what he said.

“Kurt, I might be an ancient relic, but I’ve seen more things in my lifetime than you could ever imagine. You aren’t the first men that have felt something that they could not possibly have with women.” The dowager countess then focuses her attention on her grandson. “However, there are things that are expected from men who have your position in life, Blaine.”

Blaine nods. “I’ve been thinking about that and the only way forward is for me to marry as soon as possible to secure the future of Westerville. I have news on that score,” Blaine says.

The dowager countess looks surprised. “Do tell, Blaine.”

“Looking ahead, I think my best option is to marry Christina Cohen-Chang. At the Westerville Ball, she seemed very interested in me and we agreed that our social diaries should be coordinated during the London season. But I would have to tell her about Kurt.”

“For heaven’s sake! Why?” the dowager countess protests.

“To keep this secret would be dishonorable. Kurt is the love of my life and nothing or nobody is going to come between us,” Blaine replies.

“Blaine, you read too many novels! One way or another, everybody goes down the aisle with half the story hidden.”

“Grandmama…”

“Well, if Christina Cohen-Chang doesn’t accept your hand in marriage by the end of the Season, we’ll have to go abroad. In these moments, you can normally find an Italian who isn’t too picky. And of course, we shall need a footman to look after us.”

“Thank you for not turning against me, Grandmama. I know that you have rules and when people break them, you find it hard to forgive. I understand it and I respect it,” Blaine says sincerely.

“In this case, you have the trump card.”

“What is that?” Blaine asks.

The dowager countess takes her grandson’s hand in hers.

“You’re family.”

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: The Anderson household moves from Westerville Abbey to London for the Season.
June 1914

Kurt

Kurt has always thought that the servants at Westerville Abbey worked hard each and every day, but nothing has prepared him for the frenzy of activity as the household gets ready to move to London for the Season. Miss Lopez and Mr Evans are busy ensuring that every outfit is cleaned, doing the necessary mending and packing trunks. Mrs Sylvester and Brittany are gathering canned provisions and making menu lists for the entertainment that will go on at Anderson House in Belgravia. Mercedes and the other housemaids are cleaning the abbey from top to bottom under the careful eye of Mrs Hudson. Sebastian is busy coordinating the necessary travel arrangements for the family, staff and trunks. His father has been spending many hours in the wine cellar, preparing an inventory, and carefully selecting the bottles to be taken to London. And of course, Mr Hudson has been busy driving Miss Berry to Exeter to collect last minute essentials.

Kurt has been tasked with organizing Mr Blaine’s wardrobe and packing it for London, as well as tending the kitchen gardens. Judging by how busy everyone else is, he thinks he has gotten off rather lightly. Of all the family members, Mr Blaine has the smallest wardrobe of outfits, and since they are all new, there is nothing to do but carefully pack them into a trunk.

Kurt peeks outside Mr Blaine’s bedroom window, noticing that it is still raining cats and dogs. He hopes that the rain stops before Saturday, so that he can do the final picking of fruits and vegetables before they head to London. Kurt turns his head when he hears someone enter the room, and smiles when he realizes that it’s Mr Blaine.

“I’m bored, Kurt,” Mr Blaine says with an exaggerated sigh. “I’ve spent the morning in the stables with Firebird, but wasn’t able to take him on a long ride. However, Wesley has assured me that he’ll ride Firebird every day in my absence.”
Kurt chuckles. “I’m bored too. It’s too rainy to work in the kitchen gardens. To be honest, I’ve been taking my time packing your wardrobe for fear that my father will have me work with Sebastian this afternoon. Is there anything I can do for you, Mr Blaine? Something that will keep me busy all afternoon?”

“Don’t you remember that I asked you to call me just Blaine?”

“I’m working at the moment, so it’s Mr Blaine. I’ll reserve calling you just Blaine for our more private moments together.”

Kurt can see Mr Blaine’s face practically light up with a huge grin on his face and a sparkle in his eyes. “I’ll be reading my book in the library. Could you quickly finish the packing and join me there? There’s something I want to show you, and I think you’re going to like it.”

“Do tell, Mr Blaine.”

“Uh uh, Kurt. You have to hurry and join me in the library.” With a wink, Mr Blaine leaves the bedroom with a newfound energy. Kurt smiles to himself and thinks that the man will be the death of him one day.

Kurt makes quick business of completing the packing. Once he’s sure that he hasn’t forgotten anything, he goes to the kitchen and collects a tea tray for Mr Blaine. He knocks on the closed library door and then enters, to find Mr Blaine curled up on the brown leather Chesterfield reading *The World Set Free* by H.G. Wells.

“Interesting book, Mr Blaine?”

“I’ll say it is, Kurt. It’s about a future with something horrific called atomic bombs. It gives me shivers, but not the good type.”

Mr Blaine places his book down on the nearby side table. “I’ve been counting the minutes since I left my bedroom, waiting for you to appear.”

“Would you like me to pour you a cup of tea?” Kurt asks.

“I’ll have the tea later. I did promise I had something to show you.”

Mr Blaine gets up from the sofa and goes to the bookshelf in the far corner. After pulling out a few books, he reaches into the middle shelf and turns a lever. Kurt gasps when a portion of the bookshelf swings open to reveal a doorway.

“There are many secret chambers and tunnels in the abbey. I told you that I’d show you one day.” Mr Blaine holds out his hand and adds, “Come with me.”

Kurt doesn’t hesitate for a single second, for the thought of exploring the abbey’s secret nooks and crannies sounds rather exciting. He takes Mr Blaine’s hand, who leads him into a darkened spacious chamber. Mr Blaine lights a single candle which is positioned on the wall. When Blaine reaches out to close the door, Kurt tugs at his shoulder. “We won’t be trapped in here, will we?”

Mr Blaine chuckles. “No, this side has a handle like any ordinary door. There’s also another exit on the far side which connects to the other passageways in the abbey. Cooper and I used to explore them when we were younger. I doubt my parents know that they’re here at all.”

“What do you do in these secret chambers?”
“Cooper and I used to play hide-and-seek, but I can think of a lot of things - private things - we could do.”

It finally dawns on Kurt what Mr Blaine is saying. “Oh! I see what you mean. I’m totally on board with that.”

Mr Blaine’s smile practically brightens up the secret room. Kurt takes his time to look at Mr Blaine’s plump, red lips, which look ready to kiss Kurt senseless. However, it’s Mr Blaine’s eyes that really gives him away. The honey-colored irises are darkened with swirls of chestnuts warmed on an autumn day, and the heat in his gaze makes Kurt realize that Mr Blaine desires him.

Mr Blaine pulls Kurt closer so that their breaths intermingle. Kurt can smell coffee, chocolate and something that is uniquely Mr Blaine. He wishes for a moment that he could bottle the heady scent and open it when he’s on his own and lonely. Kurt smiles as he can feel Mr Blaine lift up on his toes and press his lips gently against his.

For the first time, Kurt feels safe that they won’t be caught in the act.

For the first time, Kurt lets himself really feel.

As they slowly kiss, Kurt focuses on the physical sensations. Kurt didn’t think it was possible for Mr Blaine - no, Blaine - to smell even better than usual, but that he does. When Mr Blaine licks his lower lip, Kurt opens his mouth, granting permission for his tongue to enter. As Blaine’s tongue starts exploring, Kurt feels an electric tingle flow through his body to the tips of his toes. Kurt can hear Blaine’s breathy sighs; it’s music to his ears. With their bodies as close as they’ve ever been, Kurt can almost feel Blaine being etched into his heart and soul. It’s as if roots have been planted and are now being nourished with enough love to flourish.

After a few minutes, Kurt pulls back to breathe again. When he hears Blaine whimper at the loss of connection, a warm feeling grows in his belly. In that moment, Kurt comes to realize that he’s the one who causes Blaine to make such sinful noises. He’s the one who makes Blaine look so debauched. But most importantly, he’s the one whom Blaine loves.

Kurt leans in so that he can feel Blaine’s body pressed against his. He senses Blaine’s heat and his racing heart - Kurt can hardly bear it. With one hand cupping Blaine’s cheek, and the other wrapped around the nape of his neck, Kurt takes the lead and allows his lips to communicate without words. When Blaine’s lips trail down and start kissing his neck, the electric tingle in Kurt’s body evolves into a lightning strike, hard and fast.

“Kurt, I feel so alive when I’m with you,” Blaine murmurs as he presses Kurt against the wall. “I want to make you feel so good. I don’t know what I’m doing, but I want to so badly.”

Kurt can’t help but let out a loud moan when Blaine’s hands slide along his sides and circle his hips. Any resistance Kurt might have had crumbles and he moans, “Yes!”.

“Did you hear that noise, Sebastian?”

A loud muffled cough and throat clearing can be heard on the other side of the door.

“No, my lord. Can’t say that I did,” Sebastian replies.

Kurt immediately pushes away from Blaine. “Shh, your father and Sebastian are in the study.”

Blaine keeps Kurt in his arms, although his lips and hands have stopped exploring.
“Sebastian, how long has this tea been sitting here?”

“I don’t know, my lord. Kurt must have brought it in earlier.”

“Ah, it was probably meant for Blaine. I can see his book over by the sofa. Blaine must have forgotten it when he left. Could you please take it up to his bedroom?”

“Yes, my lord. I’m more than happy to look after Mr Blaine. That is actually the delicate matter I was hoping to speak with you about, my lord.”

“If you must,” the earl replies hesitantly.

“Have you considered leaving Kurt at Westerville Abbey during the London season? I have more than enough experience to act as footman and valet to both Lord Cooper and Mr Blaine.


“Shh, love. Let’s see what my father has to say,” Blaine whispers into his ear.

“I don’t get involved in household matters that Hummel is more than capable of handling,” the earl stiffly replies.

“But is he, my lord? With the greatest respect to Mr Hummel, he doesn’t think clearly on matters relating to his son. Kurt tends the kitchen gardens very well - after all, he’s a farm boy. But I’ve noticed that he’s clumsy and unsophisticated as a second footman. Perhaps it would be best if I handle his duties in London and Kurt remains in Westerville Abbey.”

“Nonsense, Sebastian. That’s not what I’ve heard from my family, Mrs Hudson, and her son. They all are impressed by how quickly Kurt has adapted to his job and goes that one step further than expected. He’s a chip off the old block and has settled down nicely at the abbey. No, Kurt will go with us to London. He’s been instrumental in keeping Blaine happy with his wardrobe and tending to his needs.”

“Yes, my lord,” Sebastian mutters.

“Sebastian, in the future, think twice before you bother me about downstairs matters, particularly about Kurt. I don’t think Hummel would take kindly to it.”

Kurt sagged with relief against Blaine’s body. He can’t believe that Sebastian has the gumption to address his lordship on this matter, and he’s relieved with the earl’s response. However, he’s certain that Sebastian won’t let it rest there and that worries him.

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“Do each of you know what is expected of you over the weekend while the family temporarily moves to London?”

“Yes, Mr Hummel,” everyone replies in unison.

The meeting in the servants’ hall goes on longer than usual, for there are many logistics to go over. There’s preparing rooms at the abbey for a long absence, transporting trunks and provisions to London, and getting Anderson House ready for the family… And all of this needs to happen in less than 48 hours.

Hummel continues his speech. “The success of the move depends on each and every one of you.
The family is counting on us to make this happen. We have to pull together to ensure the success of the London season for Mr Blaine and Miss Berry. I promise that each one of you will continue to have one half-day off a week with an extra shilling in your pocket, provided that all goes smoothly,” Hummel divulges.

The servants’ hall is abuzz after the announcement that they’ll have spending money during their time off in London. This welcomed bonus has never happened before.

“I want to see the changing of the guards at Buckingham Palace. It must be such a fancy palace if King George and his family live there,” Mrs Hudson says.

“I want to go to the East End and see if I can locate some of my family. I haven’t seen my grandparents since I started living at Westerville Abbey,” Mr Evans sighs. “How about you, Kurt? What do you want to do on your half-days off?”

“I haven’t really thought about it, Mr Evans. I didn’t realize we would not only get half-days off but also extra pocket money. I guess I’ll first stroll down Savile Row looking at the shop windows.”

“You must be really interested in fashion if you plan to spend your free time in London looking at tailor shops. Surely there must be other things you would like to do as well,” Mr Hudson suggests.

“Perhaps I’ll save all the money and watch a musical in London’s West End,” Kurt thinks out loud.

Mr Hudson grins like a Cheshire cat. “Miss Berry plans to attend every show in the West End during her stay in London. I can ask her to recommend a musical. Perhaps I can join you? Miss Berry keeps going on about the magic of a live performance, and now I’m kind of curious.”

“I’d like that very much, Mr Hudson. We’ll attend a show together.”

Kurt hears the sound of a spoon clinking against a glass. When he looks up, he sees his father getting everyone’s attention. “There will be plenty of time to chatter about day-off activities on the train to London. Let’s get back to the tasks at hand before we leave.”

Kurt goes to the footman’s pantry to give the silver cutlery one final polish before the family leaves for London. He startles when the door slams loudly, and looks over his shoulder to see Sebastian glaring at him.

“I’m on to you, Kurt.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Sebastian. Now leave me to finish the silver polishing.”

“How could I not hear those loud moans in the study earlier today? It sounded like they were coming from a bitch in heat. I initially thought it was Santana and Brittany, but they denied it. The moan had to have come from you.”

“I still don’t know what you’re talking about,” Kurt retorts.

“Do you think I’m stupid, Kurt? The tea tray that hadn’t been served? Mr Blaine’s book left on the sofa side table? The high shrill moans? They all point to you and Mr Blaine fooling around. Is that how you keep him satisfied?”

Kurt doesn’t know what to say but gives Sebastian the deadliest glare he can, before resuming his silver polishing.
Sebastian continues, “It’ll be easy to gather evidence now that I know what’s going on. Once I have the proof that I need, I’ll talk to Hummel - even his lordship, if necessary - about it. Your days are numbered, lady face!”

With a triumphant smirk, Sebastian leaves the footman’s pantry as quickly as he entered, leaving Kurt with anxious thoughts.

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Kurt picks the last of the ripened fruit and vegetables, and carefully places them in wooden crates for the trip to London tomorrow. Mr Hudson has kindly offered to help him bring them to the garage ready for transport.

“These are the last of the crates, Mr Hudson. It’s our last trip.”

“I can’t recall the gardens having so much produce before. You must have magic in your fingers, Kurt,” Mr Hudson says as they walk towards the garage.

“It has more to do with growing up on a farm than any kind of magic.”

“What’ll happen to the gardens once you leave tomorrow for London?” Mr Hudson asks.

“The head gardener has agreed to look after the kitchen gardens in my absence. The dowager countess’ cook will can the produce.”

“I bet it won’t taste as good as Mrs Sylvester’s jam and whatnots,” Mr Hudson smiles, licking his lips.

When the last of the crates are stacked in the garage, Kurt asks, “Do you want help loading the car in the morning?”

“No, thank you. Mr Evans has already agreed to help me both in the garage and at the train station. That man is quite strong, you know. You take care of Mr Blaine and make sure that he wakes up in time.”

“That I will,” Kurt giggles. After waving goodbye to Mr Hudson, Kurt returns to the kitchen gardens to lock up and make sure that he hasn’t forgotten anything. As he enters the open gate, he smiles when he comes face-to-face with Blaine. Even though he’s wearing an old suit that will be left behind when they go to London, Blaine looks devilishly handsome.

“I read the note that you left in my bedroom. It sounded pretty urgent. You have some news?” Blaine asks.

“Sebastian knows,” Kurt replies.

“Knows what?” Blaine asks with a quizzical look.

Kurt relates the conversation he had with Sebastian earlier in the footman’s pantry.

“We’ll just have to be careful in London, Kurt. Once I’m engaged, there’s nothing that Sebastian can say that will have an impact on us. My father knows only too well that what’s important is that I’ll be a married man by the end of the year. He’ll squash Sebastian’s idle gossip quickly.”

Kurt frowns at this news. Even though what Mr Blaine says makes sense, it doesn’t mean that he likes it. “So, once you’re married and gone to either India or the military, I’m yesterday’s news?”
“Kurt, you’ve taken what I’ve said the wrong way. With the future of the Westerville estate financially secure, my father won’t be bothered by how I conduct myself as long as I’m discreet. When it comes to protecting the Anderson name and its honor, he’ll destroy Sebastian’s credibility.”

Blaine tugs him close and envelops Kurt in his arms. “You’ll never be yesterday’s news to me. We’re going to make this - us - work for a very long future. Grandmama will help us figure out how to make that happen. You’re far too precious to me to let you go now, or ever.”

These are the exact words that Kurt needs to hear. He crashes his lips against Blaine’s. It feels urgent, desperate, and fervent. He wants to crawl into Blaine’s skin and be as one. As tongues intertwine and hands explore, Kurt is surprised by a rustling sound moving along the inner garden wall. Kurt turns towards the noise and discovers Lord Tubbington.

“What am I going to do with you, Lord Tubbington? Will there be anything left of the garden when I return?” When he hunts down the cat, he’s shocked by what he encounters. “Come quick, Blaine. There’s something you’ve got to see.”

As Blaine hurries over to the inner wall, they both freeze in place when they hear a voice.

“Leave it to you Kurt to wish men to come quickly.”

Kurt turns around and sees Santana in the garden entrance with a smirk on her face. “You’re no longer ‘Mr Blaine’, huh? You two looked all cozy in each other arms.”

“It’s not what you think,” Blaine stammers.

“Oh, I think it was exactly what I think. Sebastian will be very interested to hear about this. Ta ta for now.” Santana grabs Lord Tubbington from Kurt’s arms and sashays out of the kitchen gardens.

“What do you think she saw?” Blaine whispers to Kurt.

“I think she saw less than she wants us to believe, otherwise she would have mentioned the kissing. I think that we need to keep a low profile in London… at least until you’re engaged.”

“I agree, Kurt, although I’m not going to like it one little bit. By the way, what were you calling me over to see?”

Kurt takes Blaine’s hand and brings him to the inner garden wall. “Catnip! Brittany has planted catnip in the kitchen gardens. Now I understand why Lord Tubbington acts so crazy most the time. If catnip affects humans the same way, it would go a long way to explain Brittany's behavior as well.”

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Kurt tosses and turns all through the night. He can’t seem to sleep the eve before his first trip to London. Yes, he’s excited to see the capital city and help Blaine with the London season. After all, whom Blaine decides to marry will affect him as well.

But mostly, Kurt is nervous about Sebastian. What did Santana’s prying eyes see today? And what will Santana tell Sebastian? And if it’s not scandalous enough, to what lengths will Sebastian go to disgrace him? Should he break things off with Blaine before Sebastian can destroy them? Should he discuss the matter with his father?
No, he simply won’t stop being with Blaine because of Sebastian. They promised each other they would be together forever, through thick and thin. He needs to trust Blaine and the dowager countess to know what to do if Sebastian makes accusations. He’ll just have to be cool, calm and collected around Sebastian and not rise to his bait.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Earlier this week, Lilyvandersteen posted the first chapter of her new story, Puppy Eyes. The story is off to a great start and already has me wanting to read more. I strongly urge you to check it out.

Next up: The London Season begins.
June 1914

Blaine

“I wonder what time they’ll be back?” Blaine remarks, sitting in the parlor with Cooper and Quinn. “It’s already been hours.”

“These things can’t be rushed,” Quinn chides. “It’s not every day that a young lady is presented at court, especially an American debutante.”

Blaine isn’t sure how his mother made it happen, but she was able to secure an invitation for Cousin Rachel to be presented at court to the King and Queen. No doubt the family name and the close friendship between his father and the Prince of Wales went a long way to secure the coveted invitation.

The front door opens and Blaine’s parents, the dowager countess and Cousin Rachel enter the drawing room. Cousin Rachel is a vision in white, with a long gown and fur stole. The finishing touches are a single strand of pearls, a hat with white feather plumes and a nosegay of white roses. In Blaine’s opinion, she looks like an angel.

“Tell us all about it, Cousin Rachel,” Quinn pleads.

“Of all the British customs I’ve experienced since I’ve arrived, that was the very best. I’ll remember this afternoon for as long as I live.”

Quinn claps her hands together in glee. “I want all the details, Cousin Rachel.”

“Aunt Pamela, Uncle Michael and I were in the car in a very long procession to Buckingham Palace. Guards in red uniforms flanked us on horses, to make sure that the crowds gawking at us stayed on the pavement. When we entered the palace, we went our separate ways, with Uncle Michael entering a room for the gentlemen, while Aunt Pamela and I went up the grand staircase to a room filled with waiting debutantes, and Aunt Pamela gave the invitation to one of the guards. We waited forever in a queue, and then it was finally our turn to enter the throne room, where the
King and the gentlemen were. An officer announced, “The Countess of Westerville presenting Miss Rachel Berry.”

“My legs were shaking so badly as I walked towards the thrones, but then I remembered it was like performing a role in a play. That gave me the confidence to curtsey to the King and Queen. It was so reassuring to know that Aunt Pamela was always by my side.”

“It should have been me presenting you to court,” the dowager countess grumbles under her breath.

“You did join us for the afternoon high tea at the palace, Lady Westerville,” Pamela reminds her.

The earl consults his pocket watch. “We’re expected at the Duke of Westminster’s ball in two hours. I suggest we all get some rest before getting dressed for the event. We’ll meet back down here at 6:30 sharp.”

Blaine retires to his room and continues to read a novel by H.G. Wells. When he gets to the part of the book that describes the workings of atomic bombs, there’s a knock on the door. Blaine’s face lights up when he sees Kurt enter, and his eyes follow the footman as he heads to bathroom to draw the water in the cast-iron tub. When he can smell a sandalwood fragrance wafting from the bathroom, Blaine joins Kurt. Without taking his eyes off the footman, Blaine slips off his singlet and underdrawers, leaving him completely naked. When Blaine hears Kurt’s breath hitch, he knows that Kurt is satisfied with what he sees. As Blaine slowly enters the bathtub, he wiggles his buttocks a little for show.

“Ww-would you like some help with your hair, Mr Blaine?” Kurt stammers.

Blaine looks up and sees an adorable Kurt with pinkened cheeks. Once he has nodded, Kurt takes off his jacket and rolls up his sleeves, not once looking away from Blaine. Kurt retrieves the necessary gear, and kneels next to the tub. “Tilt your head back, Mr Blaine.”

Blaine doesn’t think twice before he does as he’s told, for an authoritative Kurt is so very sexy. He can feel the hot water fall onto his head with Kurt’s nimble fingers carding through his curls to get rid of the pomade.

“You can sit up again, Mr Blaine.”

Kurt squeezes a dollop of shampoo in his palm and rubs them together to build up a lather. Blaine can feel those magic fingers again on his scalp, rubbing the hair roots using the perfect amount of pressure. How does Kurt make something so simple feel so good? He can then feel Kurt smoothing the lather over the ends of his curls, and Blaine bites back a moan.

“Tilt your head back again, Mr Blaine.”

“Surely, it can’t be over already! Your hands feel like magic.” Blaine closes his eyes as Kurt rinses off the shampoo.

“We still have a few minutes. Can you lean your back against the tub, Mr Blaine?”

Curious as to where this is going, Blaine once again does as he’s told. Blaine can feel long fingers card through his curls. He can’t help but whimper when it stops, for the sensation is soothing and he doesn’t want it to end. He quickly realizes that Kurt isn’t quite finished when he feels fingertips slowly move across his scalp in light circular motions. Blaine loses all rational thought as Kurt moves his fingers from back to front and then front to back. “That feels so good, Kurt.”

With one hand, Kurt cups his neck, and gently rubs with his thumb on one side while the other
fingers stroke the opposite side. As Kurt’s hand moves up and down his neck, Blaine’s heartbeat races as he imagines what it would feel like if Kurt did that to his cock. When Blaine hears giggling, he looks down and sees his fully erect cock jutting out of the water. He squeezes his eyes firmly closed rather than face the humiliation.

“Don’t be embarrassed, Blaine. It happens naturally. I’m rather proud that I could get that reaction from just a simple touch of the fingertips.”

As Kurt applies a bit more pressure, the circular motions get bigger. Blaine abruptly sits up, for he’s afraid that his cock might explode if Kurt’s ministrations go on any longer. When he steps out of the bathtub, Kurt quickly grabs a fluffy towel and opens it wide before him. Blaine steps forward and Kurt’s arms, with the towel, embrace him tightly. Blaine whispers, “The way you make me feel… You’re going to be the death of me.”

“Then let’s hope it’s a long and slow death, Mr Blaine. Once you’ve finished in here, join me in the bedroom. We’ve got to make you look like a dashing young prince for tonight’s ball,” Kurt replies before leaving the bathroom.

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The Duke of Westminster’s London residence is just a block away from Anderson House in Eton Square, Belgravia, however, it’s the grandest mansion in the area. The Duke owns more of Britain than the king through an estate that can be traced back for centuries. In London’s Belgravia and Mayfair alone, the Westminster family owns 300 acres of prime real estate. The Duke holds an annual ball in London that coincides with the debutantes’ presentation at court. Everybody who is anybody will be attending tonight.

When they turn the corner to Eton Square, Blaine can hear the stringed instruments playing. As Blaine eyes the long queue of cars waiting to drop off their passengers, he’s relieved that Anderson House is close enough that they were able to take a leisurely stroll to the ball.

When they arrive at the mansion, Blaine tucks his grandmama’s arm underneath his and assists her with ascending the grand marble white stairs. “You look absolutely elegant this evening, Grandmama.”

“Oh, my dear, you flatter me, which is just as it should be. Blaine, you’re such a gentleman. I don’t know what I would do without you,” the dowager countess whispers.

“And I don’t know what I would do without you,” Blaine replies, for he knows that his grandmama is his one true ally in the family. He’s well aware that he’s recently tested her with the situation with Kurt, and she has yet again proved that she has his personal interests at heart.

A footman greets them, and the earl hands over the coveted invitation for the evening’s ball. Hats, stoles and canes are handed to another footman for safekeeping.

“Would you like me to take you to the drawing room so that you can play whist with your friends, Grandmama?”

“There’s plenty of time for whist later, my child. Right now, I want to go to the ballroom. There might be a suitable debutante for you that I’ve overlooked.”

Blaine chuckles, “I doubt that very much, Grandmama. Between you, mama and Quinn, I think every eligible girl from all corners of these isles has been found.”

“Don’t be defeatist, Blaine. It’s very middle class. Look - over there is Millicent Hutchinson. I find
her rather a bore, but she’s a gossip and knows everything about everyone. Help me over so that I can subtly pick her brain.”

“Perhaps I should wear a sign saying I’m available to a wealthy debutante,” Blaine deadpans.

After deposing his grandmama at the table and finding her and Lady Hutchinson glasses of sherry, Blaine takes a good look around the ballroom. All the debutantes are still in their white gowns from the afternoon’s presentation at court, with young gentlemen flocking around them.

“No one catches your eye, Shrimpy?”

Blaine quickly turns around and sees Lady Kitty smirking at him. “Why, Lady Kitty, I didn’t realize you would be here. I’ve never seen you in all white before. I would say you look like an angel, but I know better. Perhaps you should be wearing red instead.”

“Save it, Shrimpy. If the cream of the elite is here tonight, then I’m rather disappointed. The gentlemen are toffee-nosed fops that wouldn’t know a real woman if she stood right before them. I’m bored with the entire evening.”

Blaine looks at Lady Kitty’s melancholy expression and suddenly realizes that her boredom has nothing to do with the standard of gentlemen present, only that they are not giving her their attention. Blaine bows and offers his hand. “May I have the next dance?”

Lady Kitty grins and takes Blaine’s hand, and they join the other couples on the dance floor. Their third dance together is a waltz. As they travel around the dance floor, Lady Kitty whispers, “There’s a lady in the corner near the punch bowl who is staring at you with a very large pout on her face. Judging by her eyes, she’s checking out your arse.”

As Blaine turns Lady Kitty in time with the music, he glances over and sees Miss Cohen-Chang staring at him. When she looks up from his lower body, he gives her a large smile and her face lights up. When the dance is over, Blaine makes his farewell to Lady Kitty and heads towards the punch bowl.

“Miss Cohen-Chang, I was hoping that you would be attending tonight.”

“You were?” she asked, fluttering her eyelashes.

“Why, yes of course. Mama wasn’t sure whether you would be here this evening, as you weren’t presented at court.”

“It’s only the old-money British elite that get an invitation to the palace. Mere mortals like me are glanced over.”

“I find it hard to believe that anyone would glance over you, Miss Cohen-Chang, for you are far more delightful than most English maidens.”

“You’re such a flatterer, Mr Anderson.”

“No, I just recognize true beauty when I see it.” When the orchestra starts a new song, Blaine offers his hand for a dance. They twirl and travel around the dance floor effortlessly for the next hour, and just as he can feel Miss Cohen-Chang start to tire, the orchestra stops for a break.

“Shall we get a glass of punch?” Blaine suggests.

“Yes, I’m both thirsty and hot,” Miss Cohen-Chang declares.
“Why don’t we take a stroll in the gardens to cool off before the orchestra starts again?”

“What an excellent idea, Mr Anderson, although I think I’ve danced enough for one night. I need to reserve some energy for the other events taking place this week.”

Once Blaine has collected the glasses of punch, they step outside into the small back garden. There’s a full moon that helps light the path around the rose bushes and foxgloves. Although it’s the summer, the air is cooler and Blaine can see Miss Cohen-Chang slightly shivering. He takes off his jacket and places it over her shoulders.

“I’ve never known a gentleman as attentive as you, Mr Anderson.”

“I’ve had plenty of experience looking after my grandmama.”

“Are you close with her?” Miss Cohen-Chang asks.

“Yes, we are very close. She’s quite a remarkable lady. I hope to find someone as loving and loyal to family as she is.”

“Korean families are also quite tightly-knitted. But sometimes, it feels as if I can’t breathe with everyone in everyone else’s business.”

“I know what you mean. My older brother teases me relentlessly about my life, and I find it rather annoying. But with my grandmama, I know that she has my best interests at heart.”

Miss Cohen-Chang stops them in the darkened corner of the garden. “Do you pay attention to what your heart wants, Mr Anderson?”

Blaine thinks of Kurt and butterflies stir in his belly. “Yes, I do. I think that love is what grounds us and pushes us to be the best person we can be. I think that finding a soulmate and true love is the highest goal any of us can obtain.”

Miss Cohen-Chang turns to face Blaine, and he feels a little uncomfortable with how long their eyes are locked together. Just as he’s about to propose they return inside and join the others, Miss Cohen-Chang says “You feel exactly the way I do about love.”

Blaine can see that Miss Cohen-Chang is leaning towards him, closing her eyes and moving her head towards him for a kiss. He feels ill-prepared for the moment. Of course, he knows that at some stage he’ll have to kiss his future wife. But all he can think of right now is the taste and feel of Kurt’s lips pressed against his.

Blaine turns his head away, and he can hear Miss Cohen-Chang let out a loud gasp. “I’m not ready. It’s been a very long day with Cousin Rachel being presented at court and looking after Grandmama. I want this moment to be special for both of us and I’m not ready for it tonight.”

“What a sweet romantic you are, Mr Anderson. I’m sorry for my forward behavior. I just feel a special connection between the two of us.”

Blaine gives her a weak smile and leads her back into the ballroom. Miss Cohen-Chang immediately makes her excuses to find the ladies’ powder room. Blaine looks around the ballroom and smiles when he sees Cousin Rachel and Lord St James on the dance floor.

In the corner of his eye, he sees his grandmama calling him over with a wave of her hand. He notices that she’s standing with a young debutante and her family and that can only mean one thing - that Lady Hutcheson has given her the scoop on another possible wife. Although he still feels
shaken by the almost kiss with Miss Cohen-Chang in the gardens, Blaine puts on his game face and joins his grandmother’s party.

“Blaine, you’ve found me. I’d like to introduce you to Mr and Mrs Motta from Manchester, and their daughter, Sugar.”

“How do you do?” Blaine politely says as he bows.

“Lady Westerville has been telling us that you recently arrived for the London season,” Mr Motta says.

“Yes, we arrived last weekend. My Cousin Rachel was presented at court today.”

“So was Sugar,” Mrs Motta proudly replies.

Blaine gazes at the daughter. She’s attractive, with long straight hair loosely combed back, and her smile shows off a healthy set of white teeth. Her gown is the customary white for debutantes on this occasion, but what Blaine notices most of all is the diamond jewelry she’s wearing.

“What an unusual first name you have, Miss Motta. Has it been in your family for long?”

“I’m the one and only Sugar. When my father first saw me at birth, he thought I was sweet as sugar. I’m his very own princess,” Miss Motta replies.

Judging by Mr Motta’s proud smile, Blaine can tell that the daughter is the apple of his eye. “And how did you find the palace this afternoon, Miss Motta? Was the presentation all that you were expecting?” Blaine asks.

“It went very smoothly, and it was exactly what I expected, Mr Anderson. I have Miss Spencer from Brilliantmont to thank for that.”

When it’s obvious that Blaine has no clue how to respond, the dowager countess interjects, “Brilliantmont has very high standards as the head of the world’s premier finishing school for ladies. Did you have an opportunity to see much of Switzerland whilst you were there?”

“My governess and I made our way to Zurich, where we boarded the Orient Express to Paris.”

Blaine makes a mental note to thank his grandmama later. He’s intrigued by Miss Motta’s accent, for he’s never heard such a thick Northern brogue from a lady before. He replies, “Ah, the city of lights. I’ve often thought that Paris should be seen when one is in love.”

Miss Motta giggles. “Or seen in the couture houses. Paul Poiret, Jeanne Paquin, Jacques Doucet, and Mariano Fortuny are my favorite designers.”

“Is that where you purchased the diamond tiara?” the dowager countess asks.

“No, this was a little bauble I found at Asprey the other day. I told Daddy I just had to have it.”

“Anything for my princess,” Mr Motta confirms.

Blaine can now understand why his grandmama has wanted him to meet Miss Motta. Not only is the family rich, but the father indulges his daughter.

Mrs Motta looks equally proud of their daughter. “Mr Anderson, we were just discussing how our paths will cross again tomorrow. We both have invitations for afternoon tea with Lady Beaumont. Our Sugar has agreed to give a small musical performance.”
“I shall look forward to that very much, Miss Motta.” Blaine gives his grandma a discrete pleading look, hoping that she’ll realize that he wants to leave the ball. After the incident in the garden with Miss Cohen-Chang, Blaine would prefer to spend some time alone, thinking. Fortunately, his grandma picks up on his sentiment.

“If you’ll excuse us, I have the early signs of a migraine. I must admit that today has been exhausting and has taken its toll. I do want to make it to Lady Beaumont’s tomorrow and listen to the special performance. Blaine, would you be a love and please escort me home?”

“Of course, Grandmama. I’m pleased to have made your acquaintance, Miss Motta. Until tomorrow, then.”

“Yes, I’m looking forward to it, Mr Anderson,” Miss Motta replies.

Once Blaine has told his mother that he’s going home with his grandma, he whisks the dowager countess away to the entrance, where Hudson is waiting with the Renault. When they are comfortably situated in the back seat, his grandma updates him about the Motta family.

“They’re nouveau riche from Manchester. Mr Motta owns several successful textile factories that import cotton and export finished goods to the colonies. They only have one daughter, Sugar. What a ridiculous name! Who would name their daughter after a type of food?”

Blaine laughs and shakes his head before his grandma continues. “It’s obvious that she’s spoilt rotten. Did you notice how many names she dropped during the course of the evening? Lady Hutchinson told me that they are in London for the Season in order to secure her a marriage with someone from an old elite family. She’s obviously not suitable material for a titled son...”

Blaine finishes her sentence, “But she’s suitable for a second son. Let’s see what tomorrow brings at Mrs Beaumont’s afternoon tea.”

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: Mrs Beaumont’s afternoon tea and a surprise guest for dinner.
June 1914
Blaine

Blaine wakes up early the next morning, glad that he didn’t come home in the wee hours from the Duke of Westminster’s ball. He recalls the events of last night, and groans when he thinks of the awkward moment in the garden with Miss Cohen-Chang. Was he wrong to not kiss her when the moment didn’t feel right for him? Would there ever be a moment when it would feel right? Blaine knows the answer without even thinking.

No.

Blaine appreciates that eventually he’ll have to do more than kiss his future wife, but he can’t figure out how that will happen. Will he be able to perform the role he was born to play? How will he be able to keep his future wife physically satisfied with his heart belonging to another?

Blaine can’t help but think of the intimate moments he’s had with Kurt. The feel of Kurt’s body, the scent as he holds Kurt tight, and the taste of his lips. Those delicious lips that are only meant for him. Nothing has felt more right as when Kurt consumes his mind, body and soul. Just thinking about it, Blaine’s heart begins to beat faster, his face flushes and his cock starts to stir.

He hears the door slowly open and smiles when he sees Kurt tiptoeing in. “Good morning, Kurt.”

Kurt looks as if he’s been up for hours. He is bright-eyed, immaculately dressed, and the front of his hair swoops up just the way Blaine likes it.

“You should’ve rung for me earlier, Mr Blaine. How long have you been awake?”

“Not for too long. I was just thinking about how much I miss you.”

Blaine knows that Kurt is thinking by the way he scrunches his eyes in that adorable way. “How
can you miss me when you see me every day?"

“I see you every day, but I’m not with you every day. There’s a difference.”

Blaine pouts, because isn’t it obvious?

“I know what you mean, but it’s only been a week. We still have a long road ahead of us before the London season is over and we’re back at Westerville. And we both know that a lot will be decided about your future before then.”

Blaine plops his head back on his pillow and lets out a groan. “That doesn’t mean I like it.”

“With Sebastian and Santana snooping around, we have to be extremely careful,” Kurt reminds him. “And just for the record, I don’t like it either. Now, you best get up because everyone will be downstairs for breakfast soon.”

Blaine gets out of bed, and gives Kurt a quick peck on the cheek before he heads into the bathroom for his morning routine. When he’s finished, Blaine frowns because Kurt has left his bedroom. He quickly dresses in the clothes that Kurt has left on his bed and goes downstairs to the dining room for breakfast.

“Good morning, Cousin Blaine,” Cousin Rachel chirps, who is already sitting at the dining room table, eating porridge with fresh strawberries.

“You’re very chipper today, Cousin Rachel, considering you were at the Duke of Westminster’s ball until late last night.”

“We didn’t stay much longer than you and your grandmother,” Pamela adds. “I think we were all exhausted from meeting King George and Queen Mary and attending the ball.”

“I could have danced all night. Lord St James is the very best dancer, after Blaine, of course,” Cousin Rachel declares.

“Do you think he’s the one?” Quinn asks.

Cousin Rachel sets down her spoon and dabs her mouth with the white linen napkin. “I’m not sure, Cousin Quinn. Who’s to say that there’s only one man whom one could fall deeply and irrevocably in love with? He ticks all the boxes for my father, and I certainly enjoy his company. I can live with that.”

The earl takes a sip of tea and clears his throat. “There is someone else who you might find interesting, Rachel. Lord Clarington of Nottingham will be staying with us for a few days next week whilst his London house is being refurbished. He’s in his mid-twenties and hasn’t yet married, although many a lady has tried to engage him. Maybe you’ll be the one to capture his attention.”

Quinn leans toward Cousin Rachel. “Lord Clarington has dreamy looks and he’s intelligent. His father passed away five years ago and he’s been focusing on managing their extensive properties ever since.”

“I look forward to meeting him, then,” Cousin Rachel replies.

Cooper sets the newspaper down on the table. “How about you, Blaine? I saw you last night with a young lady who was dripping in diamonds? She certainly looked sexy.”
Quinn gives her husband a pointed look. Blaine knows that she’s sensitive about these things since their first-born died in childbirth. Before Blaine can answer, the dowager countess enters the dining room. “I do hope I’m interrupting something.”

Blaine stands up. “Good morning, Grandmama. Can I get you something from the breakfast buffet?”

“Just some buttered toast and jam, Blaine. I need to watch my figure.”

“We were just speaking about Blaine’s potential suitors now that Lady Rebecca Jackson and her butt-slapping ways have been rejected,” Cooper jokes.

“Are you ever going to let that go?” Blaine asks, completely exasperated with his older brother.

“Never!” Cooper cackles. “Who was that lady that you and grandmama were talking to last night?”

“It was Miss Sugar Motta,” Blaine replies.

“Sugar! What kind of name is that!” Cooper exclaims.

The dowager countess smiles. “I thought the same as well, but it can’t be helped. She’s the only child of a textile manufacturing industrialist - a nouveau riche that has more money than sense. He simply dotes on his ‘princess’, and I doubt he’ll ever leave her wanting for anything.”

“That makes the possible marriage even sweeter,” Cooper chortles.

“Are you going to do this with every potential wife that I meet, Cooper?”

“Absolutely! I love riling you up, Blaine,” Cooper retorts. When Cooper gets up to revisit the buffet table, he can’t help but ruffle Blaine’s pomade-styled hair.

“It’s hard to distinguish who is the younger and older with these two,” the dowager countess comments in a carrying whisper.

“Enough, Cooper!” the earl demands. “Pamela, you mentioned that the Mottas will be at Mrs Beaumont’s after tea this afternoon. Blaine, it’s imperative that you attend as well.”

“Yes, Father,” Blaine replies with a tight-lipped smile. Blaine consoles himself with the thought that Cousin Rachel and grandmama will be attending as well, and Miss Motta will be giving a performance.

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Tell me, have you ever heard this melody?
Dya dya dya dya dya dya
That melody has made an awful hit with me
Dya dya dya dya dya dya
I don’t know where I heard it
But I liked it from the start
It seems that I preferred it
’Cause it got right to my heart

Blaine wraps his arms around his front and bows his head thinking of dead kittens, rotten tomatoes and the like, because under no circumstance can the laughter that’s contained in his throat be released into Mrs Beaumont’s back garden. Blaine can’t believe he has to sit through the carnage
of Al Jolson’s famous song.

Miss Motta couldn’t carry a tune if it came with handles.

Blaine’s eyes dart around the garden and he almost loses the fight against the laughter when he notices that all the ladies have their kerchiefs across their mouths and are struggling as well. He looks back down and thinks of smelly boots, getting thrown off a horse, and other things he generally detests.

*I cannot help but hum*
*Dya dya dya dya dya dya*
*Come dearie, wild about*
*Can’t do without*
*That haunting melody*

When the pianist plays the song’s last note, Blaine immediately starts clapping with the rest of the bemused guests. Before Miss Motta can perform yet another song, he walks over to her. “You must be so thirsty after your performance, Miss Motta. Come and take a cup of tea with me.”

“Did you like my song, Mr Anderson?” Miss Motta asks after taking a seat next to Blaine.

“That was a special rendition of the Al Jolson song that I won’t forget for a very long time. Do you frequently sing in public?”

After Miss Motta has taken a sip of tea, she replies, “I’ve been having private vocal lessons at home for the past two years, but this was my debut performance. I’m hoping to improve through continued sessions with the maestro and regular public performances.”

Blaine is at a loss of what to say, for he had hoped that today had been Miss Motta’s debut and swan-song performance. Fortunately, the dowager countess comes to his assistance. “You are quite wonderful the way you see room for improvement wherever you look. I never knew such zeal.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Miss Motta hesitantly replies.

“I must’ve said it wrong,” the dowager countess whispers as she leaves them to speak to Lady Beaumont.

The rest of the afternoon tea goes smoothly as Blaine discusses the weather and other trivialities with Miss Motta. Although she’s pleasant enough, Blaine doesn’t think there’s much substance beneath the expensive exterior. He’s now more determined than before to pursue Miss Cohen-Chang and have Miss Motta as a back-up plan.

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The family is gathered in the drawing room for the usual pre-dinner drinks. The conversation is filled with dissecting the events they have already attended, and discussing plans ahead for the next week. Blaine is surprised when the doorbell rings; he wasn’t expecting anyone to join them for dinner.

“Are we hosting a dinner tonight?” Blaine asks.

“Your father has invited a couple that you’ll be very interested in,” Pamela replies.

“Lord and Lady Islington,” Hummel announces before an elderly couple joins them in the drawing room.
“Lord Islington, I trust you had no troubles finding Anderson House?”

“No troubles at all, Lord Anderson. Thank you for inviting me and my wife for dinner. You must be very busy this time of year with a young debutante in the house.”

Pamela nods. “It has been hectic since we arrived in London eight days ago, but it’s refreshing to take an evening off, stay home and spend quality time with company over the age of 18.”

Lady Islington fondly smiles. “I remember quite well the coming out season of our daughter. It was an exhausting summer, filled with balls, theatre engagements, afternoon teas, and what nots. At the time, I was relieved when the Season wound down and we could have a night to ourselves. Fortunately, our daughter fell in love with a most agreeable gentleman and was married before the next summer. However, I shall always look back at her coming out Season as a special bonding time with our daughter.”

“Although I don’t have a daughter myself, I’m living vicariously through my niece, Rachel Berry. She arrived here a few months ago from America, where she lives with my brother in New York City. She reminds me of myself, looking at the British world through the fresh eyes of a young American debutante.”

Michael clears his throat politely. “Lord and Lady Islington, allow me to introduce my sons. My eldest is the Viscount Westerville, who will follow in my shoes, and my second son is Mr Blaine Anderson. Sons, I was with Lord Islington during the Boer War, and he’s currently the Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies.”

Blaine now understands why his father invited Lord Islington for dinner - India is part of his duties as the under-secretary.

After Lord Islington briefly shakes Cooper’s hand, he immediately focuses on Blaine. “I’ve heard many great things about you, Mr Anderson. I can already see that you’re a chip off the old block.”

“You’re far too kind, Lord Islington. I hope that you won’t be disappointed now that you’ve met me.”

“I doubt I shall be, young man,” Lord Islington replies.

“Dinner is ready, my lord,” Hummel announces.

“Very well, Hummel. Let’s go to the dining room and continue our conversation while we eat,” the earl suggests.

As usual, Blaine assists his grandmama out of her chair and links his arm with her’s. Given Lord Islington’s status, he allows the couple to follow directly after his parents to the dining room.

Dinner is a seven-course affair, filled with excellent food and convivial conversation about what’s going on in London this summer. They all plan to see the London Symphony Orchestra next week. It’s Cooper that turns the conversation to the more somber current events.

“Lord Islington, what is your view about the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife two days ago in Sarajevo?”

“It’s really a matter of Serbian nationalism. Russia supports the Serbs and Germany aligns itself with Austria-Hungary. Tensions have been brewing for years and the assassination has only brought it to a head. We shall see what the Kaiser does. If he agrees that Germany will militarily support Austria-Hungary, then I’m afraid there will be a war in the region.”
“Do you think that Great Britain will be involved?” Blaine asks.

“It’s too early to say. It depends if France continues its alliance with Russia.”

“Wars have been waged with less fervor,” the dowager countess suggests.

“How true, Lady Anderson,” Lady Islington replies.

The dowager countess smugly smiles and adds, “All this endless thinking is overrated.”

Pamela stands up from her seat. “Ladies, shall we leave the gentlemen to discuss current affairs and retire to the drawing room?”

Blaine stands up and Kurt immediately rushes over to assist the dowager countess from her seat. When Blaine is satisfied that Kurt has a good hold of his grandmama, he whispers thank you and sits back down at the table. Once the ladies have left, Hummel distributes glasses of port wine, while Sebastian serves cheese and biscuits. Hummel sets out the box of the house’s finest cigars and cheroots before the men.

Once the cigars are lit, the earl turns his attention to Blaine. “Lord Islington has recently been appointed the Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies. His experience as Governor of New Zealand for two years will put him in good stead for the position.”

“After I left New Zealand, I was appointed the President of the Royal Commission on the Public Services of India. We are currently looking at who should fill the superior posts within the Indian Civil Service.”

Blaine thinks that Lord Islington has suddenly become more interesting. “What a fascinating project that must be. Do you foresee a change of recruitment policies in the short term?”

Lord Islington takes a puff of his cigar before answering. “An excellent question, young man. Our studies aren’t completed, but I believe the report will recommend that recruitment to the superior posts should be made partly in England and partly in India. We’re still debating whether the competitive exams should be held simultaneously in England and India. My gut feel is that they should not. India is known for its corruption and god knows who would pass the exams.”

Blaine nods. “Only last December, I took the exams myself in London. It would have been virtually impossible to cheat in the examination hall’s conditions.”

“I met with your father at the club five days ago, where he told me all about you. I’ve since followed up with the examination council, and I’m pleased to report that you’ve passed the Indian Civil Service exams with flying colors.”

“That’s jolly good news, Blaine,” Cooper exclaims before knocking back the remaining port in his glass.

“I’m very proud of you, son,” the earl says, patting Blaine on the back.

“Thank you for sharing the information, Lord Islington. I’m delighted with the news. Do you know what happens now?”

“From what I gather, you’re intelligent, fit, and are an excellent equestrian. There’s always a place in the British empire for young men like you. I looked into it and there’s a District Officer Cadet position open in Kerala in the new year. I think it would be ideal for you. There would be a month of initial training in Delhi before you would head to Cochin.”
Blaine knows from Mr Schuester's geography lessons that Kerala lies in the southern part of India, and it was once a Portuguese colony. The main city is Cochin, which is an important port for spice trading. It’s a princely state of the British Indian Empire; the current Rajah is not only a scholar, but progressive, and he’s currently introducing railways to connect the state with the rest of India.

“It sounds like an ideal posting, Lord Islington. How long would I be posted in Cochin?”

“I would think that you would be a District Officer Cadet for two years. Typically, the next step would be a District Officer as soon as a position is open. However, for a man of your caliber, I suspect you would be transferred to Delhi to work in the Viceroy’s office. You’ll have an exciting and varied career ahead of you.”

“When would I set sail for India?” Blaine asks.

Lord Islington signals for Hummel to refill his crystal glass with port, and he takes a sip before he speaks. “We’ll have to check the timetables, but I do believe that the Princess of India will set sail soon after Christmas. I’ll have my secretary secure two first-class tickets for you and a wife.”

The earl interjects, “Blaine is attending the London season with a view to finding a suitable wife, someone who is willing to live in India, raise children there, and support his endeavors. There are already several potential ladies that Blaine is pursuing.”

Lord Islington nods. “That’s very sensible. I’ve found that it’s best to leave England as a married man, as you’ll only return once - maybe twice - to the motherland during your service in India before you retire.”

Blaine slowly takes a sip of port, allowing him time to think of the implications. It dawns on him that his future, which has been discussed at length, is now clearly mapped out before him. He’s confident that Miss Cohen-Chang will marry him if he kisses her and makes a few romantic gestures. Maybe Miss Motta could work out if India is disagreeable to Miss Cohen-Chang. But the question that fills his mind is: what will happen with him and Kurt?

Chapter End Notes

Song performed by Sugar Motta - That Haunting Melody by Al Jolson (1912)

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.
Datchitrandom created this most amazing artwork for the story. Dapper Dreamboat Blaine and Second Footman Kurt are exactly how I pictured them when I wrote this story. Please leave love and comments for Datchitrandom here.
June 1914
Kurt

Kurt has been waiting for an hour in the butler’s study for his father to return from the dining room, where the men are having their after-dinner port and cigars with Lord Islington. At last, his father arrives, looking dog-tired from a full day of duties. Hummel sighs when he finally slumps in his favorite chair.

“Kurt, I’m glad you’re here. It seems like ages since we last had a chance to have one of our after-dinner talks.”

“I’ve missed them too, Father. The days in London are as long as those at the abbey, but much more hectic, with so many social events happening. It’s hard to carve out any private time. I can’t even stop to think.”

“How true, Kurt. I’m glad you stopped by tonight. Pour us a cup of tea and then I’ll tell you some important news I gleaned tonight.”

As Kurt pours the tea, he wonders what the news could possibly be. Does it have to do with a downstairs servant or an upstairs family member? As hard as it is, he waits patiently until his father has been refortified by a few sips of tea.

“Lord Islington is the government minister in charge of the colonies,” Hummel reports.

“Yes, I remember that from the introductions I heard in the drawing room before dinner,” Kurt replies.

“He is responsible for all of the British empire, including India.” The butler puts down his teacup and gives Kurt a meaningful look.

Kurt quickly realizes that the real purpose of the minister attending dinner tonight was to talk to Blaine. “Did he say anything interesting while the men were having their after-dinner drinks?”
“Yes, indeed, Lord Islington had the most interesting things to say. Mr Blaine has passed the Indian Civil Service exams with flying colors, and he was asked to take a position somewhere in the south of India. I haven’t heard of the place before, so the name escapes me.”

Kurt bows his head, trying not to cry in front of his father. He has always known that Mr Blaine would leave Westerville sometime in the near future, but that knowledge doesn’t make it easier now that Mr Blaine’s fate is finally decided. He was secretly hoping that Mr Blaine would go into the cavalry, for then at least Kurt would be able to see him during his home leaves. But India is on a different continent; the journey takes weeks and is prohibitively expensive. Once Mr Blaine leaves from the Southampton port aboard the ship, he’ll never see him again. As hard as he tries, the sobs break out like water bursting from a dam.

His father walks over and sits next to Kurt on the old sofa. He holds Kurt in silence, rocking him slowly as tears soak his waistcoat. “I thought it best that you heard the news from me first in private.”

After ten minutes, the sobs slow down and are intermingled with sniffles. When Kurt finally looks up at his father, his blue eyes are red and eyelids are puffy. “What am I going to do, Father? I love him.”

“Kurt, it’s a hopeless situation. I can only relate how I felt when your mother passed away ten years ago. At first, it feels overwhelming and impossible to continue on, but you do. You wake up, get dressed and get on with the day, and the next day, and the next. Over a period of time - and I think it’s a different length for each person - the grief subsides and in its place come the memories that make you smile.”

“But Mr Blaine isn’t dead!”

“No, he isn’t, but he won’t be in your life any more. I think you need to discuss things with Mr Blaine. I suspect that he’s feeling a whirlwind of emotions right now as well. Perhaps he could use the soothing comfort of hot chocolate.”

Kurt remembers their promise to each other of tackling problems together, and he feels an urgency that they need to be together while sorting out their feelings. He hugs his father goodbye before heading to the kitchen to prepare a mug of hot chocolate.

After gently knocking on the door, Kurt enters Mr Blaine’s bedroom. He can see a lump under the bed sheets and pillows, and hears gentle sniffles.

“It’s me, Mr Blaine. I thought you might want hot chocolate tonight,” Kurt calls out quietly, before placing the mug on the night table and sitting on a corner of the bed.

“Hmph… *sniff*… Thank you, Kurt… *sniff*… I’ll see you tomorrow,” Mr Blaine replies, his voice muffled by the pillows.

At that moment, Kurt realizes that his father is right. Mr Blaine is just as upset as he is about his departure for India and their future. He needs to be strong for Mr Blaine, who is obviously upset.

“My father told me the news about your posting in India.”

Kurt notices two hands pull down the bed sheets so that only a headful of curls and two eyes peek out. “He did?”

Mr Blaine looks so vulnerable with his tear-filled red eyes that Kurt’s heart squeezes painfully. Kurt scooches down the bed so that he’s closer. “My father wanted me to hear it from him first in
private. How do you feel about the posting, Blaine?”

“Lie down beside me, Kurt.”

Kurt quietly goes to the bedroom door and locks it, before he strips down to his underclothes. He smiles when he notices that Blaine has opened the bed sheets for him to enter. Kurt climbs into the bed and gingerly lies down under the sheets. Before he knows it, a warm body is pressed against his. Kurt wraps Blaine in his arms and gently rubs his back.

“A year ago, I would have been excited at obtaining a posting in India. Lord Islington seems convinced that I’ll climb up the ranks of the Indian Civil Service in record time. But in spite of the promising career set out before me, I just want to stay in England. Everything has changed since I’ve met you, Kurt. I don’t know what to do,” Blaine whispers into his neck.

“Of course you do. At the beginning of August, you should propose to Miss Cohen-Chang. If she declines your offer of marriage, you should actively pursue the diamond lady. Either way, you’ll be engaged by the end of the Season. The wedding should take place in November so that you can have a short honeymoon in Paris before Christmas. Then your time will be filled with preparing to depart for India. We knew this would happen, Blaine.”

“B-b-but I don’t want to. I don’t want to go to India without you.”

“Perhaps we could find a way for me to go to India as well?” Kurt suggests.

“I’ve racked my brains but I can’t figure out how. Only the top positions in the Indian Civil Service are held by the British; Indians are employed in all other ranks. Households are staffed by the locals as well. I can’t figure out how you could be part of my life in India.”

“Perhaps I can stow away on the ship and then find some work later. A farm manager perhaps?”

“But you know nothing about growing spices in the Indian terrain.”

When Kurt feels Blaine’s tears wet his chest, he whispers, “We can’t possibly figure out everything tonight. We’re both upset and emotional. However, can we promise each other to explore ways to be together in India? I can’t see a future that doesn’t include you.”

“I’m so in love with you, Kurt Hummel,” Blaine replies before he captures Kurt’s lips with his.

The kiss feels urgent and full of promises that may or may not be kept. Kurt tries to memorize the feel and the taste of Blaine. Although he wishes that their circumstances were different, he revels in Blaine’s honesty and love. Kurt pulls back for a moment, and looks into Blaine’s warm amber eyes. “I’m so in love with you too, Blaine Anderson.”

Blaine snuggles closer in and whispers, “Stay with me tonight.”

As much as Kurt longs to spend the night holding Blaine in his arms, he knows it would be unwise. The walls have too many ears and eyes, and soon whispers and gossip would be heard by someone who matters. “I must head back to the servants’ quarters soon. I’m sure that Sebastian checks on me each night to see where I’m sleeping. However, I promise I won’t leave until you fall asleep.”

Kurt stays until he hears Blaine’s breathing even out, and then a gentle little snore. He brushes away the curls that are covering Blaine’s face and kisses his temple. As hard as it is, Kurt untangles himself from Blaine’s embrace, dresses back into his uniform and returns to the servants’ quarters.
After the morning duties have been performed, Kurt takes a short tea break in the servants’ hall. He’s exhausted from staying up all night, trying to figure out a solution to his and Mr Blaine’s situation. He’s discounted every possibility that he could think of, including joining the crew of a pirate ship and kidnapping Mr Blaine in the Arabian Sea.

He can’t go to India as Mr Blaine’s butler - colonial families hire local Indians for the household, and tongues would wag with a British servant. Kurt doesn’t have the education and training to join the Indian Civil Service. He has no skills that could possibly get him to India. The situation appears hopeless.

“Boo, what’s wrong? You look down in the dumps,” Mercedes asks.

“It’s nothing, Mercedes. I just didn’t sleep that well last night.”

“You’re far too conscientious for your own good. I bet you were worrying about Mr Blaine and which tie goes best with which day suit.”

“Something like that,” Kurt meekly agrees.

“I bet it had more to do with Mr Blaine accepting a position in the Indian Civil Service. Her ladyship told me all about it this morning,” Miss Lopez reports.

The servants’ hall is abuzz with the news of Mr Blaine leaving for India.

“This must mean that there’ll be a wedding by the end of the year. It’s been years since Lord Cooper and Lady Quinn were married. I certainly hope the wedding will be held at Westerville Abbey,” Mrs Hudson says.

Mr Hummel enters the hall and everyone rises from their seats. After nodding to indicate that everyone can sit down again, he reports, “I see that the news of Mr Blaine’s position in the Indian Civil Services has reached downstairs. Absolutely nothing has been decided regarding his departure, other than he will be leaving in the new year. I’ll inform you when more information is available.”

“Will Kurt still be needed when Mr Blaine leaves for India?” Sebastian ponders, mostly to himself but in a loud enough voice that everyone hears.

The butler glares at Sebastian, but continues to speak. “I have some other news that will impact you more immediately. Now that Miss Berry has been presented at court and the Season is running smoothly, his lordship has decided that the half-day’s off rota should begin. The schedule for the next three weeks has been posted in the corridor.”

Everyone scrambles from their chairs and charges into the corridor, but Kurt decides to stay behind with his father and not get caught in the stampede. The butler sits down and Kurt pours him a cup of tea.

“Thank you, Kurt. Your half-day off is on Monday. Mr Blaine is not attending any events that day, but Lord St James is due to visit Miss Berry in afternoon. With a high tea served for his lordship, I can only spare you. Perhaps a certain gentleman will decide to leave Anderson House for the afternoon as well?”

Kurt says nothing, although he appreciates what his father inferred.
“I forgot to mention that the dowager countess needs tea for two to be brought up to the front parlor. She asked specifically for you.”

Mrs Sylvester readies the tray with tea and scones and Kurt takes it to the front parlor. He’s not surprised in the least to find Mr Blaine sitting with his grandmother.

“Lock the door, Kurt,” the dowager countess orders.

Once Kurt has done what he’s been told, he sets down the tea tray and stands by the armchair where Mr Blaine is sitting.

Mr Blaine starts the conversation. “I’m not sure what to do, Grandmama. It feels like a hopeless situation. I know it’s my destiny to marry and go to India, but I don’t want to leave Kurt behind. I’ve racked my brain all night and I can’t think of a solution.”

“Me neither,” Kurt says, allowing his head to slump forward. Kurt realizes that he hasn’t yet performed his duties, so he pours the tea, and offers the scones on the silver platter.

After taking a sip of tea, the dowager countess says, “All of life is a series of problems which we must try and solve, first one and then the next and then the next until at last we die. I’ve thought about this too, but I might have a solution. Have you completed secondary school, Kurt?”

“Yes, my lady, I have. I was the top pupil at Wiveliscombe Grammar.”

“Excellent. British tutors are always required in India to teach the children of the Indian Civil Service’s elite.”

“Don’t they hire British governesses, Grandmama?” Mr Blaine asks.

“They do for their daughters, but young lads also require male tutors,” the dowager countess informs them.

“But I have no qualifications as a tutor, my lady,” Kurt reminds her.

“You don’t now, but within a year you will be a highly-coveted tutor. I’ll arrange for a correspondence course for you to get a teaching qualification. It will mean hours of study in your free time.”

“But I don’t have any free time,” Kurt grumbles.

“I think that my gardener needs some advice and hands-on experience with tending a kitchen garden. You, of course, will be overseeing his work in a consulting role, while studying in the greenhouse.”

Kurt smiles for the first time in the conversation. “I think that arrangement could work most satisfactorily, my lady.”

“But why would someone hire Kurt if he has neither experience nor letters of recommendation?” Mr Blaine asks.

“Kurt will gain practical experience by tutoring the slow learners in Westerville village. As the governor of the school, I’ll personally write a letter of recommendation for him. Once someone sees my name on the letterhead, he’ll be snatched up in no time at all.”

“But how could we get a job for Kurt in Cochin and then have him transferred to Delhi later?”
“What I suggest is that Kurt takes a position in Delhi and forgoes Cochin. A year or so later, you’ll be promoted and transferred to Delhi. You’ll have children so that your son will be in need of a male tutor. Kurt will be perfectly placed to accept your job offer, and no-one will question it as you have the link of the Westerville estate. You’ll be living under the same roof. The rest is up to you two.”

Mr Blaine sits tall in his seat. “Hopefully by that time, I’ll have been able to come to an understanding with my wife. It’s not a secret that I wish to keep from her. As long as Kurt and I willing to be apart for a few years, I think this plan will work.”

“But what happens if you only have daughters?” Kurt asks.

“The Anderson men always sire sons,” the dowager countess proudly responds. “Blaine knows that he’ll have to continue to expand his family until he produces a son.”

Mr Blaine shudders at the thought. “Grandmama, are you content with helping Kurt in Westerville so that we can fulfill our dream of being together? I hope it won’t put you in a moral dilemma… Because if it does, I don’t think I could live with myself.”

The dowager countess shakes her head. “If we only had moral thoughts, what would the poor churchmen find to do?”

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After the family has had their lunch and the silverware has been polished, Kurt heads to the kitchen to see if there is additional work for him to do. He’s shocked to find Blaine standing by the counter, wearing a white chef’s jacket.

“Mr Blaine, is there something I can help you with?”

“There certainly is, Kurt. I had the most delicious casserole at the Grosvenor’s last night. Lady Grosvenor said it was called *coq au vin* and the dish comes from the wine-producing region of France. The casserole has chicken, pearl onions, mushrooms - all slowly cooked in red wine. There are also some herbs and I’m trying to remember what they are.”

“I’ve never tasted such a casserole in my life, but thyme always goes well with chicken. I’d also add a bay leaf for a more complex flavor,” Kurt suggests. He picks up the recommended herbs and hands them over to Mr Blaine to smell.

“That was it! I could taste the thyme in the dish. Can you help me recreate it?” Mr Blaine asks.

Kurt chuckles at how eager Mr Blaine is to have him as his sous-chef. “Certainly, Mr Blaine, as long as that’s fine with Mrs Sylvester,” Kurt replies, looking at the disgruntled cook.

“I’ve already told Mr Blaine that Brittany and I could prepare the casserole, but he insists on making himself a nuisance in the kitchen,” Mrs Sylvester grumbles.

Mr Blaine goes over to the cook, and pats her shoulder. “I’m sure that your *coq au vin* would be much better than anything the Grosvenor’s chef can produce, but I want to try to recreate the dish myself. I rather enjoy cooking. It certainly beats sitting in the drawing room, listening to Cooper and Cousin Rachel try to outperform each other.”

“Are they at it again?” Mrs Sylvester asks.

“They’ve been at it since we came back from church this morning. It’s a miracle that they stopped
long enough to eat lunch. I love them both dearly, but sometimes I want to stuff socks into their mouths.”

Mrs Sylvester cackles. “Go ahead, Kurt, and help Mr Blaine with his dish. We’ll serve it for dinner.”

The cook looks around the kitchen and eyes Brittany preparing the ingredients for a lemon tart. “Brittany, why are you using my clementine knife to cut a lemon?”

“I was only trying to help.”

“Oh...Judas was only trying to help, I suppose, when he brought the Roman soldiers to the garden!”

When Kurt hears Mr Blaine quietly sniggering, he goes to the footman’s pantry to take off his jacket and put on an apron, barely containing laughter. Mrs Sylvester certainly has a way with words. When he returns to the kitchen, he retrieves the vegetables from the larder. Kurt notices that Mr Evans and his father are also in the kitchen, chatting to Mrs Sylvester, who’s preparing the tea trays.

“I believe these are the vegetables you mentioned that go into the casserole. I’ve also brought out carrots.”

“How about if I deal with the chicken and you cut up the vegetables in bite sized portions?” Mr Blaine suggests.

After Kurt peels the carrots and scrubs the mushrooms, he inspects them, scrunching up his nose.

“Anything wrong, Kurt?” Mr Blaine asks.

“I miss taking care of the kitchen gardens. The fruits and vegetables from the local greengrocer in Belgravia are quite substandard. There’s nothing like freshly-picked produce to make a dish even tastier.”

Mr Blaine leans in and whispers, “I miss having the kitchen gardens, too.... for many reasons. Many private reasons.”

Kurt blushes and quickly looks around, grateful that no-one seems to have heard Mr Blaine’s gentle flirting.

Mr Evans looks up at the pair. “You need to visit Spitalfields Market. They sell every kind of fruit and vegetable imaginable. Say, Kurt, don’t you have a half-day off tomorrow?”

“I do, Mr Evans. Perhaps a trip to Spitalfields Market would be a great outing. Is there anything you need, Mrs Sylvester?”

“I’ll make a list for you. There’s plenty I’ll need if you’re going to Spitalfields.”

Mr Hummel thinks it over and says, “Since you’ll be going to the market on household business, why don’t you go in the morning? That will still give you the rest of the day off for your own pleasure.”

“I could accompany you to the market,” Mr Blaine proposes. “I’ve been there once before with Mr Evans, and I fear that you might get lost on the crowded streets. I would enjoy finding ingredients for creating my own special recipes. I’ve always wanted to prepare a duck with sour cherries. We’ll
have Hudson drive us to Spitalfields Market, and then he could return to Belgravia with the produce, leaving you to enjoy the rest of your day off.”

“I think that’s a very sensible idea, Mr Blaine,” Mr Hummel responds with enthusiasm. “I’ll entrust you with the money, Kurt can select the very best produce, and Mr Hudson will ensure that everything gets back to Anderson House safely. I suggest that you leave immediately after an early breakfast so that you can select the pick of the crop.”

Mr Blaine smiles brightly. “Excellent. Kurt, will you bring me my breakfast tray at, say, 5:30 AM? I have no social obligations tomorrow, so I could show you some of London in the afternoon.”

“I wouldn’t like to impose and inconvenience you, Mr Blaine,” Kurt implores, but secretly, his heart is doing cartwheels.

“It’s no inconvenience at all, Kurt. I really haven’t seen much of London this summer, except for ballrooms and drawing rooms. Some fresh air would do me good.” Mr Blaine looks around and then winks at Kurt.

“If you want your dish served at tonight’s dinner, you best get on with it,” Mrs Sylvester scolds.

Mr Blaine salutes her, then focuses his attention back on the chicken. While Kurt chops the vegetables, his mind drifts to tomorrow’s excitement. While Spitalfields Market sounds interesting, the best part of the day will most definitely be spending the afternoon alone with Mr Blaine.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: Kurt’s day off
June 1914
Blaine

“Anything more I can do for you, Mr Blaine?”

Blaine inspects the breakfast tray on his lap as Kurt fluffs the pillows behind his back. His heart squeezes when he spots the single red and yellow Devonshire rose in a small crystal vase on the tray. He’s certain that Kurt added this little touch.

“No, I’ll be fine. Now scoot and get changed into your casual clothes. I’ll meet you outside the back entrance in half an hour.”

Blaine rushes through his morning routine, going through a mental checklist of everything he wants to do with Kurt during their outing in London. There’s a knock on the door and Sam enters. After the Westerville fox hunt, Blaine had confided to both Wesley and Sam his feelings about Kurt. They were both immediately supportive and Blaine was reminded at what good friends they are.
“I’ve got everything you need, Mr Blaine. Let’s get you ready.” Sam sets down a set of his own clothes on the bed.

“Do you think it will work?” Blaine asks.

“Of course it will. No-one will notice you today in these clothes.” Sam helps Blaine put on a white shirt and rolls up the sleeves, and Blaine immediately can tell that the material isn’t as soft as the shirts he normally wears. The trousers prove to be a bit trickier. In addition to a belt, Blaine uses Sam’s suspenders to keep the trousers from falling off his tiny waist.

“I can’t see your feet!” Sam laughs. He kneels in front of Blaine and carefully rolls the trouser hems into a makeshift cuff. “It’s a good thing rolled-up trousers are the current fashion.”

“Do you think I’ll fit in with the crowd but still look good enough for Kurt?”

“You look fine, Mr Blaine. You should’ve seen Kurt last night, carefully selecting what he would be wearing today. I swear he chose and discounted at least six outfits. Kurt is so excited about spending the day with you.”

“Trust me, he can’t be more excited than I am. When do you get your half-day off, Sam?”

“You’ll never believe this, but Mercedes and I both have Friday afternoon off,” Sam reports.

“Are you going to spend it together?”

“I haven’t asked her yet,” Sam admits, looking sheepish.

“Put yourself out of your misery and ask her this morning, and make sure that she knows it’s a date.”

Sam lets out a deep sigh.

“Courage, Sam. Kurt has already told me that Mercedes is sweet on you. Now I’d better get going if I’m to meet Kurt on time. It’s already 6 AM.”

Sam leaves the bedroom and gives him the all clear. Blaine looks left and right before he silently sneaks out of his bedroom, walks along the hallway and heads down the stairs. When he leaves by the main entrance, Blaine is relieved that there was no-one awake to question why he is dressed in such a manner. He walks along the side of the townhouse and when he arrives near the back entrance, he keeps in the shadows of an elm tree.

After five minutes, Kurt appears and Blaine’s breath hitches at the vision before him. Kurt is wearing possibly the tightest pair of trousers he’s ever had the privilege to see. They accentuate his lean muscular legs in all the right ways. Kurt is also wearing a crisp white shirt and a tweed jacket.

“Who goes there?” Kurt whispers, his eyes flashing, when he notices movement near the tree.

Blaine comes out from behind the elm and takes off his woolen cap. “It’s me, Kurt,” Blaine reassures him.

“Blaine! I almost didn’t recognize you in that outfit!”

“Good, that’s what I was going for. I didn’t want today to be about the son of an earl going out with his footman. I want it to be just two ordinary men enjoying a day in London. You look incredible, Kurt.”
“Thank you, my kind sir. I guess we do look like two ordinary, but incredibly good-looking men ready for a day in London.”

Hudson leaves the townhouse from the back entrance and joins them. When he sees Blaine, he lets out a soft whistle. “We better get going before Hummel comes out. He won’t approve of what you’re wearing, Mr Blaine.”

They climb into the Renault and Hudson drives to Whitechapel, in the East End of London. Although it’s only five miles, it feels as if they are in a different world. The streets are overcrowded with dirty children, some of whom don’t have shoes on their feet. Soot and grime cling to the terraced houses, which have the day’s washing hanging on lines from open windows.

Kurt gasps when he sees an old man lying in the gutter. “I’ve heard about the East End, but I never realized it was this bad. I can understand now why Mr Evans’ grandparents sent him to live at Westerville Abbey when he was just a child.”

Hudson looks in the rearview mirror and says, “Most men struggle day-to-day to earn a decent living at the docks. Believe it or not, conditions are getting better since the Port of London Authority was established a few years ago. There are pockets of the East End that are better than others, especially around the market.”

“Please don’t get lost!” Kurt begs.

Hudson turns the car onto Wentworth Street, which is near the Spitalfields Market. Once Hudson has parked the car, they make arrangements for the morning.

Blaine passes a piece of paper to Hudson. “Here’s the list of what Mrs Sylvester requires. Kurt and I will spend our time getting some of the more exotic foods. We’ll meet at the clock tower at noon,” Blaine instructs, handing the necessary coins to Hudson.

“Be careful, Mr Blaine. Jack the Ripper still hasn’t been found.”

Blaine chuckles to himself because the Ripper’s victims are exclusively women, however, he finds Hudson’s concern sincere and endearing. He and Kurt walk up to the corner and take a left on Commercial Street, and they can see Spitalfields Market up ahead. The street is busy with people and lorries filled to the brim with crates of produce. There are shops with awnings selling their wares on either side of the street.

“Blimey! I didn’t realize Spitalfields would be this large. I’ve been to Taunton on market day, but that’s nothing compared to this,” Kurt exclaims. “How are we going to find what we need?”

“We’ll start at the top end of the street and work our way down to the clock tower. Make sure you stick close to me.”

“I’ll be like glue,” Kurt promises.

They make their way through the variety of shops and stalls, buying fruits and vegetables that meet Kurt’s exacting standards. Blaine is delighted to find sour cherries for his duck dish, and he buys lychees for Mrs Sylvester. The exotic fruit reminds Blaine of the cook - the outside is roughly textured and spiky, but the inside is soft and sweet with a light floral taste. Before they know it, they are at the clock tower, where Hudson is waiting for them.

“Let me help with your crate, Mr Blaine,” Hudson offers as they start walking back to the car. Once the produce has been stacked into the Renault, Hudson opens the rear door for Blaine.
“We’re not leaving just yet, Hudson. There’s one place nearby that I want to show Kurt.”

“Bb-but I promised Hummel that I’d make sure you two were safe and that means driving you out of this area.”

“How about you have your lunch at the Ten Bells across the way, while we visit another market? I promise we won’t be more than an hour.”

“What will I tell Mr Hummel when he asks why I’ve been gone for longer than expected?” Hudson asks.

“Perhaps you got lost on the way back,” Blaine suggests.

Hudson roars with laughter. “Yes, I guess that would be a believable excuse. I’ll have my lunch and then I’ll wait for you by the car.”

Blaine strides ahead and Kurt quickly follows. “Blaine, where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise that I think you’re going to like. Now follow me,” Blaine replies.

After a ten-minute walk, they arrive at another busy market street filled with hundreds of stalls. “This is Petticoat Lane Market, Kurt. They sell fabrics, notions, and ready-made clothes, as well as home decor items.”

They browse the stalls, and Kurt carefully looks over the fabrics used for men’s fashion. “I think these fabrics will be perfect for a jacket for my father. I just can’t decide which one is best.”

Blaine sets out a few coins on the cutting table. “Sir, I’ll buy both of these fabrics. My friend will let you know the lengths required,” Blaine informs the shopkeeper.

“Blaine, I can’t let you buy both of them!”

“Why not? Your father can have two new jackets… Or even better, make one jacket for your father and one for yourself.”

Kurt glances around the shop before giving his decision. “Well then, let me take another look around. I don’t want my jacket to be tweed like my father’s.”

Blaine sits down on a nearby stool, watching Kurt find possible fabrics for his own jacket. After he’s finally made a decision, the shopkeeper cuts the material lengths, and wraps them in paper. Blaine holds the door open for Kurt and notices that the street is even busier during the lunchtime hour.

“You spend too much money on me, Blaine,” Kurt chides.

“It’s actually for my own personal gain, if you wear outfits I can admire on you,” Blaine says sincerely.

Kurt looks at the wares across the street. “I think it’s time we find something for you and I have an idea.”

They head to a stall that sells bow ties exclusively. Blaine is immediately attracted to the patterns that he doesn’t usually see at the tailor in Exeter. A red tie with multi-colored polka dots catches Blaine’s eye.

“Let me buy it for you, Blaine.”
“I love it, but I wouldn’t have any occasion to wear it.”

“Nonsense. You could wear it proudly in Cochin and tell all the Indians that it’s the latest fashion in London.”

Blaine laughs at the thought of setting a trend of polka-dot bow ties in India. He’s not very comfortable with Kurt spending his pocket money on him, but nonetheless allows Kurt to buy this small gift for him.

They head back to the car, where Hudson is patiently waiting. “Please drive us to Hatton Garden,” Blaine instructs.

Hudson’s eyes almost bug out of his head. “It was hard enough to explain why Kurt had a ring after the trip to Exeter.”

Blaine chuckles, for their real destination isn’t the famous jewelry district in London. “We’re not actually spending time in Hatton Garden. I know of a small tavern nearby for us to have our lunch.”

When they get to Holborn Circus, Blaine instructs Hudson to stop the car.

“Will you need my services after lunch, Mr Blaine?”

“No, Hudson. Why don’t you return to Anderson House with the food from Spitalfields Market? Kurt and I will be fine on our own for the rest of the day.”

They walk down Hatton Garden, which has jewelry shops lined on both sides. Blaine walks slowly on purpose so that Kurt can look at the window displays. At first, Kurt carefully looks at the jewelry, but then Blaine notices that he looks straight ahead with misty eyes.

Blaine stops Kurt when they turn the corner onto Greville Street. “What’s wrong, Kurt?”

“I want to buy you a ring so that you’ll remember me in India, but I can’t buy you what you deserve on my meager earnings. I think that the next time you are in Hatton Garden, you’ll be buying Miss Cohen-Chang an engagement ring.”

“I don’t need a ring to remember you by, Kurt. However, I’d love to wear a ring that symbolizes our love and commitment to each other. I have an idea - why don’t I buy a ring matching yours from Brufords Jewelers in Exeter.”

“I couldn’t afford it, even if Brufords gives me a special discount,” Kurt sighs.

“Kurt, it’s irrelevant who pays for the ring. What’s more important are your promises to me that are associated with the ring. That’s something very special to me that money can’t buy.”

And like a light switch, Kurt’s eyes sparkle and his lips turn up into a grin. “I think you’re right. You’re so very special to me.”

Blaine leads Kurt into a cobbled courtyard, and on the very far side, there’s a tavern with a hanging sign stating ‘The Bleeding Heart’.

Kurt smiles when he sees the tables set out in the courtyard. “Can we sit outside? It’s a beautiful afternoon, and I don’t get to be outdoors very much at Anderson House.”

Blaine nods and leads them to a table under the shade of an old oak tree. Since it’s past the usual
lunch hour, there are very few other customers, which will allow them to speak openly during lunch.

“Have you been here before, Blaine? It’s got quite an unusual name.”

“Cooper brought me here when he was collecting Quinn’s wedding ring. According to the owner, the lane was named after a 17th century beauty, Elizabeth Hatton, who was found murdered here. The picture on the bistro’s sign shows the heart of the Virgin Mary pierced by five swords.”

The waiter promptly provides them with menus, which offer the usual tavern fare. After ordering two pints of ale, roast chicken and chips, they bask in the summer sun. When the waiter brings their drinks, Kurt starts the conversation that they need to have. “Have you considered when you might raise the subject of India to Miss Cohen Chang?”

Blaine takes another gulp of ale before setting down his pint glass. “I’m seeing her tomorrow evening at the London Symphony Orchestra - our families are sharing a private box. I thought I would announce it then and judge Miss Cohen-Chang’s and her parents’ reactions. Miss Cohen-Change is expected at Anderson House for tea the following week, and we’ll discuss India further.”

“So, it’s really happening, then.”

“I’m afraid it is. However, I think that Miss Cohen-Chang will make an excellent wife. Not only is she smart, but she’s practical. I hope that she’ll find a way to make our marriage work and reconcile herself to the fact that I’m in love with you.”

“I certainly hope so, Blaine. I really do.”

The waiter brings out their lunches and they leisurely eat their meal. The conversation turns to light-hearted matters such as fashion, music and funny things that have happened both during the Season and downstairs at Anderson House. After finishing their coffees, Blaine notices that the sun is casting longer shadows in the courtyard. He consults his pocket watch and can’t believe that two hours have gone by sitting in Bleeding Heart Yard.

“I’ve had a wonderful day, Blaine. I can’t remember when I’ve last had a few hours to relax. I’m sure that you have other things that you need to do, so I’ll make my own way home.”

“What makes you think that today is over? I’ve bought tickets to see Our Boys, a long-running burlesque show. I believe it’s also performed on the ‘Broadway’ that Cousin Rachel always goes on about.”

“Really?” Kurt practically screams, clapping his hands.

They take the tube to Embankment and then walk along the Strand to the Vaudeville Theatre. Once they’ve entered, Blaine and Kurt find their seats in the back of the upper circle. When the lights dim to signal that the performance is about to start, Blaine discretely takes Kurt’s hand in his. Blaine’s stomach swoops when Kurt squeezes his hand gently. Blaine wishes that he could wrap his arm around Kurt and pull him closer, but for now, hand-holding will have to do.

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“Enter,” Hummel says when he hears a knock on his office’s door. It has been a long day looking after the family and providing a high tea when Lord St James visited. With Kurt having the afternoon off, he’s been kept busier than ever. His smile turns into a frown when he realizes that it’s not Mrs Hudson at the door.
“Can I have a few minutes of your time?” Sebastian asks as he enters, not waiting for permission.

Hummel can think of a thousand things he’d rather do than listen to Sebastian whine about everyone else’s incompetence and how his contribution to the household should be recognized more. However, one thing he knows about Sebastian is that he won’t let go of something until he gets it off his chest. It’s better that Sebastian bother him than his lordship. Hummel gives him a curt nod and indicates that Sebastian should sit in a chair… a very uncomfortable chair.

“How can I help you, Sebastian?”

“It’s a rather delicate matter, Mr Hummel. You see, it concerns your son and Mr Blaine.”

Hummel lets out a deep sigh. He knew it would have to do with Kurt and how he’s lacking as a footman. “Mr Blaine hasn’t had any cause for complaint. In actual fact, he’s been quite complimentary about Kurt’s service.”

“I’m sure that Mr Blaine has been complimentary, but do you know of all the services Kurt provides?”

Hummel isn’t sure how much Sebastian knows, but decides his best strategy is to feign ignorance. “Kurt does everything that is asked of him in a most exemplary manner.”

“I’m sure that Mr Blaine would agree with that, in between his gasps and moans. An eyewitness has seen them in the kitchen gardens, doing the most unthinkable things of a sexual nature. I want to know what you’re planning to do about it.”

“Nothing. Kurt and Mr Blaine may have been indiscreet, but it’s nothing that you haven’t done yourself,” the butler retorts.

“I beg to differ, Mr Hummel. I’ve never ravished Mr Blaine, a gentleman who is expected to court debutantes and find a wife. I have a proposition for you. Make me his lordship’s valet, and I’ll keep quiet. Otherwise, I’ll tell his lordship all about how the second footman is taking advantage of Mr Blaine.”

“You wouldn’t dare!”

“Oh, yes, I would, Mr Hummel. After my conversation with his lordship, you and your man-whore son will be on the next train back to Somerset.”

“Over my dead body will you be his lordship’s valet!”

Hummel’s chest tightens. He’s not sure how to get out of this predicament without disgracing the Hummel name. There is no possible reason for him to make Sebastian the valet while Sam Evans is in place. No matter what happens, there is no happy ending for him and Kurt. He feels his heart beating faster and squeezing.

Then everything goes black.

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“Middlewick and Talbot’s romantic entanglements with the ladies make our situation seem so simple,” Kurt reflects as they exit the theatre.

Blaine giggles when he remembers the boys’ antics during the play. They decide to take a taxi back to Belgravia as the sun has set long ago. When they arrive at Anderson House, Blaine pays
the taxi driver and escorts Kurt to the back.

“Does today really have to end?” Kurt laments.

Blaine pulls Kurt behind the elm tree. “I was hoping that today might end with a goodnight kiss.”

Blaine places his hands on either side of Kurt’s face and slowly moves his head forward until their lips brush. As their kiss deepens, Blaine pulls them closer so that there is no space between them, and he can feel Kurt’s heartbeat against his chest. His hands drift down to Kurt’s hips, and when he hears Kurt inhale sharply, blood immediately flows down south, and his cock fills. Kurt’s lips travel along his neck, kissing and sucking. It’s all Blaine can do to control himself and not thrust forward for a little relief.

Blaine wants so much more with Kurt besides kissing, but this is neither the time or the place for it. Lord knows if Sebastian is lurking outside the house. Before he loses control and finds himself unable to behave like a gentleman any longer, Blaine pulls back for air. He rests his forehead against Kurt’s with his eyes still closed. “If we don’t stop now, I never will.”

When Blaine stands up straight and opens his eyes, he can see Kurt’s eyes twinkling back at him. Kurt gives him a peck on the lips. “One day, I’m going to make you lose your dapper ways, Mr Anderson.”

Blaine stares at Kurt slowly sauntering to the back entrance, almost hypnotized by the sway of his hips. Before Kurt enters the house, he looks over his shoulder, and gives Blaine a wink. Once the door is closed, Blaine stands there for a full five minutes to cool down before he’s composed enough to enter the house from the front entrance. He’s surprised to see Mrs Hudson waiting in the hallway. She quickly brings him into the empty front parlor.

“Is Kurt back as well?”

Blaine simply nods.

“There’s no easy way of saying this. Mr Hummel has had a heart attack and has been taken to the Royal London Hospital.”

Chapter End Notes

I tried something different and placed the chapter photo in the beginning notes (my html code skills are getting more impressive). Hopefully, the photo will show up on the email notification but I can't test this theory until I post this chapter. Please let me know if you hate it or love it.

On Sunday, I’m traveling and will have a major time zone change. I hope to post at roughly the same time on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Any change in timings will mean posting earlier in the day.

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: Kurt visits his father at the hospital and the earl reshuffles the downstairs staffs’ duties.
July 1914
Kurt

Tick… Tick… Tick…

Kurt sits on a stool next to the hospital bed. He keeps his fingers pressed to his father's wrist, desperate to feel the pulse - the only sign that his father is still alive. Two days ago, the doctor informed him that his father had had a heart attack and is now in a coma. The sound of the large clock on the wall serves as a reminder that the longer his father remains in the coma, the less likely it will be that he'll survive.

Tick… Tick… Tick…

Kurt is grateful that the Earl has insisted that his father be sent to Royal London Hospital for the very best medical attention. The good lord knows he couldn’t afford it himself. Sending his father to a lesser hospital wouldn't fare well for his prognosis. The ward is filled with twenty patients’ beds lined up in two rows. Sisters are busy checking heart rates, updating medical charts and dispensing medicine. The ward is noisy with relatives visiting their loved ones. It's a wonder that his father can sleep through all the noise.

Tick… Tick… Tick…

Kurt tries very hard not to think about what will happen if his father doesn’t pull through. It’ll probably mean back to the farming life in Somerset. He can’t lose his father - he doesn’t want to go through the same pain he had felt when his mother passed away all those years ago. He’s certain that his heart will break into two if he loses yet another loved one. He’s counting on his father’s support when Blaine departs for India…

And he loses Blaine forever.
In spite of the dowager countess’ plan for Kurt joining Blaine in India, Kurt still has worries and so many doubts. Maybe Blaine will feel differently once he’s married and established in India. Blaine will have sexual relations with his wife to produce children. The eldest might even be the heir to the Westerville estate and its titles. Blaine could fall in love with his wife and consider his feelings for Kurt as just a temporary fling. After all, Blaine has no experience with matters of the heart.

There are so many pitfalls and uncertainties in the Dowager Countess’ plan. There are a lot of hurdles to jump over between Kurt obtaining a teacher’s certificate, finding a position in India, and Blaine receiving a position in a city like Delhi. Even if everything goes smoothly, they both wouldn’t live in the same place for at least two years. Would someone like Blaine wait for him that long? Even if Blaine doesn’t fall in love with his wife, it would only be a matter of time before he finds another lover.

And they’re not lovers.

Kurt realizes that time with Blaine has been filled with secret glances, stolen kisses, and hand holding in the back of the theatre. There has been no opportunity to take things further, even if they want to. Kurt can’t believe that this would change once they are together in India. With a smaller community, the British would probably be stricter about convention and protocol, and tongues would wag more freely if anyone stepped out of line. If Blaine still feels more attracted to men, there would be gentlemen readily available to snatch up such a catch - gentlemen who know how to be discreet behind closed doors.

Kurt considers what he has to offer Blaine, and comes up with nothing. A possible orphan with no skills other than to farm the land and serve others. A love that is strong but forbidden. Nothing at all.

Tick… Tick… Tick…

Kurt returns his attention to his father and squeezes his hand. He has always thought of his father as a tall and proud man, but he looks so sickly and pale sleeping in the bed. He decides to focus on the immediate problem here inside the hospital ward.

Kurt startles when he feels a pair of hands on his shoulders, gently squeezing.

“Any change?” Blaine asks.

Kurt shakes his head. “No. The doctor says that his condition is stable, but it’s now the waiting game to see if he’ll awaken again.”

When Kurt hears a cough, he turns his head and notices Mr Hudson with a picnic basket. “Mrs Sylvester asked me to deliver this to you. It’s filled with special treats that are normally reserved for upstairs, but she said you need to keep up your stamina.”

“Thank you for bringing it, Mr Hudson, but I’m not hungry.”

Blaine opens the picnic basket, takes out a Cornish pasty and hands it to Mr Hudson. “Why don’t you go outside to eat this, and then return with some tea for us?”

When Hudson eagerly sets off to eat the snack, Blaine finds another stool in the ward and sits down next to Kurt. “How are you holding up? I’m worried about you.”

“I’m scared, Blaine. He’s all I’ve got,” Kurt whispers.

Blaine quickly takes Kurt’s hand into his. “You have me, too. I’ll be by your side as long as you’ll
“Or set off for India with your brand-new wife and your brand-new life,” Kurt responds bitterly.

“Hey, that’s not fair. I appreciate how you must feel about the uncertainty in our futures, but one thing I know is that we are meant to be together, and it will happen as long as we work for it.”

Kurt sags against Blaine’s side and is comforted when he feels strong arms around him. He wishes that this could naturally happen in their lives and not just when he’s grieving. Blaine lifts his head so that Kurt is facing him.

“I spoke to the doctor before I came into the ward. There is very little we can do until your father awakens. He recommends that you go home, get some rest and eat. I agree with him, Kurt. You’ll need all your strength for when he leaves the hospital and returns to Anderson House.”

“But what if he wakes up and I’m not there?”

“There’s such a thing as the telephone, Kurt. The hospital will call, and Hudson will drive us to see him,” Blaine replies.

“Yes?” Kurt asks meekly.

Blaine rubs the ring on Kurt’s hand. “Yes, us. Don’t you remember my promise to you? I meant it when I said that we’ll have to learn how to figure out problems together. You once said that my loyalty is one thing you admire about me. Please believe me when I say I’m loyal to you.”

In that moment, Kurt believes every word that this dashing, loving gentleman says. He only hopes that Blaine’s loyalty isn’t tested by a lengthy separation.

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Kurt feels a thousand times better after taking a nap in his own bed. He washes himself thoroughly and dresses in freshly laundered clothes. Kurt feels his stomach rumble and therefore decides to go to the kitchen and beg Mrs Sylvester for something to eat, even if it’s not a mealtime.

When he descends the back staircase and walks down the corridor, he can hear gentle sobs come from the housekeeper’s office. He knocks on the door to see what is wrong. “Mrs Hudson. It’s me, Kurt.”

“Just a moment, Kurt.”

After a minute of hearing shuffling in the office, the door opens. Mrs Hudson’s eyes are puffy and red. The bags underneath them are tell-tale signs that she hasn’t had enough sleep. “Please come in, Kurt. You must tell me about your father’s condition.”

“The doctor said that his heartbeat is getting stronger, and his condition is stable. Father is sleeping until his heart is fully ready to function again.”

“So, he’s still in a coma,” Mrs Hudson replies, before closing her eyes and placing her handkerchief over her mouth.

Kurt notices the tear that is slowly running down her cheek. Kurt isn’t sure exactly what he should do, but it’s obvious that Mrs Hudson is quite upset about his father’s condition. He walks towards her and squeezes her shoulder. “The doctor said that it’s a sign that his heart wants to work again. My father is a fighter, and I doubt his heart will give up easily.”
Mrs Hudson smiles. “Your father is the strongest person I’ve come across. Losing his wife at such a young age and having to support his family by coming into service.” Mrs Hudson blows her nose before continuing. “Your father and I have become quite close these past few years. We’re more like kindred spirits than co-workers in charge of the staff. I think the world of your father.”

Mrs Hudson is only confirming what Kurt has known since he arrived at Westerville Abbey many months ago. It’s obvious that their friendship has many layers. “I’m glad that my father has a special friend like you,” Kurt replies.

“No matter what happens with your father, I want you to think of me as someone who can be relied upon. I’ll always make sure that you have a job at Westerville Abbey as long as you wish. I can be a very formidable lady when someone special to me faces adversity.”

“I don’t doubt that for one moment, Mrs Hudson. And thank you. Knowing that I have someone like you no matter what is rather comforting.”

Mrs Hudson gives him a gentle hug. “His lordship has summoned everyone to the servants’ hall for an important announcement. He’ll be down in five minutes. You don’t have to come, but I really think you should be there.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world. I’d like to hear what his lordship has to say firsthand. He’ll probably be announcing that Sebastian will be the new butler.”

“I certainly hope not. Over the last 48 hours, Sebastian has bullied and intimidated most of the staff. Mrs Sylvester was even here just an hour ago, asking permission to poison his next cup of tea.”

Kurt and Mrs Hudson are still giggling about Sebastian’s possible fate at the hands of Mrs Sylvester when they enter the servants’ hall. The place is abuzz with theories about what the Earl will announce. Sebastian is in the corner whispering with Mrs Lopez, looking far too smug with himself. Kurt suppresses the urge to walk over to Sebastian and personally wipe that smirk off his meerkat face.

When the Earl arrives at the servants’ hall, everyone stands to attention. Once his lordship has indicated that they should sit down, the hall is so quiet that one could hear a pin drop.

“As you are all aware, Hummel suffered a heart attack two days ago and was brought to the Royal London Hospital. His heart beat is stable and strong, and we are waiting for him to awaken.”

“Do you know when that will be, my lord?” Mercedes asks.

“It’s in the hands of God. The doctor will call us as soon as he awakens. In the meantime, Mr Evans will be acting as butler.”

“What!” Sebastian shouts. Once the footman has composed himself, he continues, “My lord, it only seems sensible that I take on the butler duties, as I am the first footman. Mr Evans might be an excellent valet, but he doesn’t know the inner workings of the downstairs staff. I, on the other hand, am well versed in Mr Hummel’s duties and responsibilities.”

The Earl shakes his head. “Mr Evans is one of the senior servants in this household, and I’m confident that he’ll be able to fulfill the role. My plan has always been to promote Mr Evans to be the permanent butler at Anderson House in London.”

“I can’t believe this! Mr Hummel never even consulted me about the butler position available at Anderson House,” Sebastian bitterly replies.
The Earl raises an eyebrow at Sebastian’s outburst. “This was something that Mr Evans and I have discussed for a long time, and something that we both want. The decision was mine, and mine alone. This is my last word on the matter.”

“Yes, my lord. I will consult Mr Evans about the valet duties now expected of me,” Sebastian says, trying desperately to keep himself together.

The Earl shakes his head. “You shall remain the first footman, Sebastian. You will be invaluable in assisting Mr Evans to learn about the inner workings of the footmen and duties downstairs. Kurt will take over the valet duties for me. Blaine is more than satisfied with Kurt’s services and…”

“I bet he is,” Sebastian snarls. “Blaine and Kurt are…”

“Enough!” Mrs Hudson shouts. “His lordship has made his decision, and it’s up to us to make sure that standard of service continues to be first-class. My lord, what will happen when Mr Hummel returns?”

“That’s the most sensible question I’ve had yet, Mrs Hudson. Once Hummel is fully recovered, he will continue his role as butler, with Mr Evans as an under-butler learning the new position. When we return to Westerville Abbey, Mr Evans will remain in London at Anderson House. In the meantime, we’ll be one footman short. My mother has already sent for her butler, Spratt, to help us out.”

“It seems like a rather good plan. I shall help Mr Evans in any way I can,” Mrs Hudson promises. “Now let’s get back to work, everyone. There is plenty to do before the pre-dinner drinks bell is rung.”

“Kurt, could you please join me in my study when you have a moment?” the Earl asks.

“Yes, my lord. I’ll be there in five minutes.”

Kurt goes to the washroom and ensures that he’s neatly groomed for a one-on-one meeting with the Earl. Once he’s satisfied that he looks the best that he can, considering the circumstances, he goes up the stairs and enters the study.

“Kurt, thank you for coming. I understand from Blaine that you only returned hours ago from the hospital.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“I can appreciate that this is a very difficult time for you. Take off as much time as you need. I’m sure that between Evans and Mrs Hudson, they will be able to handle things and soothe Sebastian’s bruised ego.”

“Thank you, my lord. If it’s alright with you, I would prefer to continue working. Mr Blaine suggested that I keep to a routine, at least until my father awakens and is discharged from the hospital. However, I’d like to spend evenings after dinner at the hospital with my father.”

“Blaine often comes up with rather good ideas. He also suggested that he can help me dress if you’re not available. Trust me, everyone at Anderson House will help in any way they can whilst your father is recuperating.”

“Thank you, my lord. It means a lot to me.”

“One last thing. If Sebastian causes any trouble for you, please tell me. I know that things didn’t
work out quite as he envisioned, but everyone has little setbacks in life. If you feel more comfortable talking to Blaine, then you can discuss these matters with my son.”

“Thank you, my lord. I shall meet you at 6 PM in your bedroom with your evening outfit ready.”

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One week later…

Kurt has established a new routine in the Anderson household. He still rises early each morning and lays out the dining room table. Kurt is secretly pleased when Sebastian has to empty the servants’ chamber pots while he delivers the breakfast tray to the Earl and sets out his morning suit for breakfast. After shaving the Earl, he carries a second breakfast tray to Mr. Blaine. With his new position in the household, Kurt is able to spend more time with him. He updates Mr. Blaine on the previous night’s hospital visit and helps him dress for breakfast.

The rest of the day is busy, serving the family meals and setting out the outfits the men have to wear. Once the dinner service is over, Mr. Hudson drives him to the hospital for his nightly visit to his father. Kurt is grateful for the new routine, for it doesn’t allow much opportunity for him to think.

Mr. Evans is settling into the role of butler as well as expected. The household staff are working particularly hard to ensure that the transition goes smoothly. As predicted, Sebastian tries to trip him up, but Mrs. Hudson seems to have eyes all around her head and usually diverts any potential disasters.

“Everyone is expected outside the front of Anderson House,” Mr. Evans shouts along the downstairs servants’ corridor. “A very important guest is expected at any moment.”

The staff quickly stop what they are doing and rush outside to form a V-shaped line, with the men on one side and the women on the other. The entire Anderson family waits on the front marble steps for their guest to arrive. A cream-colored Rolls Royce stops in front of the house, and the driver opens the rear door for a very handsome young man.

The family walks down the steps and the Earl greets the visitor. “Welcome, Duke Clarington. You may remember by sons, Cooper and Blaine, but I don’t believe you’ve met my niece, Miss Rachel Berry.”


Kurt notices that the Duke gazes at Mr. Blaine for longer than necessary, and he doesn’t like it one little bit. The Duke then walks past the male and female staff, almost as if giving them a proper inspection.

“Come in. You must be worn out,” the Countess says as she welcomes the guest.

As the ladies make their way up the entry stairs, the Duke holds back to have a word with the Earl. “I’ve come alone. My man was taken ill just as I was leaving.”

“That won’t be a problem, will it, Evans?” the Earl asks.

“Certainly not, Your Grace. I’ll look after you myself,” Mr. Evans offers.

Duke Clarington shakes his head. “I wouldn’t dream of being such a nuisance. Surely I couldn’t.” The Duke looks carefully at Sebastian. “I remember this man. Didn’t you serve me when I was
dining at Westerville Abbey?"
“Did, Your Grace,” Sebastian replies with a smile.

“Very well. We should do very well together. Can I expect you an hour before dinner?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

Once the family and Duke Clarington are inside the house, Mr Evans orders, “Sebastian and Mr Hudson, please take the Duke’s cases up to his bedroom. Kurt and I will go to the kitchen and organize afternoon tea for the drawing room. Sebastian, you can join us there when you’re ready.”

“Yes, Mr Evans,” Sebastian replies.

As he walks to the kitchens, Mr Evans nudges Kurt and says, “Sebastian looks like a dog that received a meaty bone. Rumor has it that Duke Clarington enjoys both the men and the ladies. If that gets Sebastian off our backs for a few days, I’m grateful for the Duke’s arrival.”

“How long will the Duke be staying at Anderson House?” Kurt asks.

“His rooms at his London house are currently being refurbished. I’ve been told he’ll be staying a week.”

Kurt smiles to himself. A week without Sebastian getting on his case feels like a gift from heaven.

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Tick… Tick… Tick…

“Is there anything I can get you, Kurt?” one of the sisters asks, after finishing taking his father’s blood pressure.

“I’m fine for the moment,” Kurt politely replies. He’s not really fine. He’s exhausted after serving a seven-course dinner that evening. Mrs Sylvester has already forewarned him that every meal will be formal, with numerous courses, while the Duke is staying at Anderson House.

Kurt looks down at his hand against his father’s wrist and is comforted by the strong and regular pulse that he feels. Mr Blaine had offered to join him at the hospital this evening, and Kurt is now regretting that he didn’t take him up on the offer. Kurt has noticed over the past two days that Duke Clarington spends equal time with Mr Blaine and Miss Berry. The Duke openly flirts with Miss Berry, complimenting her musical performances and has even hinted at singing a duet together. Miss Berry now spends her free time looking for the perfect song, while there is a permanent scowl on Lord Cooper’s face.

Duke Clarington also flirts with Mr Blaine, although it’s a lot more subtle. They go for strolls together in St James Park, and Mr Blaine has visited His Grace’s men’s club more than once. When Kurt sees them together, Duke Clarington finds ways to be physical with Mr Blaine - arm around his shoulder as if he’s whispering a secret, shrugging his side, and the like. Kurt doesn’t like it at all, but there’s nothing he can do but watch and silently brood. Kurt breaks out of his thoughts when he feels a finger move in his hand.

Kurt looks over at his father, who is now moving two fingers. “Sister! Sister! Come quick! My father’s fingers are moving!”

By the time a sister appears, his father is slowly moving his head side-to-side. “Mr Hummel, can
you hear me? Squeeze Kurt’s hand twice for yes.”

Kurt looks down and is ecstatic that he can feel two weak squeezes.

The sister smiles. “Mr Hummel, I know it’s difficult, but I want you to open your eyes.”

Very slowly his father opens one eye, then the other. He first focuses on the sister in front of him and then slowly gazes around. When Kurt sees his father stare at him, he says, “Welcome back, Father.”

“I’ll go get the doctor. He’ll want to examine your father immediately,” the sister says and leaves the butler’s bedside.

Kurt and his father continue to gaze at each other, holding hands. The first words that come out of his father’s mouth are, “Sebastian. He’s evil. Don’t trust him. He’s got it out for you.”

Chapter End Notes

In 1914, it would be extremely rare for a person to survive a heart attack. I used literary license in this part of the story as I wanted a parallel to Burt’s heart attack in canon.

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Thank you to dblmalfunction, who performed a detailed review for the pesky mistakes that I’ve missed. Expect better use of commas, punctuation in general, and a slight change to how titles are set out in future chapters. However, I did the last-minute edits and proofreading by myself, so all mistakes are mine.

Next up: Blaine and Miss Cohen-Chang have a discussion about India.
July 1914
Blaine

“Everyone needs to be outside pronto to greet a very important person to Anderson House,” Sam
shouts as he runs along the downstairs corridor. He bumps into Blaine as he turns the corner. “That
goes for you, too.”

Blaine rushes to the front entrance and stands by his grandmother on the front marble steps. He
straightens his tie and smooths down his suit jacket as the Renault stops along the curve. Sam
approaches the car, opens the rear door, and assists a man out. “Welcome home, Mr Hummel.”

Both the servants and the family members clap their hands and cheer when they see the butler
walking slowly towards the townhouse. Although Hummel has a cane, Kurt is holding on to him to
ensure that he doesn’t fall. The butler looks rather pleased with the reception and announces, “It’s
good to be home again.”

The Earl steps forward and shakes Hummel’s hand. “I speak on behalf of everybody when I say
that we’re happy to have you home again as well. I expect you to stay in bed and rest, just as the
doctor ordered. We’ve made the necessary temporary arrangements in the household until you’re
fully recovered and on your feet again.”

“It won’t take that long, My Lord,” Hummel huffs. Blaine chuckles to himself, because he suspects
that Hummel will be a handful for the staff keeping him on bed rest.

Blaine sets down his tea cup and glances at Miss Cohen-Chang, who is visiting Anderson House
for afternoon tea. While Hummel was in the hospital, Blaine had cancelled a couple of social
engagements so the he could be there with Kurt. When Miss Cohen-Chang first arrived today, she
was frosty, but gave Blaine the opportunity to explain the recent goings on at Anderson House.
“Thank you for being so understanding, Miss Cohen-Chang. I’m pleased that you didn’t think my absence at the Ashburton’s ball was any slight on you.”

“Not at all, Mr Anderson. I think it’s endearing that you get so involved in the household affairs. It’s a good sign when a man knows what’s happening in all corners under his roof.”

“I’m glad you think so, Miss Cohen-Chang.”

Blaine glances over at Kurt who is standing tall and proud along the far wall. Although his expression is blank, Blaine can tell that Kurt is listening to the conversation by his concentrated look. Blaine turns to Miss Cohen-Chang, and realizes that he’s been caught staring too long at the footman. In order to give the appearance that he was thinking of her, he asks, “Can Kurt pour you another cup of tea?”

“No, thank you, Mr Anderson.” Miss Cohen-Chang leans in towards him and whispers, “Perhaps we could stroll around St James’s Park? If we stay in your drawing room for any longer, I fear that Miss Berry will burst in and ask you to accompany her on the piano for a new rendition of Be My Little Baby Bumble Bee to perform with Duke Clarington this evening. I want you to myself a bit longer this afternoon.”

Blaine chuckles, because what Miss Cohen-Chang described is exactly what would happen if they continued to sit in the drawing room. “I see you understand what happens in all corners under this roof as well.”

“Not everything, Mr Anderson. I’m sure these walls hold deep secrets of love, intrigue, and perhaps things darker. I’m sure they hold everyone’s secrets, including yours.”

“Mine? I-I have no idea what you mean,” Blaine stammers.

“Oh, don’t you? I’m sure Anderson House and Westerville Abbey are hiding some of your secrets - perhaps your dreams and desires. What do you think, Kurt?”

“Walls can’t easily be broken, Miss Cohen-Chang. Rest assured, Mr Blane is nothing but a gentleman through and through,” Kurt stiffly replies.

Blaine wants to stop this avenue of conversation because it’s closer to the truth than even Miss Cohen-Chang might imagine. “Shall we go for our stroll, Miss Cohen-Chang?”

At the entrance, Kurt provides them with their hats, gloves and cane. Blaine tucks Miss Cohen-Chang’s arm in his, and they set out for a leisurely walk to St James’s Park. When Miss Cohen-Chang notices that there isn’t a cloud in a sky, she opens her parasol to protect her skin from the afternoon’s harsh sun.

After an hour of inspecting the flower beds, they decide to sit down on a bench next to the park’s lake. Blaine slaps the top of his head. “I should have brought breadcrumbs for the ducks.”

Miss Cohen-Chang takes his hand and smiles. “Always thinking of others, Mr Anderson. Even the ducks! What a gentle and caring soul you are.”

“I can be ferocious if I need to be,” Blaine protests.

“I don’t doubt that for a moment, Mr Anderson. I imagine you would defend the people you love ‘till your last dying breath. It’s a very admirable quality.”

Blaine blushes at the compliment. It seems as if he can do no wrong in Miss Cohen-Chang’s eyes.
He believes she might think differently if she really knew how he feels about Kurt. “What have you been doing in your spare time recently, Miss Cohen-Chang?”

“I spent this morning at the British Library researching Cochin, India. It sounds like a most interesting place. I imagine there must be many exotic dishes, with so many spices grown in the area.”

“You’re full of surprises, Miss Cohen-Chang.”

He had informed her of his posting in India the day after he received it. That evening, their families shared a box at the Royal Opera House’s opening night of The Nightingale by Stravinsky. She seemed pleased for him, but had kept her thoughts to herself. Blaine isn’t sure how he feels about Miss Cohen-Chang researching Cochin. On the one hand, he’s relieved that she’s open to the possibility of living in India. On the other hand, they are not yet betrothed, and it might be a bit presumptuous of her.

Miss Cohen-Chang turns towards Blaine. “Did you know that my mother plays whist every Thursday afternoon with Lady Fairfax? Her husband recently retired from the Indian Civil Service, and they were stationed in Bombay. She has very much opened my eyes to what life would be like as a colonial in India.”

“And what do you think of that sort of life?” Blaine asks.

“I think it would suit me. As a Korean in England, I’m like a square peg in a round hole. I don’t fit in with the other fine ladies I meet. I know that they only tolerate me because of my father’s wealth.”

“That’s not true!” Blaine exclaims, although a little voice inside tells him it’s most definitely true.

“That’s very kind of you to say, but I think we know each other well enough to be honest with each other. I might be more suitable as a lady in the colonies. I’m neither British nor Indian, which might mean that I can flit between the two societies. I could incorporate the best of both worlds into my life.”

“So, you’re not averse to living in India?” Blaine asks.

“Not at all, Mr Anderson. If you think about it, I’m already living outside of my home country. It would just be an adventure to another foreign land. It also has the benefit of not being far from Korea or Hong Kong, where my father’s business interests are.”

There is an awkward silence. Blaine is thrilled that he has found a potential wife who not only meets his family requirements, but is also willing to join him in India. However, there’s something holding him back from kissing her and asking her parents for her hand in marriage. He’s still wrestling with his conscience about whether to tell her about Kurt before they are betrothed.

“And how about you, Mr Anderson? I understand that in addition to Duke Clarington, Anderson House has also been entertaining Miss Motta. Should I be jealous?”

“Not really. Mrs Motta and her daughter were invited to afternoon tea last week. I love Grandmama very much, but she can be quite meddling in my private affairs when she’s determined it’s in my best interests.”

“Mr Anderson, I think we are more alike than you think. I too can be ferocious when defending things that I hold dear.”
Blaine takes in carefully what Miss Cohen-Chang has said. He can just imagine Miss Cohen-Chang winning a most vicious catfight with Miss Motta.

“Don’t wait too long, Mr Anderson. Passion flames the fire, otherwise it smolders and grows cold.”

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Blaine walks down the corridor of the male servants’ sleeping quarters and stops at the door labeled ‘Mr Hummel’. The door is slightly ajar and he’s surprised when he hears a woman’s voice inside. He uses his hip to open the door and finds Mrs Hudson sitting on a chair next to the butler’s bed.

“I do hope I’m not interrupting anything,” Blaine says as he sets down a tray on Hummel’s lap.

“Mr Blaine, I’m surprised to see you! Mrs Hudson was just keeping me up to date with the goings-on in the house. You shouldn’t have been the one to bring up my dinner tray. I’ll have a word or two with Mr Evans.”

Blaine shakes his head. “I asked Evans if I could bring it up. I wanted to see for myself that you are still in bed, convalescing. Do you know, I can’t remember a single day that you’ve spent in bed since you arrived at Westerville Abbey all those years ago.”

“Humph. As you can see for yourself, I’m just fine. I don’t need to be mollycoddled. I’d recuperate just as well in the butler’s office as in bed. At least I would be useful.”

Mrs Hudson interjects, “Perhaps you can knock some sense into him, Mr Blaine. The doctor ordered him to stay in bed until we return to Westerville Abbey. We might have to tie him down to the bed posts to keep him from going downstairs. Now, if you’ll excuse me. I must return to work.”

When Mrs Hudson leaves the bedroom, Hummel sets the tray on the night table. “Do you have a minute, Mr Blaine? There are some important things I would like to discuss with you.”

Blaine’s curiosity is piqued. “I have all the time in the world for you, Hummel.”

“I take it that Kurt told you about the conversation I had with Sebastian?”

Blaine nods. His blood boils thinking of how Sebastian attempted to blackmail Hummel into giving him the valet position, without thinking about any of the consequences for others. “Yes, and I’m very angry about it. I’ve done a lot of soul searching, and I must tell my parents about Kurt and me. Westerville can’t be a place where blackmail and…”

Hummel interrupts, “Nonsense, Mr Blaine. You’ll soon be married and on your way to India. I see no need to upset the family at this point of time.”

“But what about Sebastian?”

Hummel slowly smiles. “Better the devil you know than the devil you don’t. Now that His Lordship has made a decision about the acting butler and valet positions, I suspect that Sebastian will keep quiet.”

“But what if he doesn’t? I can’t bear the idea that you might have another heart attack.”

“Don’t worry, Mr Blaine. I have a few tricks up my sleeve as well. Any decent butler knows everything that the footmen under the same roof get up to. Over the years, I’ve carefully observed
Sebastian’s actions. I’ve taken note of wine pilfered, and how Sebastian has his own special way of entertaining certain guests of the abbey.”

Blaine isn’t totally convinced that Hummel can keep Sebastian at bay with his information. He shudders to think how Sebastian could make Kurt’s life even more miserable.

Hummel interrupts his thoughts. “What I really want to discuss are your intentions with my son.”

Blaine rises from the chair and turns away from the bed, thinking carefully about how he’ll respond. Blaine realizes Hummel is asking him this question, not as a member of the staff, but as Kurt’s caring father. In spite of their class differences, Blaine has always been a young boy in the butler’s eyes, but this question deserves an answer from a man… A man in love... A man who knows what, and who, he wants.

Blaine glides both hands over his hair, ensuring that the pomade still keeps his hair in control. He turns around and earnestly replies, “Hummel, I love Kurt with all my heart and soul. Any future that I envision has him by my side.”

Hummel closes his eyes and nods. After a moment or two, he says, “I have no doubt that the Dowager Countess’ plan of having Kurt as your family’s private tutor will work. She’s already enrolled him into a correspondence course to obtain his teaching certificate. I know that your lives together won’t be easy. God knows I wish it wasn’t this way, but it’s what Kurt wants, and I’m not going to tell him who to love. The heart knows what the heart wants. If he arrives in India and finds that your feelings have changed, it would destroy him.”

“Every piece of my heart wants Kurt. I gave him a ring with certain vows, including my promise of forever,” Blaine replies.

“Mr Blaine, I know you’re a gentleman, and your promise means everything to you. Can you make me one promise?”

Blaine nods. He would do anything he possibly could for Hummel.

“I’m not going to be around forever. Promise me that you’ll look after Kurt when I die.”

Blaine takes Hummel’s hand in his. “Hummel, I promise you that I will always look after Kurt.”

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“Mr Blaine, are you here? Sebastian said that you needed my help,” Sam says, entering the second son’s bedroom.

“I’m in the bathtub, Sam. Come on in,” Blaine calls out.

Sam enters the bathroom and plonks himself down on the stool next to the bathtub. “I thought you would want Kurt to help you get ready for the symphony this evening.”

“Normally I would, but I haven’t had the opportunity to talk to you alone since you had your half-day off. Did you spend it with Mercedes?”

Judging by the way Sam is blushing, Blaine knows something good must have happened.

“I took your advice and asked Mercedes to step out with me. She said yes.”

“I knew she would. I want all the details, Sam.”
“I took her to the East End to visit my grandparents. I think they were surprised that Mercedes is a Negress, but they are far too polite to make any comments. We then had a spot to eat at a teahouse before going to the cinema. We saw Mabel's Strange Predicament, which starred the most hilarious tramp. Have you heard of Charlie Chaplin before?”

“No, I haven’t. I’ll be sure to see the film,” Blaine replies.

“You’ll laugh so hard, Mr Blaine. Charlie Chaplin is tiny, like you.”

Blaine flicks some of the bath water at Sam. “Very funny. So, did you kiss Mercedes goodnight?”

Sam’s blush is all the answer that Blaine needs. “I’m not sure what we’re doing. At the end of the Season, I’ll remain in London as the butler, and Mercedes will return to Westerville Abbey. It’s hopeless.”

“I felt the very same way about my future with Kurt when I was informed about the position in India. However, I’ve learnt from my grandmama that every problem has a possible solution. When Hummel is feeling better, why don’t you discuss it with him?”

“I doubt very much that Mr Hummel will sympathize with us. You do know that it’s forbidden for the servants to fraternize?” Sam retorts.

“I think that you’ll find Hummel more sympathetic than you think - at least, that has been my experience. Who knows? Maybe Anderson House will need a full-time housekeeper as well.”

“Really?” Sam squeaks.

“When you think about it, Cousin Rachel will be spending more time in London when she finally settles down in marriage. Who better placed than Mercedes to remain in London to take care of her needs?”

Sam jumps up from the stool. “I’ll discuss this with Mercedes. When we arrived in London, Mrs Hudson was moaning about the state of Anderson House. A full-time housekeeper might be exactly what it needs.”

Blaine chuckles at Sam’s eagerness. “Can you save the conversation for after I’m ready for the opera?”

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“Cooper, where is Quinn this morning? Will she be coming downstairs for breakfast?” Pamela asks while buttering her toast.

“She was feeling poorly when she woke up and is having breakfast in bed.”

“Oh, dear. Shall I call the doctor?”

“I don’t think so, Mama. She’ll be right as rain by noon.”

Everyone looks up as Duke Clarington enters the dining room, and helps himself to the breakfast buffet. He turns and looks around the table. “Miss Berry, you’re looking rather fetching this morning.”

Blaine places his linen napkin over his mouth and coughs, trying to suppress the laughter bubbling inside him. The simple white skirt Cousin Rachel is wearing is elegant, but her top is not. The
short-sleeved navy shirt has the most ghastly yellow tartan-patterned bow in front. It looks like it’s about to swallow her up.

“I’m so glad you like it, Your Grace. My tailor wasn’t very happy but I insisted that the bow should be as large as my many talents.”

“I would say that it’s as large as your beauty. I look forward to discovering your many talents, Miss Berry.”

The Duke sits down next to Blaine and let his eyes linger for just a fraction longer than is customary. “My compliments to your tailor as well, Mr Anderson. You always cut a very fine figure in your outfits.”

Blaine’s cheeks tinge pink, for he’s not accustomed to being complimented by another gentleman in such a manner.

The Earl sets down his newspaper. “This business in Europe seems to be escalating so quickly. The Austrian minister visited Berlin.”

“What’s happened?” Cooper asks.

“The Kaiser has pledged Germany’s unconditional support for whatever action Austria-Hungary chooses to take in its conflict with Serbia.”

“What does that exactly mean?” grandmama asks.

“It means that if Austria-Hungary declares war on Serbia, then Germany will go to war against Serbia as well,” Blaine explains.

“Do you think that it will come to a war?” Pamela wonders.

The Earl shrugs his shoulders. “I certainly hope not. If war is declared, Russia might support Serbia. This could escalate into the greatest war ever seen.”

“I certainly hope not,” Pamela shudders.

The conversation turns to the social engagements for the day, but Blaine zones out. He knows that his mother will make sure he’s where he should be in the appropriate attire. Instead, he daydreams about the next time he’ll be able to spend alone time with Kurt.

Chapter End Notes

The chapter photo is of St James's Park, where Blaine and Miss Cohen-Chang have their stroll. The link to Rachel's outfit - disregard the white skirt in the photo; it would have definitely been below the knee in 1914.

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen.

I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.
Next up: Hunter Clarington's stay at Anderson House gets interesting.
July 1914
Kurt

“I can’t believe how lucky I am to get another afternoon off,” Kurt tells Mr Hudson as they walk down Pall Mall in Central London.

“You deserve it, Kurt. You’ve been working so hard with your new duties at the house, and taking care of your father every spare moment you have.”

“Making sure that my father stays in bed has been a challenge. He’s constantly grumbling about being fine and wanting to resume his duties. I even put a sleeping draught in his mug of cocoa each night to make sure he doesn’t sneak downstairs to his office.”

Mr Hudson chuckles. “I can believe that. You’re a crafty devil.”

“Your mother has been a godsend. She politely but firmly tells my father that his job is to get 100% healthy, and her job is to make sure the household runs smoothly. I think her concern and companionship have allowed my father to focus on recovering and healing.”

Mr Hudson nods. “I know my mother values your father’s friendship very much. She’s been quite lonely since my father died when I was a baby. Wouldn’t it be funny if they got married, and we ended up brothers?”

Kurt smiles at the idea that his father could be settled and happy once he has set off for India. It would be a comfort to know that there would be someone to take care of his father as he grows old.

“I’ve always wanted a little brother,” Mr Hudson adds, with warmth in his voice.

“I’m older than you,” Kurt points out.

“But I’m taller,” Mr Hudson retorts, with a smug look on his face.
Kurt doesn’t even attempt to work out that logic. They turn the corner onto Haymarket Street and walk quickly to His Majesty’s Theatre. “Miss Berry was very generous buying us tickets to see Pygmalion.”

Mr Hudson nods. “Miss Berry is constantly talking about this play, and how she was born to play the role of Eliza Doolittle. I mentioned to her that I’d like to see it and find out for myself what it’s all about. I never expected her to buy me the tickets.”

Mr Hudson hands the tickets to the collector when they enter the theatre. They climb the stairs until they reach the balcony, where their seats are located. When they are comfortably seated, Kurt looks up at the ornately painted domed ceiling. He’s never been anywhere so grand before. Mr Hudson’s waving hand distracts him.

“Look over there, Kurt… In the stalls.”

Kurt looks down to the area near the stage and studies the people taking their seats. He finally notices the party whom Mr Hudson is referring to. There is Lord Cooper, Lady Quinn, Mr Blaine, Miss Cohen-Chang, Duke Clarington…and of course Miss Berry, who is smiling broadly at Mr Hudson.

“Did you know they would be at the performance as well?” Kurt asks.

Mr Hudson ducks his head and blushes. “Yes, I did. Miss Berry was instrumental in allowing me to have the afternoon off. She arranged with the Duke that his chauffeur would be driving them today.”

“She’s sweet on you,” Kurt observes.

“If I go by the expression on Mr Blaine’s face, I’d say that he’s sweet on you,” Mr Hudson counters. At that very moment, Mr Blaine tips his hat and beams a smile in Kurt’s direction.

Mr Hudson places his hand on Kurt’s shoulder. “I’m not judging you or anything. If Mr Blaine is happy, then that’s good enough for me. I know how hard it is to be in love with someone who’s unobtainable.”

Kurt notices the dopey look on Mr Hudson’s face as he stares longingly at Miss Berry. “I think we have more in common than people would think.”

“Like brothers,” Mr Hudson says, as he nudges his shoulder against Kurt’s.

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Kurt admires the display of opulent silver boxes in the bedroom while the Earl finishes his bath.

“They’re snuff boxes. I collect them.”

Kurt quickly turns around to find the Earl in his dressing gown. He’s embarrassed that he was caught inspecting His Lordship’s things.

“I have more at the abbey. Once your father is back at work, I shall have you keep them polished.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“We’re having another formal dinner tonight. It seems that the progress made on the refurbishment of the Duke’s rooms is very slow. Yesterday, Rachel went to inspect the works with the Duke and
insisted he change the color scheme.”

“Miss Berry does have firm views about all manner of things,” Kurt replies.

“Indeed, she does,” the Earl chuckles.

Kurt takes a tray from the dressing table. “I’ve set out your black tie outfit for this evening. I think that these particular shirt studs and cufflinks would go well with the suit.”

The Earl inspects them on the black velvet-lined tray held in front of him. “I forgot I had these - they were my father’s. I’ll enjoy wearing them this evening. Thank you for suggesting them, Kurt.”

“You’re welcome, My Lord.” When the Earl slips off his dressing gown, Kurt offers him the shirt and assists with the studs and cufflinks.

“I can understand why Blaine is so complimentary about your service. The Earl gaze turns to the window for a moment before he continues, “I can’t remember a time when I’ve seen Blaine so open and forthcoming. He was always so serious as a child, with his nose in every book he could get his hands on. But recently, Blaine is exhibiting such confidence, and is comfortable in a wide variety of social situations. And most of all, he’s radiating happiness.”

“I suspect it’s because Mr Blaine has a secured position in the Indian Civil Service, and is attending the London season,” Kurt replies.

“No, I think it’s more than that. Blaine’s mood lifted last winter when we were still in Westerville.”

“Then it must be Miss Berry’s arrival, My Lord.”

“By Jove, I think you’re right! Maybe having someone his own age at the abbey was exactly what Blaine needed to come out of his shell.”

Kurt agrees with the Earl. Mr Blaine does seem happy, but he hopes it has more to do with him than with Miss Berry. Kurt picks up the black bow tie and places it around the Earl’s neck. “Do you really think that there will be a war in Europe, My Lord?”

The Earl nods. “I was at the House of Lords today and we were reviewing Great Britain’s position on the matter. It’s a very serious business indeed.”

“If Great Britain enters the war, then many lives will change,” Kurt ponders.

“Yes, we will all need to do our part if it comes to war.”

Kurt holds open the suit jacket so that the Earl can easily put it on. The Earl gives himself a once-over in the full-length mirror. “Thank you, Kurt. That will do. I’ll see you downstairs.”

After the Earl has left, Kurt quickly puts away the dressing gown and cleans up the bathroom. He wonders how the war will affect him. Should he stay behind and fight for Great Britain, or continue with his plans to set sail for India? He makes a mental note to discuss it with his father.

When he leaves the bedroom, he notices Sebastian leaving Lord Clarington’s bedroom. That in itself isn’t unusual - after all, Sebastian is the acting valet for the Duke during his stay at Anderson House. What is surprising to Kurt is that Sebastian’s lips are red and swollen, and his hair is ruffled.
“This duck is so succulent, and the sauce with sour cherries really goes well with it. Please pass my compliments on to the chef,” Duke Clarington says, after setting down his cutlery on his empty plate.

Kurt can see Mr Blaine is preening at the well-deserved compliment. They have spent the entire afternoon creating the duck dish for tonight’s main course. Kurt doubts that Mr Blaine’s family would approve of his culinary endeavors.

“I say, Miss Berry, your duck looks different,” Duke Clarington remarks.

“I don’t eat meat, Your Grace. My course is made with tofu, but it still has the delicious sour cherry sauce.”

“What’s tofu?” the Duke asks.

“Some sort of soy product. Miss Cohen-Chang had her cook deliver some to Anderson House for me to sample,” Miss Berry reports.

Kurt has noticed how attentive Miss Cohen-Chang can be, not only to Mr Blaine but to other members of his family. Pretty soon, she’ll be ingratiated with the Andersons. Even though Kurt knows that Miss Cohen-Chang might be Mr Blaine’s future wife, it gives him an uncomfortable feeling.

Kurt clears the plates from the main course and brings them downstairs to the kitchen. Brittany is holding a copper mold and is about to turn out a jelly onto a serving dish.

“Hold it steady if you don’t want to start again from the beginning,” Mrs Sylvester says with her fingers crossed.

Kurt lets out a sigh of relief when the jelly lands on the serving dish in one piece.

“Do these strawberries go on top?” Brittany asks.

Mrs Sylvester snips, “No, I put them out for the fairies.” The cook spots Kurt in the kitchen and asks, “What’s happening upstairs?”

“They’ve finished the duck course. Duke Clarington was most appreciative, and offered his compliments to the chef.”

“Did Mr Blaine give the game away with his smug smile?”

“No, Mrs Sylvester. Although I think you should give him credit for the dish.”

“I think I’ll leave it to Mr Blaine to reveal how he spends his free time. Now go take this jelly upstairs and make sure it doesn’t wobble too much!”

Kurt takes the silver platter and carefully makes his way upstairs and into the dining room, where the family is eating a citrus-flavored sorbet. Kurt takes his position next to Sebastian and Mr Evans against the back wall and notices that Mr Spratt is topping up the glasses with wine.

Mr Spratt, the Dowager Countess’ butler, arrived this morning from Dower House in Westerville. The elder butler has spent most of the day keeping his father company. This evening, his service at dinner has been exemplary, taking orders from Mr Evans without hesitation. Kurt’s glad that the
butler isn’t trying to usurp Mr Evans’ position in any way.

“Did everyone enjoy the play this afternoon?” Lady Anderson asks.

“Who would have thought that George Bernard Shaw could create a play based upon turning a beggar into a lady,” Lord Cooper snorts.

“It’s based on Greek mythology,” Lady Quinn reminds him.

When Lord Cooper gives a blank stare, Mr Blaine helps him out. “In ancient Greek mythology, Pygmalion decides to live alone and creates a beautiful statue called Galatea, who is more perfect than any living woman. The more he looks upon her, the more deeply he falls in love with her, until he wishes that she were more than a statue. Lovesick, Pygmalion goes to the temple of the goddess Venus and prays that she give him a lover like his statue. Venus is touched by his love and brings Galatea to life.”

“I didn’t know you were a scholar as well, Mr Anderson. I admire intelligence in a man,” Duke Clarington says.

Kurt can see Mr Blaine sit that little bit taller, pleased that his grasp of the classics has been acknowledged. Duke Clarington can be just as smarmy as Sebastian!

After Sebastian has cleared the small crystal bowls, Kurt serves the jelly with strawberries carefully placed on top.

“Do you think it’s possible to take a girl from the gutter and turn her into a lady? Is it nature or nurture that makes a person?” Lady Quinn ponders.

Miss Berry gives her views. “Who’s to say that Eliza wasn’t already a lady deep inside when Professor Higgins found her? The British take too much credence on where someone is born and their accent. In America, people have an equal opportunity to achieve success and prosperity through hard work, determination, and initiative. Why, it’s even set out in our constitution that all men are created equal.”

“But are they?” Duke Clarington counters. “The great families of Britain educate their children to rule. There is an unwritten but well-known code on how to conduct oneself, which includes being benevolent to others. We provide the very stability that this great nation needs. It’s been a very effective way to rule Britain and its empire for centuries. The idea that there are no decent people in the aristocracy is absolute nonsense.” The Duke takes a sip of wine and asks, “Mr Anderson, what do you think?”

Mr Blaine looks like a deer caught in the headlights. “The elite is neither good nor bad, they just are. I think that what is most important is a person’s heart and soul. There are many elite that are kind and benevolent as you suggest, but there are others who are just plain evil. But a person’s underlying goodness - that knows no class.”

“I’m exhausted by this heavy conversation. If I were to search for logic, I would not look for it among the English upper class,” the Dowager Countess exclaims.

The Countess rises from her seat. “Lady Anderson, ladies… Shall we adjourn to the drawing room?”

Sebastian and Mr Spratt leave the dining room with the ladies to tend to their needs, while Kurt and Mr Evans remain with the men to serve the port and pass around the cheroots.
“What’s happening on the continent?” Lord Cooper asks his father.

“I’m afraid it’s not very good news. Yesterday, Austria-Hungary sent an ultimatum to Serbia to formally and publicly condemn the ‘dangerous propaganda’ about the country. They were very specific in their demands on how this should happen. The Serbian Regent Crown Prince Alexander is on his way to Russia to discuss the matter.”

“And what happens if Serbia doesn’t meet Austria-Hungary’s demands?” Duke Clarington asks.

“There will be war,” the Earl states solemnly.

The conversation stops as each gentleman considers the implications of this statement. Mr Evans nudges Kurt to top up the glasses with port. As Kurt goes around the table, he notices that Duke Clarington is gazing at Mr Blaine for a bit longer than is normal, and his eyes are darkened with lust. Jealousy pools in his stomach. It’s all Kurt can do to stop himself from walking over to Mr Blaine, pulling him into his arms, and capturing his lips in a kiss. Mr Blaine belongs to him, and is not for any other man to ogle.

I might be only the second footman, but Mr Blaine is mine! Mine! Mine!

Duke Clarington places his napkin on his plate and stands up. “It’s been a long day. I think I’ll retire to bed.”

“Cousin Rachel will be so disappointed that you aren’t joining us in the drawing room to listen to her musical performance,” Mr Blaine remarks.

“I wish I could hear her sing, with you accompanying her so adeptly on the piano. However, I’m so tired, I’m afraid that I might fall asleep in the middle of the recital. Evans, could you tell my footman that I’m going up?”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Mr Evans replies, before leaving the dining room to find Sebastian.

Kurt is relieved when the Duke waves goodbye and exits the room. It appears that the way he has been ogling Mr Blaine all night will come to naught. And this is a very good thing, because Kurt was seconds away from scratching Duke Clarington’s eyes out.

The Earl stands up. “Shall we retire to the drawing room and join the ladies? I believe Rachel has practiced all afternoon for this evening’s performance.”

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After finishing his nighttime duties, Kurt goes to his bedroom to freshen up. He can’t explain this feeling in his heart, but he needs to see Mr Blaine this evening. When Kurt opens the door to leave, he spies Duke Clarington entering Sebastian’s room. Kurt smirks, because having the Duke otherwise occupied fits in very well with what he has planned for Mr Blaine’s bedtime.

Kurt waits impatiently in Mr Blaine’s bedroom, wondering how many songs Miss Berry will perform tonight. When Mr Blaine finally opens his bedroom’s door, his eyes open wide, and he beams a smile brighter than any star.

“Kurt, I wasn’t expecting to see you again this evening.” Mr Blaine hands him his dinner jacket and walks to his dressing table to take off his shirt studs and cufflinks.

Kurt can’t control himself any longer. He follows Blaine, yanks him away from the dressing table, and pushes him against the wall. “Do you know what it’s like to have to watch Duke Clarington
undress you with his eyes all night? Do you have any idea what it feels like to hear him flirt and
flatter you?"

Kurt’s lips slam into Blaine’s - not innocently, like a tease - but deliberately. The kiss starts out hot,
and turns scorching and demanding when Kurt plunders into Blaine’s mouth with his tongue.

When Kurt releases his mouth, Blaine looks dazed. “Kurt, the Duke flirts with absolutely everyone
who is young and available. You have nothing to be jealous about.”

And what makes you think that you’re available!? You’re mine!

Kurt wishes he could share his strong emotions freely with Mr Blaine, but he’s scared of having
his heart so exposed. He bites his lips and says instead, “What makes you think I’m jealous?”

Blaine smirks, “I don’t know. Perhaps it’s the way you are manhandling me. Don’t get me
wrong… I like it.”

Before Kurt can reply, Blaine flips them so that Kurt’s back is firmly trapped between the wall and
Blaine’s pressing body. Blaine’s posture is so firm and strong against him that it nearly knocks all
the wind from his lungs. The next thing Kurt knows, Blaine is kissing him and letting out sinfully
guttural moans. Blaine, who shows no signs of stopping, eagerly makes his way down Kurt’s neck,
nipping, kissing and licking.

When Blaine speaks, his whispers are muffled against Kurt’s heated skin, but Kurt can hear him
clearly, “Do you know what it’s like to have to keep us a secret, to not let everyone know that you
are mine? I get all hot and bothered just thinking of any man wanting you.”

Kurt’s eyes roll back from the pressure of Blaine’s lips, and his heart races faster knowing Blaine
also feels possessive. Even though there haven’t yet been circumstances where men are ogling
Kurt, Blaine’s heated confession is proof that they share the same feelings of jealousy. Kurt finds
this comforting, and oh, so sexy.

“Take off your tie. It’s in my way!” Blaine says with frustration.

Kurt is dizzy from Blaine’s attention and can hear the blood rushing past his ears southward. He
somehow makes his trembling fingers move, fiddling with the knot of his tie to remove it for
Blaine. He’s never seen Blaine so full of lust, but he loves it.

Once it’s loosened, Blaine tugs at the tie and tosses it to the floor. Kurt squeaks when Blaine yanks
at his shirt and the top few buttons pop off. Blaine continues his ministrations until he gets to the
spot between the nape of Kurt’s neck and his shoulder. Blaine sucks hard, as if he wants to eat Kurt
alive. Kurt feels his body heat soar. It’s too much, but not enough at the same time. The only thing
keeping him on his feet is Blaine firmly pressed against him. Kurt’s arms fly around Blaine’s neck,
and his fingers play with the curls that are no longer controlled by the pomade.

Blaine pulls his head back and smiles when he sees the bruise already forming on Kurt’s neck. “I
want to mark you where everyone can see that you belong to me. God, Kurt, I want you so badly.”

Before Kurt can say anything, Blaine presses his tongue to the seam of his lips. Kurt opens his
mouth and Blaine’s tongue delves inside, exploring and taking. As they kiss, their passion become
more desperate, so Blaine lines up their hips and presses hard against Kurt’s body. Sparks shoot
inside Kurt when he feels the pressure of Blaine’s hard cock against his. Blaine stills, but Kurt
wants more. Kurt’s whispers are husky and urgent, “Don’t you dare stop now, Blaine!”

Kurt arches his pelvis forward desperate for more of that delicious feeling, and Blaine
enthusiastically responds. They soon find a rhythm of thrusting that feels and sounds sinful but oh so good. Not long after, Blaine’s thrusts become erratic, and the kisses are replaced with nipping and moaning against each other’s mouths. When Blaine grabs onto Kurt’s buttocks to pull him closer, a fire spreads through Kurt’s body. He lifts his leg to Blaine’s hip in an attempt to get closer. As Kurt feels every muscle in Blaine’s body tighten, he explodes.

Muffled moans are replaced with panting, and after a few minutes, Kurt realizes that they had both climaxed in what was the best orgasm of his life. A wet sticky feeling in his underdrawers quickly brings him back to reality. “I only have one suit. My father is going to kill me!”

Kurt, slipping out from Blaine’s hold, runs to the bathroom and drops his trousers and underdrawers, trying to clean up the mess with soap and water. He turns around when he can hear Blaine chuckling behind him. “It’s a good thing you’re my valet because my trousers are a mess.”

Blaine passes clean boxer briefs to Kurt. “Here, wear these. I’ll take your underdrawers and place them in my laundry. The laundry maid is very discreet about these things. She’s had plenty of practice with Cooper.”

“Do you think we were too loud?” Kurt asks, suddenly feeling shy. He puts on and knots his tie, hoping it will disguise the popped shirt buttons, and quickly does up his trousers and makes sure he looks presentable enough to leave the room.

Blaine pulls Kurt into his arms, and strokes the side of his face with his thumb. “We weren’t loud enough, in my opinion. Kurt, the way you make me feel! Why on earth would you think that any other man could possibly mean anything to me? You own me, heart and soul.”

“And you own me,” Kurt whispers, giving Blaine one last sweet kiss before leaving the room.

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Kurt is glad that Mr Evans is such a deep sleeper, for he’s able to sneak back into the bedroom and change into his pajamas without notice. After giving himself a thorough wash, he climbs into bed, still feeling sated. Blaine left no doubt in his mind that they belong to each other exclusively. Blaine was all over him like bees to a honeypot. He was possessive and demanding, and just the thought of it makes Kurt’s spent cock twitch. Although they were still fully clothed during their threes of passion, Kurt no longer considers himself a virgin. If that’s what it feels like to be with another man, he wants to spend every waking moment of every day doing it with Blaine.

A gentle, but surprising, knock on the door brings Kurt out of his lust-filled thoughts. He climbs out of bed to see who it is. When he opens the door, Sebastian is standing before him, looking as white as a sheet.

“Kurt, you’ve got to come quick. Duke Clarington is dead in my bedroom!”

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I also thank Dblmalfunction, who performed a detailed final review, although all mistakes are mine.

I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.
Next up: I think I’ll leave you guessing!
July/August 1914
Blaine

Blaine is asleep and having a wonderful dream of Kurt where they’re running through a field in a far corner at Westerville. When Kurt suddenly stumbles and lands on the ground, Blaine collapses in the field next to him. Blaine takes a moment to enjoy their surroundings, squinting as the summer’s late-morning sun beams down on them. The atmosphere becomes that much sweeter when Blaine feels Kurt press against him and kiss him slowly, as if they have all the time in the world. Kurt’s hands roam down to his hips, anchoring himself as he shifts his weight. Blaine delights in the press of Kurt’s body on top of him, and nuzzles into Kurt’s stroking hand against his cheek. He hears Kurt whisper...

“Blaine...Blaine, honey... You’ve got to wake up!”

Blaine opens his eyes to see Kurt standing by the side of the bed. Although his initial reaction is to pull him into his arms and cuddle, Blaine soon realizes that Kurt’s expression is one of fear.

“There’s a problem. I need your help. Duke Clarington is dead in Sebastian’s bedroom.”

Blaine sits up quickly. Kurt now has his undivided attention. Kurt hands him his dressing gown.

“I’ll let Sebastian explain everything to you.”

They silently pass through the corridor and ascend the back stairs to the male servants’ sleeping quarters. When they enter Sebastian’s room, Blaine’s jaw drops when he sees a very naked Duke Clarington lying face down on the bed.

Sebastian stutters, “He's dead... I think he's dead... No, I'm sure he's dead.”
“But how?” Blaine asks.

“We were together and... he’s dead. A heart attack, I suppose, or a stroke or… He was alive and suddenly he cried out, and then he was dead!” Sebastian replies.

“In your room?” Blaine is shocked that the Duke died having sexual intercourse with Sebastian.

Sebastian nods.

“We've got to get him back to his own bed. Otherwise, it will cause a scandal for your family,” Kurt explains. “Sebastian and I can’t move him alone...”

“So, you want me to help,” Blaine interjects, finishing off Kurt’s sentence. Blaine doesn’t feel comfortable with any of this. It wouldn’t be pleasant to touch a dead body, let alone carry it across the house.

Blaine turns toward Sebastian. “Why should we get involved? And what happens if we get caught? Why should we help you, in spite of the scandal it could cause for my family?”

Sebastian’s face pales. “I’ll be dismissed without a reference if the Duke is discovered dead in my bedroom. My life will be in ruins.”

Kurt stands facing Sebastian with his arms crossed. “If you want us to help, you must do something for us.”

“Anything,” Sebastian pleads.

“I want you to promise that you’ll never speak of Mr Blaine and me to anyone again. There will be no hint or whisper of impropriety. The minute either of us hear that you’ve been speaking about us, Mr Blaine will tell his father about your indiscretions with the Duke. I believe the police keep death cases open indefinitely.”

Sebastian’s eyes bug out. “Agreed. I promise that I’ll never mention you and Mr Blaine in the same sentence again.”

Blaine is impressed that Kurt has thought of obtaining Sebastian’s silence in exchange for helping him out of this predicament. He decides to, not only help, but to take it one step further. “And if I ever hear of you complaining about Kurt to the butler or anyone again, I promise you’ll be out on your ear.”

Sebastian replies, “Agreed. So don’t just stand there, help me!”

“We must cover him up first,” Blaine suggests.

Kurt quickly picks up a discarded blanket from the floor, and they wrap it around the Duke’s body. Between the three of them, they lift the body and move along the corridor.

“Hurry, the other servants will be up soon,” Sebastian whispers.

“We've got time. I put a sleeping draught in my father’s bedtime drink - he won’t wake up from the noise. Now, get ready for the hard part… the stairs,” Kurt says.

They slowly make their way down the stairs and along the corridor into the guest room. Once they get the Duke into bed, Blaine covers him, and Kurt takes the blanket they carried him in.

Sebastian leans over the Duke’s body for one last look. He tries to close the Duke’s eyes but they
keep popping open. “I can't make his eyes stay shut,” he sobs.

Blaine pulls Sebastian away. “Leave that and come away. We must get back to our rooms at once.”

Kurt turns off the lamp, and Blaine waves goodbye as they go their separate ways.

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The next morning, Blaine feels very groggy when he’s awakened by Kurt opening the curtains. “I think I deserve a lie-in this morning. Don’t you?”

“I think it’s best that everything is as usual this morning, and that means going downstairs to have breakfast with the family.”

“Do the others know?”

“Not yet, but Sebastian plans to ‘discover’ the body during breakfast.”

“It seems the best course of action,” Blaine agrees. He performs his normal bathroom routine, and Kurt helps him dress into his morning suit. Once Blaine is satisfied that he’ll pass his father’s inspection, he joins the family in the dining room.

After helping himself to sausages, eggs, fried mushrooms, cooked tomatoes, and toast, Blaine sits down opposite from his father.

“Good morning, Blaine. Did you sleep well last night?” his father asks.

Blaine is taken by surprise by this question, and wonders if his father knows anything about his nighttime activities. “I slept like a log. Wild horses couldn’t wake me up.”

“That’s funny because I thought I heard you tossing and moaning in your sleep,” the Earl remarks.

“It wasn’t me. Perhaps it was Cooper, or even Duke Clarington,” Blaine suggests, trying to hide his blush. He and Kurt must have been louder than he remembers.

Kurt enters the dining room and hands the Earl the freshly-ironed newspapers for the day. The Earl glances at the front page and announces, “Austria-Hungary has declared war on Serbia!”

Everyone is silent as the Earl reads the article. “The Telegraph reports that Russia is mobilizing its troops to help defend Serbia, and the Germans aren’t happy about it. The Netherlands has declared neutrality.”

“What has the world come to?” Pamela laments.

“An almighty war, that’s what!” Cooper exclaims.

The conversation is interrupted when Sebastian rushes into the dining room. “Your Lordship, Mr Evans, may I have a word with you in private? It's a matter of great urgency.”

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Blaine joins the rest of the family in the parlor for afternoon tea. The day has been a blur of doctors and undertakers going through the house, dealing with Duke Clarington’s body. At last, the family is alone to cope with the aftermath of the death. His mother pours the tea while Spratt offers the sandwiches and cakes from the three-tier silver stand.
“Last night, he looked so well! Of course it would happen to a Duke. No Lord would dream of dying in someone else’s house,” grandmama declares.

“Does this mean I’ll have to go in full mourning, Lady Anderson?” Cousin Rachel asks. “I brought nothing suitable with me to wear. Black is not a good color on me.”

The Dowager Countess gives her a puzzled look. “Why? You hardly knew him. You can’t go to pieces about the death of every eligible young man. We would all be in a state of collapse.”


The Earl looks stunned. “He what? Why, the Duke never spoke to me about this!”

“Five days ago, he asked for my hand in marriage. The Duke wanted to keep it a secret until he knew what my answer would be.”

“And how did you reply, Rachel?” Pamela asks gently.

“I said I would have to think about it, that there were others to consider.”

“Ah, so Lord St James isn’t out of the picture yet,” Quinn surmises.

“I don’t know. What exactly does Lord St James do?” Cousin Rachel asks.

The Dowager Countess replies, “Gentlemen don’t work. Not real gentlemen.”

Cousin Rachel frowns. “I find that strange.”

“We all have different parts to play, and we must all be allowed to play them,” the Dowager Countess advises.

“And what is my part?”

“Saving ailing estates with your dowry.”

Spratt coughs loudly. “If I may be so bold, I have news about Duke Clarington that you’ll want to know.”

Blaine’s heart skips a beat. Does Spratt know about how the Duke died and his involvement in covering it up?

“It seems that Duke Clarington had amassed gambling debts, and he was about to lose all his estates and inheritance.” Spratt reports.

“And a betrothal to my niece would ward off the creditors,” Pamela guesses.

“Spratt, I didn’t realize that you are a gossip,” grandmama remarks.

Spratt shakes his head. “I would never be involved in gossip, My Lady. However, the butlers have their own old-boy network, and I would have to be deaf not to hear about Duke Clarington.”

“Spratt, how about Lord St James? Any rumors about him? Why would he be interested in marrying Miss Berry?” the Earl asks.

“Nothing has come to my attention regarding Lord St James,” Spratt confirms.
Cousin Rachel jumps up from her chair. “I don’t like what you are insinuating, Uncle Michael. Is it impossible to believe that a man might love me for me? That I don’t need a sizeable dowry to be loved?”

Cousin Rachel runs out of the drawing room with tears trickling down her face.

Blaine empathizes with her sentiments. He has first-hand experience of being loved for himself and not for titles or wealth. And if the way Hudson gazes at her is any indication, Cousin Rachel also knows that type of love.

“I presume we’ll have endless rounds of dinners and teas with Lord St James, for him to be flung at Cousin Rachel,” Quinn remarks.

Cooper chortles, “When it comes to Cousin Rachel, she’s quite capable of doing her own flinging.”

“Shush you,” Pamela admonishes. “Cooper, that’s simply not fair. A girl likes to be wooed and romanced, in spite of the circumstances which surround her finding a husband.”

“That’s not limited to just girls, by the way,” Blaine adds.

"I'm not a romantic, but even I concede that the heart does not exist solely for the purpose to pump blood," grandmama professes.

The rest of the afternoon tea goes quickly, with each person absorbed in their own quiet thoughts.

“I think I shall see how Rachel is doing,” Pamela says, before leaving the parlor.

“Blaine, could I see you in my study?” the Earl asks.

“Of course, Father,” Blaine replies. He reluctantly follows his father, knowing that there must be some delicate matter about his own future marriage to discuss. Once they’ve sat down, his father immediately gets down to business.

“Today has been simply dreadful. First the news of a major war on the continent, then the ghastly affair of Duke Clarington dying in his sleep under our roof. I’m in need of good news today, Blaine. How are things proceeding with regards to a future wife?”

“I’ve been courting Miss Cohen-Chang quite regularly, and seeing Miss Motta once a week.” Blaine recounts dinners, balls, teas, and other society events that he’s attended over the past few weeks.

“And have you come to any decision?” the Earl asks.

“Not yet, Father. It’s a really big decision that will affect me for the rest of my life. Miss Cohen-Chang is by far the best candidate. I enjoy her company, but there isn’t the spark of love I was hoping for,” Blaine admits.

“I can’t understand why you are being so indecisive. You know that I’m counting on you. The Westerville estate is at stake!”

“I know that, Father. It’s just not an easy thing for me to do.”

Blaine adjusts his weight in his seat, feeling rather uncomfortable as his father stares at him for a moment or two. The Earl stands up from his chair and sits down next to Blaine at the front of the desk.
“I know how you feel. It seems a lifetime ago that I was in your very position. In 1886, I was 21 years old, fresh out of Oxford University. My father sat me down in the very chair you are sitting in. He told me the tale of financial mismanagement that threatened the livelihood of the Westerville estate. To ensure its survival, my father informed me that I needed to marry a wealthy heiress who would bring a large dowry to the estate.”

Blaine nods. He’s not sure where the story is going. This is nothing he hasn’t heard before.

“My father identified your mother as the one. She was a wealthy girl, and her parents wanted her to marry into the English aristocracy. My father was a very stern man, but I resisted. How could I possibly marry someone I didn’t love? Your mother was a slip of a girl who loved playing hide-and-seek with her friends and who would giggle at everything I said. I didn’t know what to make of her.”

“However, my father had ways of being rather persuasive. He insisted that your mother’s family sign an entailment which legally combined the Westerville estate with your mother’s fortune. There was nothing left for me to do. We were married the following June.”

“We bumbled our way through our newlywed years, but something changed when Cooper was born. There was no longer any pressure on our marriage to have a son to continue the Anderson line. Pamela was such a loving mother. She quickly blossomed into a woman in her new role, and I fell in love with her.”

“It’s quite a story,” Blaine comments.

The Earl continues, “I promised myself that I would never put my sons in that kind of position. But family duty comes in very different forms. Here I am, having made similar financial mistakes as my father, asking you to find a wealthy wife.”

In that moment, Blaine feels sorry for his father, who obviously knows how he’s feeling.

“I had no choice as to whom I would marry - the entail took care of that. Blaine, I’m allowing you to choose your wife, provided that she has a large dowry. You might find that the love will spark once you’re married, like it did for me and your mother.”

“I do appreciate that, but it still doesn’t make it easy,” Blaine replies.

“It will never be an easy decision, my son. I’m giving you until the end of this month. By the 31st of August, you will be engaged. The marriage will take place before you set sail for India in the new year. You can decide between Miss Cohen-Chang or Miss Motta. If you discount both ladies, there is always Lady Rebecca Jackson.”

“Oh, definitely not Lady Jackson,” Blaine shudders.

“Well then, I suggest you start with Miss Cohen-Chang.”

“Yes, Sir,” Blaine replies. A knot starts to form in his belly, twisting at the thought of having to kiss and propose to Miss Cohen-Chang.

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Blaine sits at the desk in the study, carefully composing a letter to Mr Cohen-Chang, asking if they could meet privately as soon as possible. He’s using the formal stationery that has the Westerville coat of arms. His father is right - no amount of time is going to make this decision any easier. It’s not like both he and Kurt didn’t know this would happen. Blaine looks up when he sees Kurt enter
the room.

“I believe it’s time to get dressed for dinner, Mr Blaine.”

Blaine looks at his pocket watch. “I didn’t realize the time. Do I have time for a bath?”

“Yes, I’ll go upstairs straight away and run the water for you,” Kurt replies.

Blaine places the letter into a thick white envelope and seals it. When he leaves the study, he sees Sam down the corridor. He hands the letter over to the acting butler. “Could you please ensure this is delivered immediately?”

After a curt nod, Sam raises an eyebrow when he sees that the letter is addressed to Mr Cohen-Chang. “Is this what I think it is?”

“I’m afraid it is,” Blaine replies.

Sam squeezes his shoulder. “I know how hard this is for you to do.”

Blaine dashes up the main staircase before Sam sees his eyes well with tears. When he enters his bedroom, he’s comforted by the sound of Kurt’s humming in the bathroom. He quickly strips off his clothes and puts on his dressing gown, before joining him. Blaine dips his finger into the bathwater, and it’s the perfect temperature. He takes off the dressing gown and steps into the tub. When he rests his head against the tub’s back, he closes his eyes, feeling the stress of the day start to leave his body.

“Would you like for me to shampoo your hair, Mr Blaine?” Kurt asks.

Blaine hums in agreement. Soon, the room is filled with the sandalwood scent of the shampoo, and strong fingers are massaging his head.

Kurt says, “Duke Clarington’s death is the only thing people can talk about downstairs in the servants’ hall. They unanimously agree that the Duke must have had a heart attack in his sleep. However, I’m a little worried about Miss Lopez. She keeps on talking about her psychic Mexican third eye, looking directly at Sebastian.”

“Do you think Miss Lopez knows anything?” Blaine asks.

“If she does, then I’ll leave it to Sebastian to sort out. It’s in his best interests, after all.”

Kurt takes a pitcher and scoops up some of the bath water to rinse the shampoo out of Blaine’s hair. Blaine loves how his neck is cradled in Kurt’s other arm during the process.

“What’s wrong, Blaine? I can see it in your eyes,” Kurt asks.

“I had a conversation with my father after tea. I’m to be engaged before the end of the month. I’ve written to Mr Cohen-Chang, requesting a private meeting so that I can ask for his daughter’s hand in marriage.”

Kurt dries his hands on the nearby towel and rubs his forehead, as if deep in thought. When Kurt looks up, Blaine is surprised to see two sparkling eyes gazing at him.

“This is the first step in our master plan of how we will be able to have a life together. Out of all of the possible ladies, Miss Cohen-Chang is the best option. She’s pretty… and witty… and you seem to enjoy each other’s company.”
Kurt leans in to give Blaine a kiss, so soft and tender and full of promise.

“Your grandmother has been supplying me with the lessons for the teaching certificate. It’s all happening as we planned.”

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4th August 1914

Blaine takes a deep breath before knocking on the front door of the Cohen-Chang’s townhouse. When the butler opens the door, he says, “I’m Mr Blaine Anderson.”

The butler responds, “Mr Cohen-Chang is expecting you, sir. Won’t you come in?”

After entering the townhouse, the butler takes Blaine’s hat, gloves and cane for safekeeping, and leads him into the front parlor. Although Blaine has been in this room before, it always impresses him. The walls are papered in a deep red with gold dragons in the pattern. The furniture is made of rosewood imported from the Orient. There are large 4-foot-tall ceramic urns in the corners. Everything in the room reeks of money, power, and prestige.

“Mr. Anderson, I’m sorry I wasn’t here to greet you myself. I was on the telephone to Hong Kong,” Mr Cohen-Chang says in greeting, when he enters the parlor.

“I hope I didn’t interrupt any important business dealings,” Blaine replies.

“Not at all. I’ve asked Percival to bring us afternoon tea. He won’t be long.”

Blaine admires the Korean art scrolls that are hanging on the wall directly behind Mr Cohen-Chang.

“These two art scrolls have been in my family for generations. The Korean upper class have always surrounded themselves with dragons in their art and the like,” Mr Cohen-Chang explains.

Blaine looks around the room, noticing how many dragons there are in the designs. “The British think of dragons as evil creatures who breathe fire. In fairy tales, dragons are often guarding a princess and slain by a heroic prince.”

Mr Cohen-Chang smiles. “The Orient views dragons as deities that are worshipped. Instead of breathing fire, they control water and can summon rain. However, the dragon is not without a temper. Whenever there’s a flood or heavy winds, people burn incense and sacrifice plates of food to the dragon to appease it. The dragon is also a symbol of power, strength, and good luck for people who are worthy of it.”

Blaine replies, “It’s astounding that different cultures can have such contrasting interpretations of a mythical creature.”

“Christina is our only child. She’ll inherit all my worldly things, including this house, when I pass away. I hope that she marries someone who is worthy of living with the dragon.”

Blaine gulps. This is the perfect opportunity to segue into the matter of a marriage proposal. He places his hands on his thighs to stop his legs from shaking. Before he can open his mouth, the butler enters the room.

“Percival, I was expecting you to bring us our tea. What’s taking so long?” Mr Cohen-Chang chastises his servant.
“I’m sorry, Mr Cohen-Chang, but I have some very important news. This morning, Germany started to invade Belgium, which has already declared itself neutral. Only minutes ago, the Prime Minister spoke at the House of Commons. Great Britain has declared war on Germany.”

Blaine is astonished by the news. He hasn’t expected the situation to escalate in the continent so quickly. All thoughts of marriage disappear in order to consider how Great Britain joining the war impacts the nation and his family.

Mr Cohen-Chang stands up. “Thank you for informing me, Percival. If you’ll excuse me, Mr Anderson, but I need to telephone my contacts in France. I trust our discussion can wait for another day?”

“Certainly, sir,” Blaine confirms. After Percival has provided Blaine with his hat, gloves and cane, he rushes back to Anderson House, desperate to speak to his father about the war.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I also thank Dblmalfunction, who performed a detailed final review, although all mistakes are mine.

I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: The Anderson family has a change in plans.
August 1914
Kurt

“... And as a result, we’ll be returning to Westerville tomorrow morning,” Mr Evans announces to the staff congregated in the servants’ hall.

“Does that mean absolutely everyone?” Mercedes asks.

“Yes, everyone, including me,” Mr Evans confirms, and winks at Mercedes.

The servants’ hall is so silent you could hear a pin drop, as each staff member absorbs the horrifying news that Britain has declared war on Germany. Kurt is stunned at how quickly the war on the continent has escalated over the past few weeks.

Mr Evan’s voice interrupts their silent thoughts. “We have a million things to finish before tomorrow morning. Mrs Hudson will advise the housemaids and kitchen staff on what needs doing. I’ll advise the men.”

When the female staff have left the servants’ hall, Mr Evans gets down to business. “Kurt, you are to pack the men’s trunks first, then assist with closing up the house. Mr Hudson, you’ll need to bring the trunks upstairs from the cellar. Then, make sure that the car is ready for the long journey. After that, you can bring down the packed trunks. Sebastian, you should book the trains for the trunks and staff. I’ll be in the cellars, taking an inventory of the wine. I’ll first speak to Mr Hummel for advice on what else needs to be done to prepare for the move.”

At the mention of his father, Kurt asks, “Do you think my father is well enough for the journey?”

“Don’t worry, Kurt. We’ll figure that out. Rest assured, I’ll make sure that suitable arrangements are made for him.”
Once Mr Evans has dismissed them, Kurt quickly rushes upstairs to the Earl’s bedroom, and packs all the outfits from his wardrobe, carefully using tissue paper so they don’t crease. When he’s satisfied that all but the most essential items are packed, he heads to Mr Blaine’s room. He opens the wardrobe and gazes at all the fine outfits that were made in Exeter earlier in the year. Kurt supposes that the London season will come to an abrupt end, due to the war.

“Kurt, did you hear the news?”

Kurt turns around and sees Blaine entering the bedroom. Although he’s wearing his finest day suit, he looks rumpled. What surprises Kurt most of all is that some curls are escaping the pomade, as if Blaine has been combing his fingers through them.

“Yes, I heard about the war. I didn’t even realize that the Germans are on Belgian soil.”

“Not only that, but the Germans attacked France!”

Kurt sees how agitated Blaine is by the turn of events, and suddenly remembers what Blaine was intending to do that very afternoon. Kurt really doesn’t want to hear the answer, but he has to ask, “How did your visit with Mr Cohen-Chang go?”

Blaine takes off his suit jacket, flops down on the bed and shakes his head. “I was in the parlor about to ask Mr Cohen-Chang for his daughter’s hand in marriage when the butler told us the news. Mr Cohen-Chang was so distracted - probably thinking about the financial repercussions for his business - that he asked to defer our discussion. I’m not sure whether that’s a good sign or not.”

Kurt sits down on the bed next to Blaine, and takes his hand. “Anyone would be lucky to have you for a husband. I’m sure that Mr Cohen-Chang had a million things racing through his mind. Once the news settles down, and people understand how it affects them, I suspect that you’ll return to London to visit Mr Cohen-Chang again.”

“I don’t know about that, Kurt. My father is at the House of Lords at this very moment, speaking with Lord Islington and various generals. My future is more uncertain now than ever.” Blaine shifts closer to Kurt and whispers, “It’s the waiting and uncertainty I can’t bear. I think I need something to distract me.”

Kurt can feel the warmth radiate from Blaine’s chest. He cups his hands along Blaine’s face, and gives him a soft peck on the lips. Blaine needs his love and support more than ever with his future hanging in the balance. It certainly doesn’t help that the Earl is making decisions on Blaine’s behalf. He wants to comfort Blaine, despite his lack of time. However, Kurt knows that his first priority must be his own father, who is still convalescing in bed.

“I’m sorry, Blaine, but I can’t get distracted right now. I need to help Mr Evans close up Anderson House. I’m also really worried about my father. How will he be transported back to Westerville? I’m concerned that this might end up being a setback for his health.”

“Leave it to me, Kurt. I’ll make sure that your father is taken care of.”

Kurt gives Blaine a tender kiss, appreciating how mindful Blaine is of his needs, despite his worries about his own future.

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For the first time in three days, Kurt has a moment to sit down and enjoy a cup of tea. He’s been so busy with the sudden move back to Westerville Abbey that there hasn’t been a spare moment to think… Think about what the future might hold for the Anderson family and the staff.
Mr Blaine was true to his word - not only did his father sit in the train’s first class compartment with the family, but he arranged for Kurt to be by his side and sit there as well. It would have been an uneventful journey - his father had slept the entire time - were it not for Lady Quinn vomiting. It was only when Kurt provided her with a cup of peppermint tea that Lady Quinn’s upset stomach seemed to calm down.

Mercedes interrupts his thoughts when she slides into the seat next to his in the servants’ hall. “Boo, I’m glad I’ve caught you alone. I haven’t seen very much of you the past few days. How are you holding up? You look a million miles away.”

Kurt smiles at his friend and pours her a cup of tea. “I’ve finished everything that Mr Evans asked me to do. I’ve been thinking about the war and how it will impact us at Westerville Abbey.”

“Me too. Initially, I was happy that Mr Evans is now at Westerville Abbey with us and not at Anderson House in London, as originally planned. But now I don’t know what Mr Evans will do regarding the war. I can’t bear the thought of being apart from him for so long.”

Kurt empathizes with Mercedes, because he has similar thoughts about Mr Blaine. But before Kurt can answer, the rest of the staff join them for their afternoon break. No sooner has everyone a cup of tea than Mr Hummel enters the servants’ hall. Every staff member stands up immediately.

“Mr Hummel, are you sure you should be up and about so soon?” Mrs Hudson asks, with concern written all over her face.

“The doctor said I could get out of bed when I returned to Westerville Abbey.”

“But when the doctor said that, he didn’t realize we would be returning so soon,” Kurt counters.

“I’m not ready to return to work, but I’ll be darned if I’m going to spend all my days in bed. I’ll just sit in my study, going through the household accounts. I can just imagine what state they are in,” the butler huffs.

“The accounts are completely up-to-date, Mr Hummel. You won’t find anything amiss,” Mr Evans reports.

Kurt knows that Mr Evans initially struggled with the household accounts - figures and maths aren’t his strengths. However, Mr Blaine has been helping him out each day to keep the records in order.

“Is there any news from upstairs?” Sebastian asks.

Mr Hummel replies, “There is no doubt that this war will impact the Westerville estate. I think we should wait to hear what the Earl has to say, and not idly gossip.”

“I’m planning on enlisting immediately. The Fritzes need to be stopped,” Mr Evans states.

“I agree. I want to follow into my father’s footsteps and join as soon as possible,” Mr Hudson pronounces. “I’m planning to go to the recruitment office in Exeter on Friday.”

“Can I join you?” Mr Evans asks.

Sebastian sighs. “I guess I’ll go to Exeter too. The sooner we sign up, the more we’ll have our pick as to what we want to do in the war. Perhaps I’ll enlist in the army as a medic. I’m used to tending to people’s needs.”
Kurt rolls his eyes and thinks that Sebastian might want to be a medic so that he won’t be in the thick of any front-line action.

“But if every man leaves, how will Westerville Abbey be run?” Mrs Hudson asks.

“Kurt can stay behind and look after things. The British army won’t want to deal with his namby-pamby ways,” Sebastian sneers.

“That’s enough, Sebastian!” Mr Evans warns. “I think the British army would be bloody lucky to have someone so hardworking as Kurt.”

Kurt looks at Mr Evans with a newfound respect. Seeing him keep Sebastian in his place, he realizes how Mr Evans has matured in his role as acting butler. Kurt isn’t sure what he should do. Should he join the others at the recruitment office?

Mr Hummel clears his throat to grab everyone’s attention. “I think that Mrs Hudson raised a very good point. The Westerville estate still needs young men. The Earl will have most definite views on the matter. Can I suggest that you take the physical test at the recruitment office, but delay enlisting until I can discuss it with his lordship?”

The men nod at the suggestion, and Kurt decides to join the others and take the physical test.

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Kurt gets in the back seat of the car on the return journey from Exeter’s recruitment office. Once Hudson has navigated his way outside the city center, he looks at Sebastian in the rear-view mirror. “I can’t believe you enlisted in the Royal Medical Corps, Sebastian! Mr Hummel told us to take the physical tests only.”

“I’m my own man. I don’t need Mr Hummel’s permission to serve in The King’s Army.”

Kurt would bet Sebastian is more motivated by the thought of all those men needing his personal attention than any sense of duty. Kurt crosses his arms and looks out the window, lost in thought. Mr Evans and Mr Hudson passed the physical test without any problems. Kurt was very surprised about what the recruitment officer said to him.

“Mr Hummel, you are fit and healthy. We need fine young men like you to serve in the Royal Army,” Major Roberts says. He looks down at Kurt’s file and adds, “There is only one problem.”

Kurt arches one eyebrow, wondering what the problem could be. Certainly, the Royal Army couldn’t possibly know about his attraction to men.

“You are classified as a farmer. We aren’t allowed to recruit farmers at the moment.”

“And why is that?” Kurt asks.

“You’re needed on the home front, to produce food for the men in battle.”

“But I work as a footman for the Westerville estate.”

“The Dowager Countess herself informed me that you have experience as a farmer. She even mentioned that you are responsible for all the produce that graces the abbey’s table. She was quite complimentary about your knowledge and skills as a farmer.”

Kurt isn’t sure what the Dowager Countess is up to, but she has always had his and Blaine’s best
interests at heart. She obviously has a plan that she hasn’t discussed with them, but what could it possibly be? He’s a bit annoyed that she acted without consulting them first.

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Kurt inspects the kitchen gardens, pleased that the Dowager Countess’ gardener has maintained it so well while he was in London. The flower section is a symphony of bright colors. While the rose blooms grab his immediate attention, Kurt prefers the simplicity of the white daisies. They bring back hazy memories of making daisy-chain crowns with his mother. The tomatoes, peas and runner beans are ripening nicely on their vines. Kurt makes a mental list of what’s ready for picking so that he can let Mrs Sylvester know.

When the gate door opens, Kurt smiles at the sight greeting him. Blaine makes a beeline for the raspberry bushes. “I really missed eating fresh raspberries while we were in London.”

Kurt laughs at Blaine stuffing his face full of the red berries. “Perhaps I’ll have to smuggle some raspberry bushes from the garden into your things when you set sail for India.”

Blaine leaves the raspberry bushes and heads toward him. Kurt opens his arms, and when he feels Blaine pressed against him, Kurt wraps around him in a tight embrace. They stand there holding each other for a minute, and Kurt takes in how solid Blaine feels against his chest.

Blaine pulls back and Kurt can see the warm whiskey-colored eyes gazing at him. “It appears that I’m no longer expected to go to India. Apparently, I’m to serve this great nation in other ways.”

“The military?” Kurt asks. He suspected that plans might change when Great Britain declared war on Germany.

Blaine nods. “Specifically, the cavalry. Father is currently in discussions with Major General Bushman to see if there is an officer’s position available in the 9th Queen's Royal Lancers.”

“I want to join you, Blaine. Perhaps I could be your batman?”

Blaine shakes his head. “No one has a batman or personal servant in the military anymore. No, you’re much better off staying here at Westerville Abbey.”


“Take that as a good sign, Kurt.”

“There’s nothing good about being thwarted by a formidable 70-plus-year-old lady. She had no right in interfering without discussing it with us beforehand!”

Blaine tries to calm Kurt down by rubbing gentle circles on his back. “It really is a good sign, Kurt. Grandmama only protects those who are close to her, like family. She only wants you close by and out of danger’s way. And if you think about it, she can be quite cunning when she needs to be. If plans and circumstances change, it’s best that you’re here so that she can guide and support you.”

Kurt hasn’t thought of the Dowager Countess’ actions in quite those terms before. Maybe Blaine is right and he should let the Dowager Countess guide him through the war times ahead.

“And what about Miss Cohen-Chang? Will you be married before you set off for the continent? I can’t imagine what life at Westerville will be like with you overseas and serving the new Mrs Anderson.”
“My father has spoken to Mr Cohen-Chang at length about this very matter. Mr Cohen-Chang is adamant that his daughter’s betrothal should wait to see what comes of this war. He doesn’t want Christina to become widowed and face the prospect of being alone for the rest of her life.”

“So, the pressure is off you now?” Kurt asks, secretly pleased that Miss Cohen-Chang will not be a member of the Anderson family quite yet.

“No, the pressure is still on, but it’s been deferred. This war will end soon enough, and then I will do what is expected of me.”

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“Brittany, where are you? Is Mr Hummel’s lunch tray ready? Kurt is waiting to take it up,” Mrs Sylvester barks.

“Yes, Mrs Sylvester,” Brittany replies as she sets the tray on the kitchen table.

“You’re always dozy but tonight you’d make Sleeping Beauty look alert.”

Mrs Sylvester pushes the tray towards Kurt and instructs, “Make sure Mr Hummel eats his veg. I can’t have him all blocked up because he turns his nose up at turnips.”

“Yes, Mrs Sylvester,” Kurt politely replies. It’s times like these that Kurt wonders how Brittany can be so patient with the prickly cook.

Kurt takes the lunch tray to the butler’s office and sets it down on the desk. He finds his father pouring a bottle of red wine into a crystal-cut decanter. “I thought you weren’t going to work!”

“It’s not taxing to pour a bottle of wine, Kurt. Mr Evans doesn’t have the knowledge and experience to pair the best wine with dinner courses.”

“Mr Evans would know if you taught him. I’ve brought you your luncheon. I’m under strict instructions to ensure that you eat all the turnips.”

“If that woman knows I hate them, why does she insist on serving them?” the butler grumbles.

“Do you have a moment, Father? There’s something I wish to discuss with you.”

“Have a seat, Kurt.”

“Did you know that the Exeter recruitment officer rejected me?”

“Why? You’re the epitome of good health,” Hummel protests.

“I passed the physical exam but was rejected because I’m classified as a farmer.”

“I’m sure that the Earl can clear up this misunderstanding. You’re a footman now.”

“I’m not sure whether the Earl can do anything. You see, the Dowager Countess ensured that I’m classified as a farmer. She gave a glowing recommendation about my work in the kitchen gardens.”

Hummel eats the remaining turnips with a grimace on his face, and sets down his cutlery. “I see. Well, this is a different matter altogether. The Dowager Countess obviously has a grand scheme that includes you remaining at Westerville Abbey while Mr Blaine goes to the continent.”

“But what if I want to join him?” Kurt asks.
“You don’t have the necessary experience to join the cavalry, Kurt. You would be an enlisted soldier in the regular army. I have to agree with the Dowager Countess on this matter. You are better off here in Westerville. I know that I’m not a healthy man, and my years are numbered.”

“Don’t say such things! The doctor said that with a better diet and more exercise each day, you could live until a ripe old age,” Kurt protests.

“I’m going to die sometime, Kurt. It would mean the world to me if you stayed in Westerville and learnt how to become the best butler the Anderson family has ever had.”

Kurt doesn’t want to think about it. “But what about Sebastian? Isn’t he in line to be the next butler?”

Hummel raises a shaking fist. “Over my dead body will Sebastian be more than a footman in the abbey. I can promise you that!”

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Two days later…

Kurt waits patiently for the Earl to finish his grooming in the bathroom. Unlike Mr Blaine, who begs him to shave him each day, his lordship prefers to perform that task himself. They now have a comfortable routine, and Kurt knows how best to help Lord Anderson get ready for dinner. The Earl puts on his stiff white shirt, then Kurt adeptly attaches the shirt’s studs and cufflinks.

“Kurt, I presume you’ll be serving dinner tonight as usual?”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“I have rather important news to announce this evening about certain members of the household at the abbey.”

“I see, My Lord.”

“You’ll remain behind at Westerville Abbey.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“There are just as important jobs here in England as there are on the continent. It’s vital that we produce a sufficient amount of food to feed our soldiers. Here at Westerville, we’ll be focused on food production for the troops. This means an increased role for you, Kurt. I’ll need you to inspect the crops at the estate’s tenant farms, and provide the farmers with advice on how to increase their crop yield. Do you think you are up for the job?”

“I’ll certainly try. I’m not formally trained in agriculture, My Lord.”

“There are plenty of people in the agricultural department that are highly educated, and we’ll be working with them. However, I’m told that your knowledge is based upon experience, and I think you could be an enormous help. Besides, your father is still recovering from his heart attack and needs you more than ever.”

Kurt assists the Earl with his jacket and then takes his leave. He can’t wait to hear the announcement at dinner.

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Kurt serves the gooseberry fool to each family member sitting at the table. He smiles when he sees Mr Blaine lick his lips - the cook placed the raspberries on top especially for her favorite Anderson. When Kurt has finished serving, he takes his place against the wall next to Mr Evans.

All eyes in the room look at the Earl when he stands up from his seat at the table. “I have some very important news. Cooper and Blaine will be off to the continent very soon to serve the King in this war. Cooper will be a Captain in the Royal Fusiliers’ Infantry Brigades. And I’m sure that it will come as no surprise to learn that Blaine will be a Lieutenant in the 9th Queen’s Royal Lancers Cavalry Brigade.”

“What wonderful postings,” the Countess says with glee. “And how about the servants?”

“Evans will join Cooper’s unit, and Hudson will join Blaine in the cavalry,” the Earl replies.

“Does Hudson even know how to ride a horse?” Miss Berry shrieks.

Mr Blaine gently squeezes her shoulder before replying, “Not every position in the cavalry involves horses, Cousin Rachel. There are cars, trucks and other vehicles that need to be driven.”

“I’m comforted by the thought of my sons having someone from the abbey with them,” the Countess says.

“When do Cooper, Blaine, and the staff leave?” Lady Quinn asks.

“Next Friday,” the Earl replies.

Chapter End Notes

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Next up: Blaine prepares to leave Westerville Abbey.
August 1914
Blaine

Blaine steps out of the fitting room at Thomas Moore’s Tailors, to see a very surprised look on Kurt’s face. Blaine nervously turns around slowly so that Kurt can inspect him in his new kit from all angles.

“Mr Blaine, your uniform is such a dull color!”

“The color is called khaki,” Mr Moore explains. “It’s the latest fabric used for British uniforms. The Royal Army insists that all its land personnel wear this color in the battlefield.”

“It’s supposed to camouflage us so that we blend in with our surroundings. It makes it more difficult for the Germans to see us,” Blaine adds.

Kurt inspects the jacket closely and gently touches its lapel. “This is such thick wool. Is it itchy?”

“A little bit, but I’ll be grateful for such a warm jacket when winter comes.”

Kurt takes a hold of Blaine’s arm, lifts it, and inspects the jacket’s sleeve. “The lieutenant insignias are already sewn on the cuff.”

Blaine looks down and sees the two emblems that identify his rank in the cavalry. “There will be 30 men in my unit. They’ll need to see something to identify me easily during battle.”

“Let’s hope that the Germans won’t get close enough to you to recognize them as well,” Kurt says, lowering his head and his hands tightening into fists.

Blaine knows that Kurt is frightened about him going into battle. Now that there is a war on, he’s a little frightened, too. However, Blaine doesn’t want their last days together to be filled with fear, but rather with happy memories which he can recall during the low moments in the battlefield. Kurt
looks up and the corners of his mouth turn up into a weak smile. It appears that they are on the same page, and Blaine can see that Kurt wants these last days to be precious, too.

Although it’s a hot summer’s day, Blaine needs to wear his uniform for a later appointment in Exeter. Mr Moore wraps Blaine’s civilian clothes in paper and hands the parcel to Kurt.

Their next stop is Marks and Spencers on Queens Street. When Blaine examines the underdrawers on display, he can see Kurt smirking from the corner of his eye. Blaine leans in and whispers, “I can’t take those boxer briefs with me to war - I’ll be on Firebird all day and my thighs will chafe badly.”

Kurt selects a pair of long flannel underdrawers and holds them up. “I think this is the sort of thing that you’ll need. You should buy a dozen pairs.”

Blaine knows better than to question Kurt about anything related to clothing, but he can’t help but wonder why he would need so many pairs of underdrawers on the continent during wartime. Most men in the field make do with just one pair. After paying, he and Kurt walk to the nearby Pinder and Tuckwell Bootery.

Kurt opens the door for Blaine to enter the store. Blaine looks around the offerings - his father has insisted that he buy the very best pair of boots that he can find. Blaine reminded him that he had a perfectly good pair of riding boots, but his father was adamant. “Those riding boots are fine when you’re on Firebird. But there will still be plenty of walking, and I want to ensure your feet are warm and protected. Trust me, I know from first-hand experience in the Boer War - a good pair of boots is essential.”

Mr Tuckwell comes out from the back. “Mr Anderson, I heard that you have joined the cavalry.”

“Yes, Mr Tuckwell. I’m a Lieutenant in the 9th Queen’s Royal Lancers Cavalry Brigade. I have a decent pair of riding boots, but I need a pair of regular military boots when I’m not on my horse.”

Mr Tuckwell replies, “Very sensible, Mr Anderson. I know just the very thing. The Royal Army has already set out the guidelines for the necessary boots. They’ve been selling very quickly the past few days. Please have a seat. I’ll need a precise sizing.”

Once Blaine is seated, Mr Tuckwell takes very detailed foot measurements before going to the back stockroom. After a few minutes, he comes back empty-handed, with a frown.

“I’m afraid that we don’t have a pair of the boots in your size. Your feet are much smaller than most soldiers’. When are you leaving Westerville?”

“Next Friday,” Blaine replies.

“That won’t be enough time to order the correct size boots and have them delivered to Exeter. Do you see any chance to go to London beforehand?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, the officers in my unit are gathering in London the day we’ll be sent overseas for training.”

Mr Tuckwell claps in glee. “Excellent. I’ll telephone Harrods right away and provide them with your foot measurements. Do you have time to wait for them to confirm that they have your size in stock?”

Blaine takes out his pocket watch and glances at the time. He’s due at Henry Wykes Photography
Studio in an hour, and he has one very important errand to run beforehand. However, this could fit in nicely with his plans. He was intending to send Kurt off separately anyways, while he went to the final shop.

“Mr Tuckwell, I’m rather pressed for time. I’m sure you can appreciate that I have many things to organize before my departure, but my footman will stay for the news.”

“Very well, Mr Anderson. I’ll telephone Harrods immediately.”

When the shopkeeper goes to the back office, Blaine turns to Kurt. “After hearing whether Harrods has the boots in stock, could you go to the chemist for me? Buy any toiletries that you think I might need. Make sure to tell them it’s for me, and they’ll put it on the Anderson account.”

“Certainly, Mr Blaine,” Kurt replies.

“Once you’re finished, please meet me at Henry Wykes’ on the High Street. Mama insists on having photographs of ‘her soldiers’ before we leave for the continent.”

“Yes, Mr Blaine.”

After Blaine finishes at the final stop, he’s feeling rather pleased with his last purchase. He still has thirty minutes before he’s due at the photography studio. He goes into a nearby bakery and decides to treat himself to a Chelsea bun and a cup of tea. While he eats the tasty treat, he formulates a plan on how to spend his last day in London before joining the other officers in his cavalry unit. It’s such a good plan that his heart rings with joy.

He loses track of time going through the details of what will be his last 24 hours in England. When he hears the cathedral bells ring, he realizes that it’s time for his next appointment. He quickly heads to the photography studio, where Cooper, Hudson, Evans, and Sebastian are waiting.

Cooper smiles. “I say, Blaine, you look rather dashing in your uniform.”

“As do you,” Blaine replies. “Why, you even have one more emblem on your cuff, Captain Anderson.”

Blaine looks over Hudson and Evans, who are wearing their rank-and-file uniforms. “It’s hard to believe that we are all going to war.”

Hudson walks over to him, and Blaine notices he’s hobbling a bit and asks, “Why are you walking so strangely?”

“I figure that if I’m going to be in the cavalry, I best learn more about how to ride and take care of a horse. After all, you might need help with Firebird, Mr Blaine. Wesley has been giving me lessons. I have so many sore muscles that I can hardly move.”

Blaine chuckles quietly. “Most beginners have the very same problem, Hudson. A really hot bath with Epsom salt will do the trick. I’ll have Kurt bring some to you when we return to the abbey. I’ll also have Wesley teach you some exercises that you should do before and after horse riding. They should help you in the future.”

“That sounds really great, Mr Blaine,” Hudson replies.

Cooper interrupts their conversation. “Evans, Hudson, Sebastian, and I have had our individual photographs taken. We need all the soldiers together next.”
Mr Wykes arranges the group with Cooper and Blaine sitting on chairs, and Evans, Sebastian, and Hudson standing in the background. Blaine finds it very hard not to roll his eyes when he sees Cooper beaming a huge smile at the camera.

Once the flashbulb has gone off, Mr Wykes says, “Let’s have Mr Anderson alone for his individual photograph.”

Blaine sits in the chair and hears the front door bell ring. Kurt enters the studio and stands near Mr Wykes, giving Blaine a shy smile. Kurt looks so beautiful. His smile lights up the room and ignites a passion inside Blaine’s heart. When Blaine returns the smile, he is momentarily blinded by the flash of the camera.

“I think that we are done for this session,” Mr Wykes says.

Blaine quickly interjects, “Is it possible to have one last photograph? Kurt hasn’t been photographed yet.”

“Really, Blaine? You want a photograph of the second footman?” Cooper asks with a puzzled look.

“I’d like as many reminders of home when I’m off in France. And yes, that includes photographs of everyone, including Kurt. Besides, I think it would be an excellent gift to Hummel, who is still convalescing.”

Secretly, he wants a photograph of Kurt to keep with him during the war, but he’s not beneath using the butler as an excuse.

Cooper nods in understanding. “Very well. Kurt, you’re up next.”

Kurt’s cheeks tinge pink with the news of a surprise photograph, and he uses his hands to check his hair. Blaine knows that Kurt has guessed the real reason behind the photograph. Kurt sits on the stool and looks directly at Blaine, with sparkling eyes, as the photograph is taken.

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“Do you really need to leave for London the day before you have to join your unit?” Pamela asks.

“If I’m to have a proper pair of boots, I’ll need to collect them from Harrods. There isn’t time for them to be delivered all the way to Exeter,” Blaine replies.

Michael nods in agreement. “I’m the one who insisted on Blaine having new boots. Do you want to stay at my club for the evening? I’m sure I could arrange it.”

“No, I’d rather stay at Anderson House - somewhere that is my home.”

“But it was closed up weeks ago when we left London!” Pamela exclaims.

“I’ll be very busy in London and will only be at the townhouse to rest my weary head. I could take Kurt with me to get the bedroom ready, and prepare my breakfast the next morning,” Blaine suggests.

“I suppose that would work,” Pamela reluctantly agrees.

Evans joins in the conversation. “We left Anderson House in such a hurry. It seems sensible that Mr Blaine brings Kurt with him to London. Kurt could ensure that everything is in order before he leaves.”
Michael nods. “Very well. Evans, could you book the train tickets for Blaine and Kurt?”

Cousin Rachel accompanies Blaine on his final horse ride before Firebird is transported to the training camp on the continent. They race across the fields, careful to avoid the cattle grazing. When the horses begin to slow down, Blaine leads them to his special place by the lake. After helping Cousin Rachel dismount from Bluebell, he sets out the blanket under the oak tree and retrieves the flask of tea and shortbread from his saddlebag.

“I’ll be very lucky if my cavalrymen ride as well as you, Cousin Rachel.”

“You still beat me when we race,” Cousin Rachel pouts. “I’ll be riding plenty while you’re off to the continent. By the time you return, I’ll beat you. Every. Single. Time.”

Blaine throws his head back and shakes with laughter. He’s certainly going to miss Cousin Rachel’s tenacity. “What do you plan to do during the wartime, Cousin Rachel? Do you want to go back to America?”

Cousin Rachel shrugs. “It’s too dangerous to cross the Atlantic Ocean at the moment. Father telephoned and informed me that I should stay in Westerville, at least until the end of the war. Uncle Michael is in full agreement. I think that they are both secretly hoping that I’ll find that titled husband.”

“Someone like Lord St James?” Blaine asks.

“Exactly,” Cousin Rachel huffs.

“Do you like him?”

“Lord St James is good company but a bit full of himself. However, he’s the only gentleman I’ve met who can keep up with me vocally, and that must count for something.”

“Don’t tell Cooper that! He thinks his musical prowess is second to none.”

Cousin Rachel looks at the lake in the distance and sighs. “If only men would fall in love with ladies based upon their singing ability - I’d have every British gentleman kneeling at my feet. But the reality is that British gentlemen fall in love with money.”

Blaine is saddened that Cousin Rachel feels that way. “British gentlemen do know how to fall deeply and irrevocably in love, but through necessity, they’ve also learnt how to distinguish between love and marriage.”

“But I want both! I want to marry the man that I’m deeply and irrevocably in love with. It doesn’t matter to me whether he’s a titled gentleman or a person making an honest wage.”

“Like a chauffeur?” Blaine suggests.

“Finn is a better man than most gentlemen I met during the London Season. He’s honest, hardworking, and a very gentle and caring person. I would be honored to be his wife.”

Cousin Rachel’s face contorts and she suddenly shakes with sobs. Blaine pulls her into his arms so that he can comfort her.

“I-I’m so frightened about Finn going to war. I couldn’t bear it if he died in the battlefields. He’s
my one true love, and no amount of money I have will protect him from the Germans. My heart is ripping in two, and there is nothing I can do about it.”

Blaine rubs soothing circles on her back. “There are many things in life that you can’t control. In my experience, it’s best to focus on what you can influence and decide.”

“I don’t know how you can be so calm when you’re leaving Kurt behind. Do you think that your love for Kurt will survive the war?”

Blaine’s eyebrows shoot up. He’s never confided to Cousin Rachel how he truly feels about Kurt. “W-what? I don’t know what you mean?”

“Come now, Cousin Blaine. No need to be coy with me. I may have known you for only a brief period, but I know what love looks like. I can see the heart-eyes you have for Kurt from a mile away, and judging by Kurt’s expression, he feels the same about you.”

Blaine simply nods. Now that he’s confronted by his cousin, he cannot deny his love for Kurt. However, he’s worried that he and Kurt haven’t been as discreet as they had thought. “Is it that obvious? Does anyone else know?”

“I can’t speak for the staff, but I doubt your family has ever wondered about your sexual preferences. They are too caught up in marrying you off to some rich lady.”

“And you don’t judge us?”

Cousin Rachel bursts out in laughter. “Are you seriously asking me if I’m accepting of two men being together? Perhaps I didn’t make it perfectly clear when I told you about my ‘Uncle LeRoy’.”

Blaine’s face reddens. Of course Cousin Rachel is accepting of his and Kurt’s relationship. She’s lived with two men who were in a relationship all her life.

Cousin Rachel rubs his arm in comfort. “You can rely on me to keep your secret safe. After all, we’re best friends.”

Blaine takes her hand and squeezes. “The very best.”

“Tell me, how you are really feeling about leaving Kurt behind?”

“My heart is breaking. However, I’m focusing on doing my best in the war for my country, so that when I return, our lives can continue together.”

“Will you keep an eye on Finn when you’re at the war front? Although he is brave, he can be a bit clumsy and forgetful.”

“Of course I will. I’ve known Hudson since we were lads. He’s a Westerville man, and I promise I’ll take care of him like a brother. Can I ask that you do the same for Kurt?”

Cousin Rachel shakes his hand. “It’s a deal!”

When they hear a horse’s gait, they both turn to see Wesley and Hudson approaching. Wesley announces, “It’s time, Mr Blaine. I need to get Firebird ready to leave. The cavalry’s truck will be picking him up very soon.”

Blaine reluctantly puts the picnic items back into the saddlebag and mounts Firebird.

Rachel stays on the blanket, not making a move to leave. “If you don’t mind, Cousin Blaine, I’d
like to sit here a bit longer and collect my thoughts.”

“Of course, Cousin Rachel. Shall I return to collect you?” Blaine asks.

Cousin Rachel shakes her head. “That won’t be necessary, Cousin Baine. Hudson can escort me back to the stables.”

Blaine hopes that Finn’s equestrian skills will get him back to the stables in one piece.

Blaine and Wesley race back to the stables. They dismount and slowly groom their horses. Blaine doesn’t want to say goodbye to Firebird, even though he knows they will be reunited on the continent.

“I wish you could join me in the cavalry, Wesley.”

Wesley replies, “You know that can’t happen. I’m neither a citizen of Great Britain nor of one of its colonies. The Royal Army won’t accept me.”

Blaine bottom lip juts out. “It’s their loss. I don’t know anyone who can handle a horse as well as you.”

“I’ll be here when you return from war. Once you leave, his lordship plans to buy a new colt from Count Wilde. I’ll have him broken in and trained by the time you return from war.”

Blaine wonders if his father is already thinking about a new horse for him, in case Firebird is killed during the war. He shakes off the very thought, and focuses on another matter.

“Wesley, can I ask you a favor?”

“ Anything, Mr Blaine. You can count on me.”

“Can you keep your eye out for Miss Berry? I fear she’ll be lonely once Cooper and I leave for the war. She doesn’t have many friends in the west country, so it would comfort me to know you’d accompany her on horse rides.”

Wesley nods. “I’ve noticed that Miss Berry has been melancholy since the news of the war. I was planning to join her on her rides to ensure her safety.”

“Thank you, Wesley. Could you also keep an eye out for Kurt? Sebastian has it out for him, and I fear that something might happen.”

“I’ll be happy to do so, Mr Blaine. His lordship has already informed me that Kurt will be riding around the Westerville estates, inspecting the tenant farms. I’ll be riding with him until he gets the lay of the land.”

“Kurt knows how to ride? I didn’t know that,” Blaine exclaims.

“I thought you knew he grew up on a farm,” Wesley says with exasperation.

Blaine knocks his forehead with the palm of his hand. Of course, Kurt knows how to ride a horse. After all, he was able to set Firebird’s horseshoe right during Westerville’s fox hunt. He wonders what other talents Kurt must have that he hasn’t yet discovered.

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Blaine walks out to the croquet lawn where there is a table set up in the shade of the elm tree. He
waves at his grandmother, who is patiently waiting. Spratt immediately pours tea and serves scones with jam and clotted cream.

“That will be all, Spratt. I’ll ring the bell once we’ve finished our tea,” the Dowager Countess informs the butler.

“I’m perfectly happy to stay, My Lady.”

“That won’t be necessary, Spratt. I need to speak to my grandson on a private matter.”

“Yes, My Lady,” Spratt replies, leaving for the abbey in a huff.

“Typical Spratt. He’s as touchy as a beauty losing her looks,” the Dowager Countess reflects.

“Mama tells me that you’ll be staying at the abbey for the foreseeable future,” Blaine says.

“There’s not enough staff to keep both Westerville Abbey and Dower House open. The young lads are enlisting in the army without a care of how we are supposed to cope without them.”

“We all have to do our part in the war effort,” Blaine reminds her.

“Isn’t two grandsons fighting enough?” the Dowager Countess insists.

The Dowager Countess takes sip of tea and offers Blaine the plate of scones. “Are you ready for your departure tomorrow?”

“Yes, Grandmama. Kurt has packed my trunk. We’re taking the morning train from Exeter to Paddington station.”

“How convenient that Kurt is available to accompany you to London and look after you on the eve before you leave for war,” she says with a wry smile.

Blaine looks away from his grandmother, for fear that she will see him blush. When he’s composed himself, he returns his gaze to her and replies, “I should have known that you would figure it out.”

“There’s still plenty of grey cells in this brain of mine. I hope you have the farewell that you deserve.”

“I hope so, too, Grandmama. I know that this is asking a lot, but I hope you will look out for Kurt when I’m away. Kurt means the world to me.”

“Of course I will, Blaine. In for a penny, in for a pound. I’ve already set him up to take a correspondence course to obtain a teaching certificate. Even though you are not going to India, it might come in useful in the future.”

“I know that things will change in the household with Evans and Hudson leaving for the war. Now that you’re living at the abbey, please make sure that nothing bad happens to him. Sebastian has it out for Kurt, and although he’s agreed to a truce, I don’t trust him.”

“I’ve dealt with my share of staff like Sebastian before. He won’t get away with anything under my watch.”

“Thank you, Grandmama. You don’t know how much it means to me.”

“I think I do, Blaine. Remind me one day to tell you about Prince Igor Kuragin from Russia,” the
Dowager Countess replies.

Blaine can tell that his grandmother is caught up in memory, as she pulls her hands to her heart and sighs.

“Now you must promise me that you will be careful on the continent, and do nothing that’s stupid. Let someone else be the hero. It’s not only Kurt that wants you back in Westerville in one piece.”

“I promise,” Blaine reassures her. Blaine feels a weight lift from his shoulders, knowing that his grandmama will be keeping Kurt safe until he returns. If anyone can take care of Kurt while he’s away, it is most definitely the Dowager Countess.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I also thank Dblmalfunctio, who performed a detailed final review, although all mistakes are mine.

Next up: Kurt and Blaine spend their last night together in London.
August 1914
Blaine

“You’ll write soon?” Pamela asks.

“Of course. I’ll write when I get to the training camp,” Blaine replies.

After escorting his grandmama outside to the abbey’s main entrance, he turns her into his arms and gives her a long hug. “I’ll miss you, Grandmama.”

He can hear the Dowager Countess sniffle into her lace handkerchief, before she whispers in his ear, “Blaine, I’ll miss you more than you’ll ever know. Don’t worry about Kurt. He’ll be safe here with me.”

After giving his grandmama a peck on the cheek, Blaine releases her and turns to give Quinn, Cousin Rachel, and his mother a farewell hug. When Blaine goes to shake his father’s hand, he’s surprised to be enveloped in his arms.

“Godspeed,” the Earl says in a low gravelly voice.

Blaine turns his attention to the staff, who are lined up to bid him farewell. The first in line is Hummel, who is dressed in his formal butler attire.

“Hummel, don’t tell me that the minute I leave, you’re going to start working again,” Blaine reprimands the butler.

“No, Mr Blaine, but I couldn’t let you leave without officially sending you off. I was in this very spot when you left for Sandhurst, and I want the honor to be here when you leave for war.”
Blaine says his goodbyes to the staff in line, taking the time to speak to each of them individually. Many have been at the abbey since he was a wee lad, and have watched him grow up. They are part of his family, and are intricately woven into his childhood memories.

“Mr Blaine, we best be off if you’re to catch the 8 o’clock train,” Hudson reminds him.

Kurt is standing proudly next to the Renault and opens the rear door for Blaine to enter. Once the car has set off, Blaine looks through the rear window and doesn’t avert his gaze until the figures waving disappear into the horizon.

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Blaine can hardly keep still in his first-class seat - he’s far too excited about having the rest of the day to spend alone with Kurt. He’s discounted spending the day out and about in London. They would have to either play their roles as gentleman and footman, or he would have to disguise himself. Either way, they couldn’t act naturally and be themselves in public. With only 24 hours left before he’s due to meet his cavalry unit, he would prefer to spend the time with Kurt more privately.

He glances at Kurt who is gazing out of the compartment’s window, humming softly to himself. Blaine can’t make out the song, but he starts tapping his foot in time to the tune. He stops when he feels a hand on his thigh.

“You’re so fidgety today, Blaine. We’ll be in London in less than half an hour,” Kurt says.

“I can’t help it, Kurt. I just want the next 24 hours with you to be perfect. I’ve got so many plans running through my mind that I think I’ll explode.”

Kurt gives Blaine’s thigh a gentle squeeze, and Blaine can almost see the sparks that it ignites in his veins.

“Honestly, Blaine, there’s nothing I’d rather do than to take care of you and tend to all your needs before you leave. I don’t need any of those grand plans that are going through your mind.”

Blaine can see both love and sincerity written across Kurt’s face, and he falls in love all over again.

As the train approaches Paddington station at noon, they make plans for the next few hours. Blaine will go to Harrods to collect the boots, and Kurt will open up Anderson House. Blaine is in Harrods lickety-split and loves the new boots. The leather isn’t as soft and supple as his riding boots, but he knows that they’ll keep him warm during the winter. He decides to take a taxi from Knightsbridge to Belgravia so that he doesn’t waste a minute longer without Kurt.

When Blaine enters Anderson House, he notices that the sheets have been taken off the furniture in the entrance and drawing room. Blaine sets down the Harrods box and looks around for Kurt, but he can’t see him anywhere.

“Kurt, where are you?” Blaine calls out along the corridor.

“I’ll be up in a minute. I’m making a pot of tea, and then I’ll join you in the drawing room,” Kurt shouts from the downstairs kitchen.

When Blaine enters the drawing room, he looks fondly at the piano. He doubts that there will be any opportunity to play during the war, and he will truly miss it. Blaine sits down on the piano bench and lifts the fallboard. His fingers glide over the smooth ivory keys, and he closes his eyes, getting lost in Rachmaninoff’s latest concerto. When the last note is played, he hears clapping, and
he jerks his head to the side, taking a deep breath when he sees Kurt before him.

“Bravo. You play so beautifully, Blaine. Your talent is wasted on those ditties that you play to accompany Miss Berry.”

A blush spreads across Blaine’s face at the compliment. He takes a good look at Kurt, and frowns. “What are you doing wearing your footman’s uniform, Kurt? I don’t expect you to wait on me today.”

“What would people think if they saw your footman not dressed properly?”

“It’s only you and me here! I’m not expecting anyone. I haven’t told a soul outside my family that I’ll be here.”

When they hear the door knocker pound against the front door, Kurt raises one eyebrow. “Oh, really?”

Kurt smooths out his jacket and checks his tie before heading to the main entrance. He opens the door to see a delivery man holding the most enormous wicker hamper with the letters ‘F&M’ stamped boldly in black ink across the front.

“Delivery for Lieutenant Anderson.”

The delivery boy shifts the hamper into the entrance way, and Kurt drags it into the drawing room. Blaine’s eyes widen in surprise.

“Were you expecting a hamper, Blaine?”

“N-No, I wasn’t.”

Blaine notices the envelope attached to the hamper. He snatches it and quickly opens it to see who has sent him such an expensive gift.

Kurt is a marvelous footman, but I suspect he has more on his mind today than keeping you sustained with food. Fortnum and Mason said this would be enough to feed an army, but it’s only one cavalryman I care about. Have Kurt pack the leftovers in your trunk, and have a slice of home when you need it. All my love, Grandmama

Blaine reads the note out loud to Kurt, and they both break down in giggles. His grandmama is certainly one of a kind. They broke the mold when they made her.

“Can you get changed now, Kurt? In the most unlikely event that someone knocks on the door, I promise to answer it.” Blaine gives Kurt his big puppy eyes, which always work on Mrs Sylvester when asking for an extra treat.

“Blaine, could you look any more pathetic and adorable? I’d love to change, but I didn’t bring any casual outfits.”

Blaine juts out his lower lip in disapproval, but suddenly gets a really good idea. “Since we’re not expecting anyone, why don’t you put on your sleeping trousers, and I’ll give you a vest and a jumper to wear.”

“I can’t wear and mess up the clothes that you’re taking to war!”

“But what if I want you to? What if I want to wear that very vest and jumper, knowing that you’ve
worn them, too? I’d be able to smell you wrapped around me.”

Kurt chuckles and leaves the drawing room, returning minutes later changed into the more casual and comfortable clothes. Without the layers of the footman’s uniform, Kurt looks softer, more vulnerable than Blaine has ever seen him.

“Your turn,” Kurt says, handing him a similar outfit. Blaine gazes into Kurt’s eyes as he takes off his jacket and shirt. His fingers tremble as he undoes his belt and trouser buttons. When he steps out of the trousers, Kurt’s eyes darken, and suddenly it becomes too much, too early, too everything.

Blaine turns around as he dresses in his night trousers and a comfy jumper. It’s silly really - Kurt has seen him plenty of times naked in his bathroom. But in those instances, Kurt was in his footman role, looking after Blaine as was his task and not appraising him as a man he wants to bed.

“I’m sorry, Blaine. I shouldn’t have stared while you were changing.”

Blaine turns around and notices that Kurt is wearing a smile that doesn’t quite reach his eyes.

“I’m being ridiculous, Kurt. I want you to look at me... look at me with desire. I’m just worried that I won’t be enough in your eyes.”

“How can you possibly think that, Blaine? I love you.”

Blaine ducks his head and peers up at Kurt through his long eyelashes, and with a coy smile, says, “And I love you, too”.

After their sweet exchange, the air becomes thick with anticipation and desire. Kurt breaks the silence with a nervous chuckle. “I don’t know about you, but breakfast seems like a lifetime ago and I’m starving. Besides, I’m curious as to what’s inside that Fortnum and Mason hamper.”

“Great idea, Kurt.”

When Kurt walks toward the drawing room door, Blaine asks, “Where are you going?”

“It’ll take me a few minutes to set up the dining room for you.”

The last thing Blaine wants is to sit at the dining room table and eat a formal meal. “Why don’t we pretend that we’re having a picnic and eat right here? I’m sure there is an old blanket that we can lay upon the floor.”

Kurt leans his head to the side and purses his lips. “My father won’t like it.”

“I doubt your father will like many things about our time in London,” Blaine counters.

Kurt laughs and gives Blaine a kiss on the cheek. “You’ve convinced me. You get the blanket, and I’ll get the dishes and cutlery. Meet you back here in a minute.”

After getting a blanket from the linen cupboard, Blaine lays it out on the drawing room floor. Kurt returns with a tray filled with everything they’ll need for their picnic, along with two bottles of cold ginger beer. Blaine opens the hamper from Fortnum and Mason and marvels at all the goodies that are packed inside - game pies, Scotch eggs, West Country cheese, smoked salmon, legs of lamb and ham, fruit cake, chocolate, biscuits, jam, chutney, marmalade, and of course, their signature tea.
“Fortnum and Mason weren’t joking when they said the hamper has enough to feed an army. Where do we even start?” Kurt asks when Blaine takes the items out.

“The bread won’t last very long. Why don’t we eat it with some of the cheese and slices of lamb?”

Kurt carefully carves slices off the leg of lamb and cuts chunks of cheese and bread to set out on the plates. Meanwhile, Blaine goes to the gramophone and looks over the discs that Cousin Rachel left behind when they hurriedly left earlier in the month. His heart beats faster when he sees a particular disc, and he hopes there is the opportunity to dance with Kurt later. He places another disc on the gramophone and sits down ready to eat the picnic feast.

As they eat, Kurt recounts silly tales about the goings-on downstairs at Westerville Abbey. Blaine giggles at the story of Hudson sprinkling the Epsom salt on his food, instead of putting it in his bathwater, as instructed. In turn, Blaine tells tales of the antics he got up to at Sandhurst Academy during the summers with Nick and Jeff.

“It doesn’t give me a great feeling, knowing that you’ll be relying on fellow officers in the battlefield who stole the headmaster’s underdrawers and hoisted them up the flagpole.”

Blaine’s tone of voice becomes serious. “I would trust my life with either of them. There are no finer officers than Nick and Jeff. Nick will be my captain in the Queen's Royal Lancers, and I couldn’t ask for anyone better. When it comes to the business of war, Nick is smart, quick-thinking, and courageous. I will gladly follow his every command.”

The song on the disc stops playing. Blaine walks over and selects the one with the special song. Once the needle is set down on the disc, he walks over to Kurt. “May I have this dance?”

Kurt nods and rises, and his arms wrap around Blaine’s back and pull him in. Blaine’s hands automatically reach up behind Kurt’s neck. Kurt is several inches taller than him; Blaine thinks that Kurt is the perfect height as he nuzzles into his neck.

Kiss me, my honey, kiss me
And say you’ll miss me as I miss you
Love me, my honey, love me
Like stars above me
Say you'll be true while away ev'ry day
I'll be thinking of you

Now that Kurt isn’t wearing the usual layers of his footman’s uniform, Blaine can feel Kurt’s taut muscles pressed against his body. As they sway to the music, he feels the length of Kurt’s cock against him, and it’s the most delicious feeling in the world. As much as Blaine would like to press their cocks together, he holds off. There will be plenty of time for that later. For now, he’s relishing this romantic moment.

Dearie, now don't grow weary
Be bright and cheery, my honey do
So dear, before I go dear
Come here and kiss me, (Kiss, Kiss) honey I love you

When the song ends, Blaine pulls back just far enough so that he can see Kurt, his beautiful Kurt, who has tears in his eyes. “I don’t want you to be sad and tearful on our last day together, my love.”

“I’m sorry, Blaine. I can’t help but think that this may be the last time I hold you in my arms. God forbid you should die in battle.”
“That is certainly a possibility, but I’m confident in my abilities to survive. I’ve been training for the cavalry my entire life,” Blaine reminds him. Kurt worries his bottom lip with his teeth, and Blaine can tell that there is more on Kurt’s mind than he’s saying. “What else is bothering you?”

“How do I know that I won’t be just a faded memory once you leave for the continent?”

“I can’t believe that you think so little of me that I would forget you so easily. I’ve got something that I want to show you. Come have a seat on the sofa.”

When Kurt sits on the sofa, Blaine retrieves a small box from the pocket of his jacket, which is carefully folded on a nearby chair. Blaine sits down next to Kurt and gazes lovingly into his eyes. Blaine slowly opens the box, and Kurt gasps when he sees a silver band, identical to the one that he’s wearing.

Blaine recalls the speech he’s been practicing since he purchased the ring in Exeter earlier in the week. “I know that it’s just a ring, but to me, it means more. It’s a symbol of my love and commitment to you. Our rings have an engraved scroll pattern that is never-ending, like my love.”

Blaine takes the ring out of the box, but when he goes to place it on his finger, Kurt swats his hand away. “Let me do it,” Kurt implores.

Kurt takes the ring and places it on Blaine’s finger. “I seem to recall that you made certain promises to me when you gave me the ring. Now it’s my turn. No matter who we become, even when we’re apart, we’ll always belong to each other. I promise I’ll be waiting for you to return to my arms once again. I promise to always love you.”

Blaine’s eyes well up when he looks down at their hands intertwined, wearing matching rings. “I don’t know what I’ve done to deserve you, Kurt. I wish I didn’t have so many duties weighing me down. It’s not only the war… It’s also the impossible situation of having to find a wife and sire a family.”

“Shh… you once told me that we’ll figure this out together because we’re worth it. Our love is worth it.”

Kurt leans in and kisses his lips, first softly, then with an urgency that has Blaine’s toes curling in his slippers. When Kurt licks the seam of his lips, Blaine willingly opens his mouth, wanting to get a taste of his sweet love.

“I want to go upstairs,” Kurt murmurs in Blaine’s ear.

Blaine’s mind is in a haze, and he can’t understand why those lips - those soft, delicious lips - are no longer on his.

“Just to make it perfectly clear, I want to go upstairs to your bedroom and show you how much I love you.”

Blaine’s head suddenly clears, and he now understands Kurt’s intentions. With love and desire emblazoned in his eyes, Blaine replies breathlessly, “Okay.”

Chapter End Notes

Song that Blaine and Kurt dance to - ‘Kiss Me My Honey, Kiss Me’ written by Irving
Berlin (1910).

A British jumper is an American sweater, and a British vest is an American undershirt. I hyperlinked photos in the relevant place.

I’ve now posted exactly one half of the story. There is still loads coming your way!

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I also thank Dblmalfuntion, who performed a detailed final review, although all mistakes are mine.

Next up: I think you can figure it out. The story rating will kick in.
August 1914
Blaine

Blaine silently repeats Kurt’s words. “Just to make it perfectly clear, I want to go upstairs to your bedroom and show you how much I love you.”

It’s the most stupendous idea - he’s 100% behind it, and he wishes they could somehow be automatically transported to his bedroom. He jumps up from the couch, pulls Kurt up by the hand, and leads him up the stairs. When they get halfway up the staircase, Blaine stops them on the landing. He presses Kurt against the wall and kisses him deep and hard and dirty. When they break apart, he can feel his lips tingle, and it’s Kurt who drags him up the remaining stairs.

When they finally get to his bedroom, Blaine kicks the door closed with his foot. He places his hands on either side of Kurt’s face and pulls him in, desperate for more kisses. He runs fingers through Kurt’s hair, loving the soft and silky feel. Blaine’s temperature soars with the heat coursing through his body. He breaks apart from Kurt, quickly pulls his jumper over his head, and flings it onto the floor.

Kurt removes his jumper as well, leaving him only wearing Blaine’s vest. It’s a size too small, so Blaine can make out the defined bulge of muscles in Kurt’s arms. Blaine decides to up the ante, and removes his vest so that he’s topless. Kurt mirrors his actions, and Blaine licks his lips when the cream-white chest is revealed to him.

Blaine doesn’t know where he wants to begin. His lips start kissing and nipping at Kurt’s jaw line, while his fingers wander along Kurt’s upper body. Kurt’s breathy sighs encourage him, until his
hands settle on Kurt’s hips, and his lips hone in on Kurt’s nipples.

“Bed, Blaine. I need to be next to you in your bed.”

Blaine pulls back and looks lovingly at Kurt, who has red kiss-swollen lips and disheveled hair. Kurt’s eyes are a deep gray, and he looks hungry for Blaine...for more. Blaine sharply inhales when he sees Kurt pull down his night trousers, revealing tightly-fitting boxer briefs.

“Are those mine?” Blaine squeaks.

“Since you don’t need them in the foreseeable future, I decided that they are being wasted, sitting all alone in your wardrobe,” Kurt rationalizes.

“I can’t think of a better place for my briefs to be than next to your gorgeous skin. You look incredibly sexy in them, but probably sexier without them. I-I want to see you… all of you,” Blaine babbles, unable to force his attention away from Kurt’s lower half.

Kurt shimmies out of the boxer briefs and stands there gloriously naked. Kurt’s cock is long and hard, bobbing up towards his stomach.

Kurt smirks, “If the look in those beautiful eyes is anything to go by, I think you like what you see. I feel a bit underdressed for the party. Can I see you, too?”

Blaine giggles nervously. Knowing that Kurt has seen him naked, albeit in totally different circumstances, gives him the courage to take off the remaining clothes. Despite wanting to ravage Kurt in that moment, Blaine makes himself stand still, loving how Kurt’s appreciative gaze makes him feel.

Kurt rakes his eyes slowly over Blaine’s naked body. “You’re gorgeous. I must have done something right in a previous life.”

He pulls Blaine closer and settles them down on the bed. Kurt plants kisses on his forehead, his eyelids, his cheeks, and his lips. “Tell me if we need to stop.”

“Stop? Kurt, don’t you dare!”

Kurt runs his hands along Blaine’s upper body, as if memorizing every dip and curve. “Do you know how long I’ve wanted this? Wanted you? Needed you?”

If Blaine had a response, it dies on his lips as Kurt kisses him with so much passion. When Kurt drapes himself over Blaine’s body, it feels grounding and solid and perfect. Blaine has always thought that he is the one who is needy, but he now realizes that they need each other equally. Their hearts and souls are as intertwined as the pattern on their rings.

Blaine’s skin quivers with every touch. He wraps his arms around Kurt’s back and kisses that sweet spot behind his ear. Blaine delights in the moans that fall from Kurt’s lips and in the way his hips shift. When their cocks are perfectly aligned, Kurt thrusts. Blaine gasps at the sensation - it’s hot and hard and perfect. If they are supposed to be wrong together, why does this feel so right?

Kurt continues to grind his hips down, pressing Blaine further into the mattress. Blaine clutches Kurt tightly, and he presses wet kisses onto every piece of skin that his mouth can reach. The hard pressure against his cock feels perfect, and he wants to feel the sensation for as long as he can.

“Can I try something, Blaine?” Kurt asks with a breathy voice.
“Anything, I’ll try anything with you,” Blaine encourages him.

Kurt rolls off him, and Blaine shivers, getting goose pimples, even though his skin is hot, with little beads of sweat forming on his chest. He hears Kurt open the drawer to the night table, and pour something into his hands. Blaine soon recognizes the scent of the lavender oil as Kurt warms it in the palms of his hands. Kurt lies down next to him and presses their bodies close and tight. Blaine's eyes are reverent, watching Kurt's sweet face, which displays such a sure love. When Blaine feels Kurt wrap his hands around their cocks in a tight grip, his gaze falters, and his eyelids flutter and finally close as Kurt slowly starts to stroke.

Blaine hears gasping, panting, and moaning, but can’t tell whether it’s coming from his mouth or Kurt’s. He doesn’t know where one of them begins and the other one ends, but he doesn’t care. Blaine reaches up to thread his fingers through Kurt’s hair, pulling him closer until their chests are flush against each other. Their kisses grow more urgent as the pleasure builds stronger. Blaine can’t help but thrust into Kurt’s tight fist, while Kurt kisses along his neck. When he feels teeth scraping over his skin, he thrusts his cock between Kurt’s rock hard shaft and squeezing fingers for a final time. His body ignites with pleasure as ropes of cum shooting out over Kurt’s fist. The last thing Blaine registers is Kurt biting down on his shoulder and sticky liquid spraying all the way up his chest.

Blaine blinks slowly, trying to get his bearings. When he feels the brush of fingertips making random patterns on his chest, he looks up to see a smiling Kurt.

“Welcome back,” Kurt says, giving him a kiss on the lips.

“How long have I been out of it?”

“About five minutes. I was getting worried about you,” Kurt replies, nuzzling closer.

“Kurt, that was inspired.”

A blush spreads across Kurt’s face. “I really don’t know what I’m doing. I wanted to feel pleasure and touch you at the same time. It felt like a good thing to do.”

“From now on, I’m totally on board with all your ideas,” Blaine says.

“And perhaps you might have ideas of your own that you want to try out? I’m on board for that too,” Kurt replies, and he gives Blaine a saucy wink.

Blaine loves the give-and-take nature of their relationship. There are no conventions that they need to conform to, like there are between men and women. Behind closed doors, they can be whomever, or do whatever they please.

Blaine leans forward to kiss Kurt's milky-color shoulder, and notices that the sun is almost below the horizon. He presses a smacking kiss to Kurt's cheek and gets out of bed to draw the curtains.

“That’s my job, Blaine!”

“That might be your job when you are working as a footman, but we’re equals now. Let’s go downstairs and have some more treats from the hamper. I seem to have worked up an appetite. Can’t imagine how,” Blaine says with a smirk.

They dress into their night clothes and return to the drawing room. They finish off the loaf of bread with thick slices of country pâté. Kurt finds the apples he brought from Westerville and cuts them into slices. Blaine is lazing on the blanket, and he can’t think of a more enjoyable way to eat than
to have his lover feed him apple wedges and chocolate. Blaine thinks that it’s the most decadent thing that he’s experienced in his short life.

Blaine thinks of how they usually interact with each other. Kurt is always the person who takes care of him. It goes beyond his role as the footman. It’s the little things he does especially for him, like extra portions of his favorite types of food, drops of chamomile oil in his baths, and the like. But most of all, it’s Kurt’s unwavering commitment to him, in spite of the circumstances. Why, Kurt was even willing to become a tutor and set sail for India for him. And what has he done for Kurt?

Nothing.

Blaine is saddened when he cannot come up with one single thing. He might have expanded Kurt’s horizons by showing him Southampton and London, but anyone could have done that. He might have shown Kurt kindness at the abbey, but it’s nothing he wouldn’t do for any of the downstairs servants. Blaine needs to change his way of thinking. Instead of receiving all the time, he needs to turn his attention to caring for Kurt.

Kurt starts collecting the used plates and cutlery to clean up.

“Here, let me, Kurt. You’ve done everything tonight.”

“Thank you. If you don’t mind cleaning up, I’ll get the rest of the food packed in your trunk.”

Blaine places the used items on the tray and takes them downstairs. He carefully washes and dries the items in the kitchen scullery. He doesn’t know where they are stored, so he sets them out on the kitchen table. When Blaine returns upstairs, he sees Kurt kneeling in front of his trunk in the main entrance, with a satisfied look on his face.

“Kurt, how on earth did you manage to fit in all the items from Fortnum and Mason? The trunk was pretty full in the first place.”

“It wasn’t easy, but I approached it like I was doing a puzzle, making sure that each piece fits together and leaves no space. I’m glad that the packing is done. I don’t want to wake up extra early tomorrow to pack, not when I can spend that time in your arms.”

“You’ll spend the night with me?” Blaine asks hopefully. He was praying that Kurt would, but he didn’t wish to presume.

“Do you want me to?” Kurt asks timidly.

“You know I do. Come upstairs with me. It’s time we get ready for bed.”

They switch off the remaining lights downstairs and head to the bedroom. Blaine takes the lavender oil from the nightstand and makes a bee-line for the bathroom. He turns on the taps in the bathtub, and after dispensing a few drops of lavender oil, checks the temperature of the water to make sure it’s just right.

“You do like your baths,” Kurt comments when he enters the bathroom.

“I do, but this bath is for you. I’ll have mine in the morning.”

“For me?”

“Yes, for you,” Blaine replies, giving Kurt a bop on the nose.
Kurt strips off his night clothes and carefully gets into the bathtub. Once he is leaning his head back against the tub, he sighs. “This tub is so much larger than I’m used to. It’s long enough that I can even lie down without bending my knees.”

Blaine gets the necessary supplies, and kneels next to the bathtub. He works a dollop of shampoo into a lather in his palms before he starts washing Kurt’s hair, using his strong fingers to massage his scalp.

“That feels so good, Blaine,” Kurt purrs.

“Now you know how it feels each time I take a bath. The suds usually hide my stiffie.”

“No, they don’t,” Kurt giggles.

Blaine’s cheeks pinken at the thought that Kurt has always known how his body reacts while his hair is being washed.

“Your body gives you away when I’m shaving you as well. Why do you think I take extra time to massage your face?”

Blaine throws his head back in laughter. “I thought you never knew.”

After rinsing the shampoo out of Kurt’s hair, Blaine takes the bar of soap and focuses on Kurt’s body. He uses a loofah to scrub Kurt’s back and legs, and a soft flannel washcloth for the other parts of his body. While Kurt closes his eyes, and relaxes in the tub, Blaine washes the pomade out of his hair and brushes his teeth, loving the domestic feel of them using the bathroom at the same time.

Blaine goes to the bedroom, takes the emergency candles out of the dresser, and lights them throughout the room. He returns the lavender oil to the night table, thinking that they might need it later. For what, he’s not sure, but maybe he’ll think of something really special.

When he hears the water being drained in the tub, Blaine rushes to the bathroom. He grabs a large fluffy towel and opens it wide. Kurt climbs out of the bathtub, and Blaine envelopes him with the towel, rubbing it all over to dry his body. Kurt’s body is still pink from the hot water, and his wet hair is flattened against his scalp. The smile on his face and the twinkle in his eye radiates happiness.

“Kurt, you’re so beautiful like this.”

Blaine can feel Kurt’s smile when he presses his face against his neck.

“You always know what to say,” Kurt whispers.

Kurt takes Blaine’s hand and leads him to the bedroom. A smug smile spreads across Blaine’s face when he hears Kurt’s gasp. Kurt’s reaction to the candles is exactly what he was hoping for.

“This is so romantic, Blaine. What did I do to deserve you?”

“Everything. You take such good care of me each and every day. I want to spend the night taking care of you, like you deserve,” Blaine confesses.

“You’ve been doing an excellent job so far. I can hardly wait to see what else is in store.”

Kurt lets go of the towel wrapped around him, revealing his long slender body. “Care to join me?”
Kurt asks, before climbing into bed.

Blaine has never before taken off his night clothes so fast. He jumps into bed and lies down next to Kurt, enveloped in the scent of his sandalwood soap. Blaine leisurely kisses Kurt, getting lost in the sensation. He tries to memorize how Kurt’s lips feel and taste, how soft his skin is against his, the little breathy sighs coming from his mouth. He wants to learn how to give Kurt pleasure like he’s never experienced before. Blaine wants to be Kurt’s first, and if he plays his cards right, he’ll be Kurt’s only.

Blaine’s lips move down Kurt’s body, kissing, nipping, and sucking. He focuses his attention on Kurt’s nipples, spending time there to draw out soft moans. His fingers run along Kurt’s sides and he can feel Kurt quiver in their wake. Kurt tugs him up and claims his lips in an urgent - almost desperate - kiss.

Blaine can feel Kurt’s erect cock jut into his side. He knows that when his own cock is that hard, he needs a little relief. He takes Kurt’s cock in his hand, and experimentally starts to stroke. “Is this alright?”


Blaine likes the weight and feel of Kurt’s cock in his hand. It’s not as thick, but it certainly is longer than his own. Blaine experiments with the strokes, carefully listening to Kurt’s reaction. He decides he must be doing something right when he feels wet pre-cum dribbling from Kurt’s tip, and smearing along his stroking palm. Blaine wonders what it tastes like, and whether Kurt would allow him to find out. Would Kurt like his idea or would he think of him as a freak?

“I can almost see the wheels turning inside your head. Tell me what you’re thinking,” Kurt coaxes him.

“I have an idea… B-but I’m not sure whether you’ll like it or not,” Blaine stutters.

“Tell me, my sweet lover,” Kurt whispers.

“I want to taste you,” Blaine blurts out.

Kurt moans, and his cock jumps up as he pushes against Blaine’s shoulders to urge him lower. Blaine takes this as a cue that Kurt is rather fond of the idea. Blaine kisses a trail down Kurt’s chest, and continues until he reaches his pelvis. When Kurt opens his legs, he takes the hint and situates himself between them, wondering where he should start.

When Kurt’s cock twitches in anticipation, Blaine realizes exactly where he should begin. He takes the tip of Kurt’s cock in his mouth, and sucks slowly. The pre-cum is hot and tastes sweet and a little salty, and Blaine decides very quickly that he likes it. He kisses down the length of the shaft, which has Kurt’s legs trembling. Blaine decides to experiment. He flattens his tongue at the base of Kurt’s cock and firmly licks the thick vein on the underside to the top.

“Oh my god, Blaine. Your tongue feels fantastic!”

Blaine gains confidence from Kurt’s reaction, so he decides to do something different. He places his lips on the tip of Kurt’s cock once again, only this time, he takes more of the length into his mouth as he sucks. Kurt’s hands grab at Blaine’s hair, and his fingers card through the curls, gently yanking.

He wonders how much he can fit in his mouth, so he slowly takes more of Kurt’s cock as he rolls his tongue along the shaft. Kurt’s fist tugs at his curls, which spurs him on to take more into his
mouth. When Kurt thrusts his hips up, his cock lodges in the back of Blaine’s throat, making him gag. He lifts his mouth off, spit dribbling down his chin, and coughs.

“S-sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you. Are you all right?” Kurt asks.

“I’m fine. I liked it, but it was too much, too quickly. Maybe slower and gentler the next time?”

“The next time?”

Blaine places his arm loosely over Kurt’s pelvis, and sinks his mouth down on his cock once again. He wraps the fingers of his spare hand around the bottom of Kurt’s cock, and starts bobbing his head. With each gentle thrust, Blaine takes more of Kurt’s cock in his mouth. When Kurt tugs at his curls, he hums in approval. After a particularly deep thrust, Blaine can feel the muscles in Kurt’s legs tighten. He rolls his tongue around the top of Kurt’s cock and sucks hard. His mouth gets splashed with semen as Kurt climaxes.

“Blaine… Blaine… Oh my god,” Kurt says over and over again.

Blaine gently sucks and swallows as much as he can, but there’s so much of it that some of it escapes and drips onto his chin. When he feels Kurt’s cock soften, he slowly pulls off, and wipes his mouth with his arm. He scooches up the bed and gazes at Kurt, who has his eyes shut and a beautiful smile on his face.

“Wow,” Kurt murmurs, slowly opening his eyes. “That was incredible, Blaine.”

“I’m sure I’ll get better with practice, and boy, do I want to practice a lot more.”

Kurt turns to his side so he’s facing Blaine. “I thought we were,” he whispers.

Before Blaine can answer, Kurt tugs him closer by the back of his neck, and kisses him slowly. When Kurt licks his lips, Blaine automatically opens his mouth, and Kurt’s tongue darts in, exploring every nook and cranny. Blaine’s cock twitches against Kurt’s hip - it’s been so hard for so long. Kurt’s hand envelopes his cock, and strokes gently, making Blaine keen and whine with desire.

“I’m not going to last very long,” Blaine apologizes.

Kurt tightens his grip and strokes faster and faster, his tongue darting into Blaine’s mouth in rhythm. Even though Kurt’s hand is dry, it feels so much better than when Blaine does this for himself. Kurt starts twisting his hand at the end of each upstroke, and Blaine lets out a deep guttural moan. His toes curl as his balls tighten, and he sees stars as he climaxes, shooting cum onto Kurt’s chest.

Blaine snuggles closer to Kurt while his breathing slowly starts to return to normal. As his senses sharpen once again, he feels Kurt’s fingers card through his hair, and soft kisses are scattered across his face. Kurt still smells like the lavender oil that perfumed his bath, but there is also an underlying masculine scent that Blaine can’t get enough of.

“That thing you did with your wrist felt fantastic. We could practice anytime you want. How are you feeling?” Blaine asks.

Kurt presses a gentle kiss on Blaine’s lips. “I feel boneless, like my body would float away if you weren’t snuggled up next to me.” Kurt scrunches his nose. “I also feel sticky.”

Blaine slowly gets up and dampens a flannel washcloth, and returns to the bed to wipe Kurt clean.
He then cleans his own chest and drops the washcloth on the floor. He returns to the snuggling position with Kurt, and quickly falls asleep in his lover’s arms.

Blaine wakes up to the feeling of a chest pressed against his back, with arms wrapped around him, holding him tight. He opens one eye and realizes that it’s already early morning. A huge grin spreads across his face. It’s the first time he’s awoken with another person … the man he loves in his bed. He burrows deeper into Kurt’s arms, trying to memorize the feeling.

Blaine feels toes brush against his calves. Kurt holds him tighter and presses gentle kisses along his neck.

“Oh Blaine, I wish I could wake up holding you each and every day. It’s already light outside. What time is it?”

Blaine sighs, not wanting to face the day. The last thing he wants to do is to say goodbye to Kurt and leave with his cavalry unit. He’d much rather stay in bed and laze the day away in Kurt’s embrace. Reluctantly, he leans over to the nightstand to grab his pocket watch.

“Just after 9:30.”

Kurt lifts his arms over his head and stretches. “I can’t remember the last time I had a lie-in this long. I’m usually up at 5:30 and working by 6:00. What time do you need to leave?”

“The Queen’s Royal Lancers’ truck will be here around noon.”

When Blaine rolls to his side, Kurt places a hand on his shoulder, and their knees meet each other’s. Blaine clasps his hand around Kurt’s wrist, and leans in so that their noses are touching. Blaine gazes into Kurt’s eyes, and sees the love he feels for Kurt mirrored back at him.

“Kurt, I’ll never forget the moment you walked into my life. I think that my soul knew something that my body and my mind didn’t know yet. It knew that we belonged together. Which is why I’ve fallen deeply and irrevocably in love with you.”

“And I with you,” Kurt agrees.

“In a few hours, I’ll be leaving to join my regiment. When I come back, we’ll find each other again and find a way to be together. Because you and I are meant to be. In every lifetime. For all eternity. And I just feel so lucky that I have found you so early in this lifetime, because all I want to do is spend my life loving you.”

“Blaine, I love you so much. I’ll be waiting for you to return to my arms. In the meantime, our time together is etched into my heart.”

Blaine kisses Kurt slowly and gently, thinking back to their first kiss. And like the first time by the lake, the world falls away as they kiss. There’s no right or wrong, no duties, and all thoughts disappear. It’s only their hearts and souls linking in this intimate moment. Blaine never wants it to end.

Kurt gently pulls away. “As much as I’d like to spend the day in bed with you, we best get on with the day.”

Blaine nods, for the reality is that he will be joining his regiment in a matter of hours, then boarding the ship to take him to the training camp on the continent. However, there is one last thing he needs to give Kurt before he leaves.
“Stay here for a moment. I have something to give to you.”

Blaine retrieves a large envelope from the top of the dresser and returns to bed, sitting up next to Kurt. “Remember our last outing to Exeter?” Blaine asks, handing the envelope over.

Kurt opens the envelope and several photographs scatter on the bed. The first one Kurt picks up is of Cooper, Blaine, Evans, Hudson, and Sebastian. Blaine rolls his eyes when he sees Cooper’s huge grin in an attempt to pull focus. The next photograph is of Blaine.

“I’m so glad that I’ve got my own copy!” Kurt exclaims. He sorts through the remaining photographs, which are all of Kurt.

“Why do I need three copies?” Kurt asks.

“One is for your father, one is for yourself, and of course, one is for me. I’m hoping that you would write something on the back of my copy. I plan to keep it close to my heart during the war.”

Kurt gives Blaine a smack on the lips. “I’d love to do that for you, but first, you better get ready.”

Kurt tends to Blaine while he’s in the bath, washing his hair and body. Kurt shaves Blaine and gives him a deluxe massage. They both giggle when Blaine gets a stiffie. After dressing in their respective uniforms, they go to the kitchen for tea and toast, although neither have much of an appetite. The ticking of the wall clock is a reminder that their time is limited to fleeting moments.

They go to the drawing room to pass the final hour. Kurt hands the photograph to Blaine. “Can you read the inscription after you leave? I’ll probably embarrass myself and start to cry.”

Blaine places the photograph in his shirt breast pocket, loving that Kurt is somehow still close to his heart. They sit on the sofa, holding each other while whispering sweet nothings, softly kissing, and trying to memorize everything about the other.

When they hear the door knocker bang, Kurt rises to answer it

“Is Lieutenant Anderson ready?” a young soldier asks.

“He’ll be out in a moment.”

Two soldiers take Blaine’s trunk to the military truck. Kurt walks over to Blaine and hands him his cap. “Godspeed, Lieutenant Anderson. Stay safe, and whatever you do, come back to me. I love you.”

“And I love you. Remember to go to my grandmama with any problems. She is wonderful at sorting out all manner of things.”

Blaine holds Kurt, hoping that all his feelings can be conveyed in one last kiss. When they hear the truck honk, Kurt pulls away, and Blaine leaves Anderson House.

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The nighttime air is cool as the ship sets sail across the English Channel. While it’s been a long day of paperwork and renewing friendships from Sandhurst, Blaine wants to be on his own to reflect about his time with Kurt. He gets a cup of tea and finds a seat in a quiet corner. He looks down at his ring and the never-ending scroll pattern. When he is sure that no-one is around, he takes out the photograph of Kurt, his beautiful Kurt. He flips it over and reads,
My darling B,

I love you fearlessly and forever.

K

Chapter End Notes

Is there a dry eye in the house after these last two chapters? I don’t know about you, but I’m a snifflly mess, and I wrote the darn thing!

Many thanks to Datshitrandom on Tumblr, who created the two photos at the end of the chapter. Please go here to give her love and/or reblog.

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I also thank Dblmalfuction, who performed a detailed final review, although all mistakes are mine.

I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: Four months later, there are changes at Westerville Abbey.
Changes at Westerville Abbey

Chapter Notes

The next chapters will have time jumps, so make sure you note the date at the beginning. This chapter is set four months after Blaine leaves for continental Europe.

As the story goes into the war years, I’d like to emphasize that this is a Klaine story with a happy ending.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

December 1914
Kurt

Kurt opens the curtains, allowing the weak winter’s morning light to filter into the dining room. There is still a thick layer of frost blanketing the croquet lawn.

“It looks like it’s going to be a white Christmas this year. What do you think?”

Kurt turns around and sees his father standing by the dining room table, holding his measuring stick.

“I wonder whether it’ll snow in Belgium or France. I hope the men stay warm,” Kurt replies.

“They did leave with the very best boots,” the butler reminds him.

Mr Hummel measures the distance between the cutlery laid out at each place setting, while Kurt lights the candles under the chafing dish stands. Sebastian enters with the first dishes for breakfast,
and Kurt leaves to help with the rest.

When the family comes down to the dining room, Kurt pours tea or coffee for them. He’s worked at the abbey long enough to know each family member’s preference, without even asking.

The Earl stands up when the Dowager Countess enters the room. “Good morning, Mama. This is very early for you to be up and about.”

“War makes early risers of us all. I thought I would help with the flowers, so that Pamela can focus on her war fundraising efforts,” the Dowager Countess remarks.

“Quinn will join us this morning as well,” the Countess announces.

Kurt quickly leaves the dining room and rushes to the top of the stairs to wait for Lady Quinn.

Lady Quinn wobbles down the corridor. “Good morning, Kurt.”

Kurt offers his arm and helps her navigate down the staircase.

“Kurt, I’m more than capable of getting down the stairs by myself, although it’s sweet to see how much you care for my safety. I’m only six months pregnant - goodness knows how you’ll act in the final months.”

“I’m sure Mr Hummel will insist that you take breakfast in bed, My Lady. Lord Cooper would have our heads if we didn’t do everything possible for your comfort.”

Lady Quinn giggles. “He’d want you imprisoned in the Tower of London first.”

Once Lady Quinn is safely seated, Kurt takes up his usual post along the wall.

The Earl turns his head towards the butler. “How is the mood downstairs?”

Mr Hummel approaches the table. “My Lord, with a few tweaks here and there, the staff are established in the new division of duties, and everything is working to my satisfaction. Sebastian’s return to help us during his leave has been an enormous help.”

Sebastian has completed his training at a nearby Royal Army Medical Corp camp. Kurt is surprised that Sebastian has decided to spend his leave at Westerville Abbey but guesses that he has nowhere else to go. Sebastian never talks about his family.

The Earl looks at Sebastian. “Yes, we are all very grateful that you’ve come back to smoothen the transition amongst the staff. Do you know when you’ll be deployed to the continent?”

Sebastian replies, “I’m to leave this afternoon. If you’ll excuse me, My Lord, I’ll go downstairs to see if the morning post has been delivered yet.”

The Earl turns the conversation back to the staff downstairs. “Hummel, I have no doubt that the household is running smoothly, but how are the staff feeling?”

Mr Hummel takes a moment to gather his thoughts before he replies, “They are obviously concerned about the Westerville men and for their family members who are fighting for our country. Hudson writes to his mother regularly, but there is little word from Evans, other than the boilerplate field postcards provided to those who have difficulties with writing. The staff are writing letters and getting together boxes to be sent by the end of the week.”

“What a splendid idea, Hummel,” the Countess remarks. “I’m sure the men would love to read
“Yes, My Lady. They are also talking about other ways they can help the war effort from the home front.”

“I fully support their endeavors. Let us know if we can assist in any way,” the Countess offers.

Miss Berry frowns and crosses her arms. “I feel so useless. I’m wasting my life while they sacrifice theirs.

“You’ve been a tremendous help with the fundraising efforts,” the Countess reminds her.

“No, I d-- I don't mean selling programs or finding prizes for the tombola. I want to do a real job. Real work.”

The Countess takes a sip of tea before replying, “Well, if you are serious, what about becoming an auxiliary nurse? There's a ten-week training program in Exeter. I know I could get you into the course. It may be something of a rude awakening. Are you ready for that? I mean, have you ever made your own bed, for example, or scrubbed a floor?”

“I’ve never shied away from hard work,” Miss Berry boasts. “I think it’s a marvelous idea, but how would I get to Exeter each day? Hudson is no longer around.”

“I’ll drive you,” Lady Quinn offers.

“Quinn, you couldn’t possibly drive Rachel each day in your condition,” the Earl protests.

Lady Quinn laughs. “I certainly could. I have my driver’s license, and the course should be over before the child is due. Only yesterday, Lady Marley Rose sent me a letter informing me about a knitting circle she is organizing. While Cousin Rachel is attending her classes, I could knit socks, scarves, and whatnots for the soldiers.”

The Earl rubs his chin as he thinks over the proposition.

“We all have to do our part on the home front,” Lady Quinn reminds him.

The Dowager Countess offers her opinion. “I agree with Rachel and Quinn. They must be allowed to do their parts like everyone else.”

The Earl gives his verdict. “That’s settled then. Rachel will attend the nursing class in Exeter, while Quinn joins Lady Rose’s knitting circle.”

Kurt is happy with the news that Lady Quinn and Miss Berry will be in Exeter each day. There will be fewer tasks for him to perform at the abbey, giving him more time to spend on his teacher’s correspondence course.

Sebastian rushes into the dining room with the morning mail and sets the pile next to the Earl.

“There’s a letter from Mr Blaine!”

The Countess clasps her hands in excitement. “Michael, let me read it out loud. I think everyone wants to hear the latest news from Blaine.”

“I’m most definitely interested,” the Dowager Countess agrees.

“Very well, then,” the Earl replies, handing over the letter to his wife.
As the Countess opens the envelope, Sebastian walks over to Kurt and whispers, “The newspapers have arrived as well. You best get downstairs and iron them for His Lordship lickety-split.”

Kurt reluctantly leaves the dining room, with his head hanging low, trying to contain the tears that are welling in his eyes. He desperately wants to hear the news of his love firsthand, and not the abbreviated version that his father will later recount. Sebastian could have waited five minutes, until after the letter has been read, before sending him off downstairs. Sebastian might be keeping his promise about not compromising his and Mr Blaine’s relationship, but he still has a nasty streak that thwarts any opportunity for Kurt to hear news. Why did Sebastian have to come back on his leave?

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“Are there any questions about the new arrangements?” Mr Hummel asks, after relating the news of the daily trips to Exeter to the staff during their break after lunch.

Mercedes raises her hand. “I was wondering… Maybe Lady Quinn could give us the spare yarn and patterns so that we could knit for the troops as well?”

Mrs Hudson pipes up, “What a wonderful idea, Mercedes. We’re almost finished knitting the baby clothes. I’ll ask Lady Quinn at the next opportunity.”

Miss Lopez rolls her eyes. “I’ve worked my fingers to the bone knitting for Lady Quinn’s baby, and now you want me to knit more?”

“I think you’ll agree that we all need to do our part in this war. Perhaps you would find it more agreeable to help with the canning in the kitchen? Brittany can show you how it should be done,” Mrs Hudson suggests.

Mrs Sylvester cackles. “Brittany teaching someone how to cook? Now I’ve heard everything.”

“Blondes are born with magical powers, like doing the splits or turning Swedish,” Brittany replies, as if the explanation is obvious.

“It certainly beats knitting,” Miss Lopez retorts.

Kurt can tell that Miss Lopez is very interested in the proposition of working in the kitchen, judging by how she smiles at Brittany. He makes a mental note not to barge into the pantry without making himself known well in advance. Discovering Brittany and Santana in the broom cupboard beneath the stairs was enough, thank you very much.

“Any further questions?” Mr Hummel asks.

Spratt raises his hand. “As you are aware, the Dowager Countess is moving into Westerville Abbey today and plans to stay here for the duration of the war. What will my duties be, and where will I sleep?”

Mr Hummel replies, “I’ve given it a great deal of thought, and you’ll be the abbey’s under-butler. We can speak later about the division of duties. As far as the sleeping arrangements, you’ll take over Mr Evan’s bedroom. Kurt will move into Sebastian’s room after he’s left for the war.”

Mrs Sylvester raises her hand. “Sebastian said there was a letter from Mr Blaine in the morning post. What news do we have from him?”

Mr Hummel replies, “Mr Blaine has finished his training, and his unit is now together. By now,
they should be at the battlefront.”

“Is that all?” Kurt asks, hoping for a little hint as to how Mr Blaine is feeling.

“Mr Blaine gives thanks to Mrs Sylvester for the fruitcake,” the butler adds.

Mrs Sylvester chortles. “Mr Blaine always did have a sweet tooth, or maybe it’s how much brandy I use to douse the fruitcake.”

Mrs Hudson smiles and reports, “Finn wrote that Mr Blaine is very popular within his unit. The men respect his cavalry skills, and he has already taken the time to get to know each soldier. I’m comforted in the knowledge that Finn is in Mr Blaine’s capable hands.”

The butler looks around, and when he finds there are no further questions, he says, “It’s time for my daily walk. Everybody best get on and start the afternoon chores. Sebastian, you’ll be responsible for the afternoon tea service. Kurt, the Dowager Countess is feeling poorly and has asked that you deliver afternoon tea to her room.”

Mr Hummel and Mrs Hudson leave the dining room to bundle up in their woolen coats, hats, scarves, and gloves. Once his father was released from bedrest, Mrs Hudson encouraged him to take light exercise each day. When the butler decided to take afternoon walks, it was only natural that Mrs Hudson accompany him. She insists that it’s to ensure that the butler doesn’t hurt himself, but Kurt knows better. Kurt sees the look in their eyes when they return. His father and Mrs Hudson are absolutely besotted with each other.

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Wesley and Kurt spend the early afternoon visiting the farms on the Westerville estate, where the climate and terrain are ideal for both crops and animals. The Earl has implemented one of Kurt’s ideas on how to make the farms more efficient with fewer workers. During the autumn, all the available men plant the winter wheat. Once the seeds are sown, they all turn their attention to the animal farms - mending fences and the like, as well as driving trucks of dairy and meat to the nearby depot, to be distributed by the Ministry of Food. Once the winter crop is ready for harvesting, all farmers will help reap the harvest. It makes light work for one individual farm, whose menfolk might be enlisted in the war, as well as diversifying the farmers’ skills.

After talking to the farmers, Kurt concludes that the plan is going rather well. They can make do with fewer farmhands, and the yields are starting to increase. Pleased with the progress, Wesley and Kurt start their ride back to the Westerville Abbey stables. A public bus passes them, and they can see Sebastian in his uniform, gazing out of the window. They stop their horses, sit up straight in their bridles, and raise a hand to their brow, giving a hand salute. While Kurt doesn’t like Sebastian, he hopes that the footman returns from the war safely.

“How is the new colt doing?” Kurt asks.

Wesley replies, “He’s a fine, strong, young thing, but rather feisty. He’s done well with the halter and lead ropes. Next week, I plan to start the bit and bridle training. I find that if we go at a pace that the colt is comfortable with, the progress goes much quicker in the end.”

“It sounds like such a science - so complicated and full of various steps.”

Wesley laughs. “That’s what Mr Blaine says as well. The important thing is that the colt needs to trust his handler. There’s one thing that I’m having a problem with, that I think you can help with.”

“Me? I know how to ride a horse, but I don’t know anything about breaking one in,” Kurt replies.
“It’s nothing like that. I can’t figure out a name for the colt that Mr Blaine would like. Do you have any ideas?”

Kurt considers this. “Hmm, let’s see. Mr Blaine named Firebird after Stravinsky’s ballet. We need to find another name from the theatre, symphony, opera, or something like that.”

“Did Mr Blaine attend a performance during the London season that he particularly enjoyed?” Wesley asks.

“There is an opera called ‘Elektra’, which would be a perfect name. But unfortunately, it was composed by Strauss, who is a German.”

“I don’t think Mr Blaine will want a reminder of the Fritzes after the war,” Wesley agrees.

“What do you think about ‘Nightingale’? It’s an opera that was composed by Stravinsky, so there would be a connection with Firebird. The male nightingale is well-known for its rich melodious song.”

“Nightingale it is!” Wesley exclaims.

When the horses enter the stables, they dismount and take off the saddles. Wesley sits down on a nearby stool and sighs. “I miss Mr Blaine. He used to spend hours and hours here, brushing down the horses, feeding them treats, and keeping me company. He certainly is one of a kind.”

Kurt knows that Blaine considers Wesley a close friend, and that he has confided to Wesley the true nature of his relationship with Kurt. “He certainly is special. I miss him, too. It’s been harder than I ever imagined to be separated. I only get second-hand news about Mr Blaine. It would make our time apart easier if we could somehow write to each other.”

“I’m sure Mr Blaine is feeling frustrated, too. A special letter for Christmas wouldn’t raise eyebrows, especially if you write to Lord Cooper, Evans, Hudson, and Sebastian as well.”


“Surely you can think of something, Kurt. How about relating a story about Lady Quinn since he’s been away?”

Kurt likes Wesley’s idea about writing to each man from Westerville. Naturally, his letter to Blaine would have to be formal, if it’s to be included in the Christmas box. It’s most certain that others at the abbey would read the letter before it’s sent. But at least it’s something.

Initially, Kurt had felt at loose ends with Blaine’s departure - after all, he had been responsible for tending to Blaine’s needs. But soon after, the time was filled with helping the Westerville tenant farmers. Kurt feels fine during the day, making his own contribution to the home front, but the long nights are another matter altogether.

He lies in bed each night, wondering where Blaine is, wondering if he is still alive. He wants to be able to send him words of encouragement and comfort, but mostly assurances of his love and their future together. Isn’t it his duty to provide all this to the man he loves?

Kurt picks up a pitchfork, and digs out hay from a bale to toss it into the horse stalls. There is no use getting worked up over things he can’t control. It doesn’t make it better and only makes him feel sad.
Kurt knocks on the Dowager Countess’s bedroom door, before entering with a tray containing tea, egg and watercress sandwich quarters, and a lemon drizzle scone. He was expecting to see her in bed, but instead she’s sitting on one of the chairs by the fireplace, reading.

“Are you feeling better, My Lady?” Kurt asks as he sets down the silver tray on a nearby side table.

“I feel perfectly fine, young man. It was just a pretense to be able to speak to you alone.”

Kurt arches one eyebrow, interested in what she has to say.

“Go lock the door and sit down next to me,” the Dowager Countess orders.

After Kurt has done as he’s told, the Dowager Countess takes an envelope out of the folds of her skirt.

“Sebastian was rather naughty this morning. I believe you are most interested in reading this. I’ll be at my desk near the window to give you some privacy.”

“Thank you, My Lady!” Kurt exclaims, and he eagerly takes the letter out of the envelope.

My dearest family,

It’s hard to believe that my training is now over. I’ve spent more time learning to use a variety of guns than I have on fighting tactics on a horse. They say that this war will be won by firepower and not by swords, and I’m starting to believe them.

Captain Duval is my immediate commander, and there could be no finer officer. He understands military tactics very quickly and can think on his feet. If you remember, he was a full-time cadet at the Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst, and we’ve spent summers training together. Our friendship has only become stronger during our wartime training.

Hudson has been adjusting to life in the cavalry. He’s in charge of loading the transportation horses with supplies and driving the brigade’s colonel and captains. During the journeys, Captain Duval keeps a road map with him because at times, Hudson gets hopelessly lost. Hudson says it’s because all the signs are written in a different language, but we all know that it’s just Hudson’s way.

I’ve met my unit of 30 cavalrymen during the final week of training (they were elsewhere at the start). They are all good horsemen, although not as good as Cousin Rachel. However, they are determined to thwart the Fritzes at the front. I think we’ll be an excellent fighting unit.

All hopes of coming home for Christmas are dashed - the Channel is too dangerous to cross for leaves. It will be very difficult not to spend the holidays at Westerville with the family. After a two-day break, we will be moving out, although I can’t reveal the location. I don’t know the whereabouts of Cooper or Evans, but I’ll let you know if I learn any news. Have you heard anything from Sebastian?

I received a letter from Miss Cohen-Chang last week. Her father has arranged for the family to relocate to Hong Kong until this great war is over. Korea is still under Japanese rule and isn’t particularly safe. Nothing was mentioned about whether she’s still interested in marriage, something I plan to pursue after the war.

The days are busy, but the nights are long and lonely. I spend most nights listening to the gramophone that Captain Duval brought with him and recalling memories of dancing - not only
during the Season’s balls, but at Westerville Abbey as well. I reread each of your letters countless times, thinking of the wonderful times I’ve had.

Please thank Mrs Sylvester for her regular care packages. All the men are envious of me having a steady supply of fruitcake. Could you ask Kurt to put some more bars of soap in the next care package? Or anything else Kurt thinks I might need?

Love,

Blaine

Kurt rereads the letter, trying to commit every word to memory, so that he can recall them each long and lonely night. Kurt smiles at Blaine’s remark about dancing at Westerville Abbey. He can almost feel Blaine’s arms around him as they had the last dance after the Westerville ball. There appears to be a secret message about Kurt putting things Blaine might need in the care package, and he racks his brains to figure out what they could possibly be.

Kurt sets down the letter on the table and places another log on the fire, and the Dowager Countess returns to her nearby chair.

“Thank you, My Lady. It means so much to me to read Mr Blaine’s words for myself. You have been a good friend to us.”

“We are allies, Kurt, which can be a good deal more effective. This situation with the letters is intolerable. I can’t spend the wartime years sneaking Blaine’s letters out and feigning headaches so that you can meet with me in private.”

“I’m sorry, My Lady. I shouldn’t put you in that situation. I’ll hear the news of Mr Blaine with the rest of the servants.”

“That isn’t exactly what I had in mind. Let us say that you were to write a letter of a personal nature for Blaine, and an envelope marked with a ‘B’ happened to appear on my desk. What would I do? I would have no choice but to put that envelope in one of my own, address it to my grandson, and give it to Hummel for the next post. That’s what any reasonable lady would do, don’t you think?”

A large smile spreads across Kurt’s face. “Why yes, I think any reasonable lady would come to the same conclusion, My Lady.”

The Dowager Countess continues, “And let us say, if I were to receive a letter from my grandson, and there was not only a letter for me, but an envelope marked with a ‘K’, it would be remiss of me if I didn’t pass it along, don’t you think?”

Kurt’s eyes well with tears at the Dowager Countess’s well-thought-out plan. “I would be most grateful, My Lady.”

“Tonight after dinner, I’ll write my grandson of the news at Westerville Abbey. If an envelope marked ‘B’ happens to be slid under my door, then I shall include that as well.”

Kurt wants to hug and kiss the Dowager Countess, but settles for a quick nod. He knows exactly how he will pass the evening.

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Kurt counts the minutes until the family’s dinner is over, and he can spend time writing a letter to Blaine.
The Countess looks at her niece. “By the way, Rachel, very good news. I phoned the Voluntary Aid Detachment in Exeter. They do have a vacancy on the auxiliary nurses course. It’s very short notice, but someone dropped out. You’ll have to be ready to start on Monday.”

“I guess that’s settled then,” the Earl says. This afternoon he returned from a two-day stay in London.

“Did you learn anything of interest while you were in the House of Lords?” the Countess asks.

“We spent most of our time discussing the Ottoman Empire. Since we declared war on them last month, some of our troops have been redeployed there. We’ve already captured Basra and are advancing north into Iraq.”

“Do we know exactly which troops?” the Countess probes.

The Earl takes a gulp of wine before answering. “There’s no easy way to say this, but it includes the Royal Fusiliers. Cooper and Evans are in the Middle East.”

“Do you think they’ll be safe?” Miss Berry asks.

“I think they will be. This is very top secret, but the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps plan to support our efforts in the region. The Ottomans might find themselves fighting both the ANZACs and Britain on two fronts.”

“It’s reassuring that the colonies are coming to our aid,” the Dowager Countess remarks.

“I also spoke to Brigadier Boyd of the Royal Army Medical Corps. Preparations are being made to treat the injured soldiers when they return back home. The Westerville hospital has been earmarked for officers.”

“Only fitting that Westerville receives men of character,” the Dowager Countess remarks.

The Earl continues, “I have offered Westerville Abbey as a complimentary convalescent home. A place for the officers stay while they are recovering. We’ve got to get behind the war effort and support our troops any way we can.”

The silence in the dining room is deafening. Kurt thinks that life at the abbey will soon change beyond his imagination.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I also thank Dblmalfunction, who performed a detailed final review, although all mistakes are mine.

I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: Blaine learns that war is quite different than what he had expected.
Chapter Notes

In the chapters set during World War one, there are no war scenes described in gory detail. I’ll give specific warnings in individual chapters, although none are needed now. This chapter is set six months after the previous one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

France
June 1915
Blaine

My dearest B,

I look around Westerville Abbey and marvel at all the changes that have taken place since you left. Most of the common rooms have been taken over by the Royal Army Medical Corps. The ballroom is now a ward for convalescing officers, the front parlor is the doctor’s examination room, and the drawing room now contains all sorts of equipment needed for physical therapy. Your father has welcomed the injured soldiers with open arms. He even shares his study with the RAMC administrators.

My father is an entirely different matter.

He sees the convalescent hospital as an invasion to his beloved abbey. He had me move all the artwork and antiques in the common rooms to the loft, and he’s meticulously taken a detailed inventory. While the RAMC staff have full run downstairs, the butler’s office and wine cellar are under lock and key. It’ll take some time for my father to adjust to not being in charge of everyone in the house.
Your nephew is such a bonny lad - healthy and growing every day. Michael Devon is just like his father, Lord Cooper. Even at three months of age, he has a very strong pair of lungs. Miss Lopez has little patience for the wee baby. Although she is supposed to be his nursemaid, it’s Mercedes who spends nights in the nursery (and me, when she needs a reprieve). Lady Quinn has fully recovered from the childbirth. She spends her mornings helping in the ward, and her afternoons with her knitting circle.

Miss Berry has no chance of returning to America - not after that German submarine attacked and sank the British passenger liner Lusitania last month. Miss Berry is now taking nursing classes in Exeter and is already scheming to get to the front. Although she wouldn’t be accepted because she’s an American citizen, you know how determined Miss Berry can be. Don’t be surprised if you find her looking after your cavalry unit one day soon!

The Earl has been restless, wondering how best to help on the home front. He was delighted when he was given the colonelcy of the local volunteers, but after a regimental dinner, he realized that they were looking for a mascot, and not for someone to serve with them in the field. He’s now more determined than ever to ensure that Westerville does everything to support our troops.

Your father and I have turned the abbey’s croquet lawn into a vegetable garden. I never thought I would see the day when your father would do manual labor, but he insisted. Every piece of available land on the Westerville estate will be used to produce food for the troops. Can you believe that the gardens at Buckingham Palace are being used to grow potatoes? Mrs Sylvester and Brittany are now responsible for the vegetable gardens near the abbey. Poor Brittany does most of the work while Mrs Sylvester barks orders at her. She’s even asked my father for a megaphone!

The village school was left without a teacher when Mr Figgins was recruited by the Royal Navy Intelligence to work in their new code-breaking unit in Whitehall. Who knew that Mr Figgins was a mathematical mastermind! Your mother is now teaching at the school, and I help by teaching the lessons on history and farming. I rather enjoy it - my teacher training correspondence course hasn’t been for naught!

Mr Kiehl recently spent the night with his new bride on his journey from Padstow to London. You’ll never believe whom he married… Lady Rebecca Jackson! She was very disappointed when she discovered that you were already fighting on the continent. Something about buns baked to perfection by some sort of master chef. Do you know what she means? Mr Kiehl is joining the navy, and the new Mrs Kiehl will return to live with her parents in Scotland for the duration of the war.

Every night after dinner, I read books to the officers (after Miss Berry’s nightly vocal performance, of course). There are so many officers who were blinded by the chlorine gas. I shudder thinking what might happen to you and Firebird, even though you both have masks. Once the last officer is asleep, I go upstairs to my cold room and try to figure out what my future holds. It’s frustrating working at the abbey, knowing that I could do more if I was on the warfront. If only I could join the cavalry!

Before I go to sleep, I take your photograph from underneath my pillow and gaze into your eyes, hoping that somehow you’ll know that I’m thinking of you… loving you… wishing you were in my arms. There are so many versions of my future in my head, but each and every one of them includes you.

I love you fearlessly and forever,

K
Blaine feels a breeze when the tent flap opens. He stands to attention as Captain Duval enters their tent.

“At ease,” Captain Duval orders.

The captain takes off his helmet, wipes his brow, and sits down on the folding chair by their small table. He lights a fag and takes a good look at Blaine, who is eating a piece of fruitcake and reading a letter.

“Shrimpy, I don’t know any other chap in the Royal Army who receives so many letters and parcels.”

“Valley, you’re just jealous,” Blaine retorts. He cuts a sliver of the precious fruitcake and hands it to his friend.

Captain Duval licks his lips before taking a bite of the fruitcake. “You must have been a real heartbreaker back in London last Season. Even my little sister has a crush on you. I’m surprised her letters aren’t in your pile.”

Blaine shakes his head, gently chuckling. “It’s not what you think. The letters all come from Westerville Abbey.”

“It’s absurd how many letters you get from your grandmother,” Captain Duval jokes.

Blaine blushes because only he knows that each letter from his grandmama also contains a letter from Kurt.

“Any news about the bombings last month?” Captain Duval asks.

Blaine frowns and shakes his head. “Ever since the Fritzes shelled the north of England at the end of last year, I’ve been worried about my family. It’s mortifying to think that the German cruisers were able to go 400 miles, bombard three cities and return to Kiel, without any of our fleet being there to stop them. Westerville isn’t that far from Southampton, where most men and supplies leave Blighty. Who knows, maybe the Germans will shell Southampton next.”

“At least your family is in the West Country and not on the front,” Captain Duval remarks.

Blaine notices that Captain Duval has dark shadows below his eyes and looks exhausted.

“How did the practice go tonight, Valley? Are the men getting used to wearing a gas mask and using a Vickers machine gun at the same time?”

Blaine was horrified when he had learnt that the Germans fired 18,000 artillery shells, which contained toxic chemicals, on the Russian positions in Poland last January. The Royal Army immediately distributed gas masks to each soldier. There are even gas masks for horses and mules.

Chemical warfare has certainly made combat more unpredictable than has ever been experienced in the past.

“The men are learning quickly. I’ve informed Major Ashmore that my units are ready to fight off their horses, if needed,” Captain Duval reports.

“But what about the shell crisis?” Blaine asks. “There simply isn’t enough ammunition in the field.”
“Once the British press got wind of it, the War Office has made ammunition its top priority. The newly formed coalition government is also making sure that the supplies are now coming steadily. Mark my words, the cock-up will cost Prime Minister Asquith and the liberals at the next election.”

Blaine lets out a deep sigh. “All the training and tactics on horseback we learnt at Sandhurst were for naught. When we were at our first battle in Ypres, we spent more time as infantry than mounted on our horses.”

Captain Duval takes a long drag on his fag. “It’s those blasted machine guns and chemical gases the Fritzes are using. We’re sitting targets on horses.”

Blaine’s brows draw together. “What concerns me most is what might happen to Firebird. He’s far too fine a horse to use as a pack mule, transporting weapons and supplies for the Royal Army.”

Captain Duval nods. “I have that fear about my own horse, but there is no hope in hell of getting them back to England.”

The tent is silent as each man finishes off their slice of fruitcake, each lost in their own thoughts about the possible fate of their horses. When the tent darkens after sunset, Blaine takes his pocket watch out from his jacket.

“I better go. My unit’s reconnaissance is due to start at 22:00 hours.”

“You should ask your family to send you a new-fangled wrist watch in your next parcel. It’s impractical to pull out a pocket watch while you’re holding a machine gun.”

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Upon returning from no man’s land, Blaine informs Major Ashmore of the enemy’s position, and the extent to which his unit was able to cut their barbed wire. Although the darkness cloaked their presence, the work was dangerous, as the Germans also sent units out at night.

Blaine crawls into his bed as the sun starts to rise. He has an uneasy feeling - the Germans have made advances towards them since the previous night. Blaine reaches for his jacket, and takes the photograph of Kurt out of the leather envelope in his jacket’s breast pocket. It seems a lifetime ago that they were at the photography studio in Exeter. Blaine gently kisses the photograph before returning it to his jacket, and quickly falls to sleep, dreaming about Kurt.

Blaine feels someone shaking his body, and wakes up to see Private Larson by the side of his cot.

“Lieutenant!, Lieutenant! You’ve got to wake up! Private Hudson has been shot! He’s in the dressing station at the bearing post.”

Blaine quickly dresses and follows the private to an old barn, which is now being used by the Royal Army Medical Corps. His heart races to think of what could have possibly happened to Hudson. He’s got to be alive, he can’t die.

“I’m here to see Private Hudson,” Blaine states to a nurse when he rushes into the ward.

“Please have a seat while I get Lieutenant Robertson. He just finished operating on Private Hudson.”

Blaine feels slightly agitated and anxious sitting in the stiff chair, and he starts jiggling his leg. He feels responsible for Hudson’s well-being. How could he tell his parents, Cousin Rachel, and Mrs
Hudson that he has failed Hudson? Wasn’t it his responsibility to keep Hudson safe? More importantly, he’ll miss him.

After a 30-minute wait, a red-headed medical officer appears from behind in the doctor’s area. “Lieutenant Anderson?”

Blaine jumps up and greets the doctor, “How is Private Hudson? Tell me everything.”

Lieutenant Robertson leads Blaine to a quiet corner. “Private Hudson is doing fine. A bullet was lodged in his left thigh, but I was able to remove it. He’s slowly waking up in the recovery room. He keeps babbling, asking for Mr Blaine. I presume that is you?”

Blaine nods. “We’re both from Westerville in Devon and I’ve known him since we were young lads. His mother is the abbey’s housekeeper. Will he be able to walk afterwards?”

“I don’t think there will be long-term damage, but it will take some time for him to recover,” the doctor replies.

Blaine’s body sags with relief. “Thank goodness.”

Robertson examines the medical record once again. “This type of gunshot wound can be tricky. I’m recommending that he leaves the cavalry at once.”

“Will he be returning home soon?”

“Private Hudson shot himself through the thigh with his rifle. Major Ashmore will need to make a full enquiry first to decide if it was a genuine accident… or a deliberate act of cowardice. The outcome will determine whether Private Hudson is sent back home or if he’s imprisoned.”

Blaine is shocked that the cavalry would even suspect Hudson of cowardice. He’s proven his bravery more than once during the war, transporting supplies, horses, and officers under the most horrific circumstances.

“Can I see him now?” Blaine asks.

“Once Private Hudson is fully awake, Major Ashmore will need to see him at once. Private Hudson is allowed one person in the room with him during the questioning.”

“That will be me,” Blaine replies with confidence. Under the circumstances, he’s the best person to defend Hudson. After all, an officer’s judgement of character should go a long way to help Hudson’s case.

Blaine sits in the corner, trying to keep out of the RAMC’s way. Although there is no enemy shooting this morning, there are plenty of cases of soldiers with painful foot conditions. Not for the first time, Blaine is thankful that his father bought him the best boots before the war.

Blaine twists the ring on his finger, wondering what Kurt is doing at this very moment. He’s surely somewhere safe and more comfortable than an old barn somewhere in France. Is Kurt thinking of him? Missing him? Loving him? Blaine drifts off to sleep with thoughts of his lover comforting him during this ordeal.

“Lieutenant Anderson? I understand that you are to join me in the recovery room to visit Private Hudson.”

Blaine opens one eye and immediately jumps up when he sees Major Ashmore before him.
“Yes, Major Ashmore,” Blaine answers, and gives a hand salute. “I was on last night’s reconnaissancemission and didn’t return until 4 a.m. I was just getting some shut eye before the afternoon drills.”

“We all get sleep when we can,” the major replies. “So, what about this Private Hudson? Have you had any dealings with him?”

“I certainly have, Major Ashmore. We’ve known each other for the past ten years, since his mother became the housekeeper at Westerville Abbey. Before enlisting in the cavalry, he was the family’s chauffeur. I can vouch for his honesty and integrity.”

Major Ashmore rubs his chin. “Do you have specific examples of this while Private Hudson has been in the cavalry?”

“Private Hudson forms part of the transportation unit, and his immediate officer thinks he does a sterling job. He has a way of fostering camaraderie amongst the men. He is quite keen to help out in any way he can. Although not required, Private Hudson volunteered to learn about fighting tactics and guns. If he didn’t like it, he could have always returned to his expected duties without recompense. It wasn’t necessary for him to inflict a self-wound to stop firing guns. I’m certain he would have spoken to me if he was unhappy.”

“I see what you mean, Lieutenant Anderson. There are easier and more logical ways for Private Hudson to not fight on the front. I don’t think this interview will take very long,” Major Ashmore decides.

Lieutenant Robertson leads Blaine and the major into the recovery room, where Private Hudson is sitting up and sipping water. His eyes light up. “Mr Blaine, thank goodness you are here. The medics are saying that I’m a coward, and that’s why I shot myself in the leg. It’s simply not true!”

“That’s Lieutenant Anderson to you,” the major states.

“Major, if it’s all right by you, I’m comfortable with Hudson calling me Mr Blaine. I’m here as his friend and not as his immediate commander.”

When the major nods once, Blaine decides to take control of the interview, knowing that it’s the easiest way to get to the bottom of what happened. He turns to Hudson. “I can’t tell you how relieved I am that you’re all right. The doctor assures me that you’ll make a full recovery. Hudson, I want you to take a deep breath and let me know what happened.”

“The first thing that Captain Duval does during riflery training is to inspect our weapons. He expects us to clean our rifles between drills. He always goes on about how residue build-up affects the gun’s performance somehow.”

“That’s right, Hudson. You are a very good listener. So…” Blaine prompts.

Hudson wipes a few beads of sweat from his brow and he takes a few deep breaths before continuing. “I got up extra early this morning to clean my rifle real good. I wanted it to be the cleanest in the unit, and show the others that I’m a Westerville man, too. I was adding a few drops of oil, but it leaked all over the gun. My hands accidently slipped and I shot myself.”

“Did you forget the most important lesson about cleaning a rifle?” Major Ashmore asks.

Hudson lowers his head in shame. “I forgot to unload the ammo. I’m really sorry, Major Ashmore. It won’t happen again. As soon as my leg heals, I’ll prove that I’ve learnt my lesson, and I’ll be the very best fighter. In the meantime, I’ll clean all the officers’ rifles.”
Major Ashmore says, “Let this be a lesson to all our men about the importance of cleaning their weapons the correct way. Unfortunately, Private Hudson, you won’t be at the front to prove your worth. You’re homebound to take care of that leg. I’m satisfied that the self-injury truly was an accident.”

Hudson sits up straight. “It doesn’t seem right that I get to go home because I did something stupid.”

Blaine immediately steps into the conversation once again. “Nonsense, Hudson. Up until this morning, you have been an exemplary soldier. You’ve got a nasty injury and you need to go back to Westerville to allow it to heal.”

Blaine turns to the doctor and asks, “When will Hudson be able to leave the front?”

Lieutenant Robertson frowns. “We’re one horse down for the ambulance at the moment. Once a horse is reallocated to the RAMC, we’ll be able to transport the wounded men out of the front to the closest Casualty Clearing Station. We’ll need to wait until the next batch of horses bring ammunition and supplies to the front. And then they’ll need to rest for a bit. It’s a darn shame because there are men who need more medical attention than we can give here.”

Blaine chews his bottom lip, his mind reeling with thoughts about how to get the horse-drawn ambulance to depart as quickly as possible. He must do everything that he can to ensure that Hudson gets the best treatment and makes a full recovery. He suddenly gets an idea that makes perfectly good sense for everyone.

“Would the ambulance leave immediately if I was able to find the RAMC a horse?” Blaine asks.

Lieutenant Robertson nods. “If you can find us a horse, Lieutenant Anderson, then the ambulance could leave just before dawn tomorrow.”

“Major Ashmore, could I offer my horse so that the RAMC has a full complement for the ambulance? Perhaps my horse could return to Westerville with Private Hudson?”

“Won’t you need Firebird?” Hudson interjects.

“A few men in the regiment have died, leaving their horses available. I’ll just use one of them,” Blaine explains.

Major Ashmore adds, “It’s not yet official but several units will soon be dismounted and turned into infantry. I’m afraid your unit is one, so it’s a sensible idea, Lieutenant Anderson.”

“I thought that was a temporary measure, major,” Blaine replies.

“More men are needed on the front lines. Every available soldier is digging trenches to secure our position. This war is being fought unlike any war has before.”

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After tactical training, Blaine washes the best that he can with the small basin of iced-cold water. He lathers up his soap and the smell of sandalwood takes him back to Westerville, where Kurt would scrub his back with a loofah. Oh, what wouldn’t he do to be pampered like that again...

When he’s finished washing, he dresses and sits at the table. He sets out his writing paper and pen, with the purpose of writing letters for Hudson to take home. He pulls out a leather travel wallet which contains photographs from back home, and finds the one of Kurt. He gently caresses Kurt’s
face with his finger, being careful not to damage the photograph. With a wistful heart, he picks up the pen and starts to write.

My darling K,

_You are probably shocked that I sent Firebird back with Hudson, but this war is no place for a horse._

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**Chapter End Notes**

I’ve done a lot of research on WW1 for this story, although it’s not a comprehensive account of the Great War. If there is something factually incorrect, please let me know (preferably by a message on Tumblr).
Trivia: The British Army Postal Service dispatched two billion letters and 114 million parcels over four years during World War 1. News and gifts from loved ones were the principal way the soldiers kept motivated and their morale high. I’d like to think the post contained letters and parcels between Kurt and Blaine.

Many thanks to Datshitrandom on Tumblr, who created the two photos at the end of the chapter. Please go here to give her love and/or reblog.

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I also thank Dblmalfun, who performed a detailed final review, although all mistakes are mine.

Next up: Private Hudson returns to Westerville Abbey.
A Soldier's Return

June 1915, Westerville
Kurt

The butler looks out the window and notices a Royal Army truck starting up the long drive. “Kurt, please go outside and wait for the truck. I’ll go get His Lordship and the family. They’ll want to hear any news immediately.”

“Yes, Mr Hummel.”

Kurt notices that Mrs Hudson is also in the hallway and she scurries downstairs. Kurt goes out the main entrance and waits for the truck’s approach. His stomach twists in knots as the truck comes into full view. It doesn’t have the white cross painted on its side, so it can’t be a RAMC truck with new patients for the abbey. It’s a regular army truck with some kind of trailer. He wonders if it has one of the Westerville men coming home on leave… or something worse.

By the time the truck comes to a stop, a crowd has gathered at the front of the house. The Anderson family are on the bottom step, while the servants are waiting on the drive. Dr Roberts stands in the distance - he was brought out of retirement to become the manager of the Westerville Abbey hospital ward.

Kurt swiftly moves to open the front door to allow the army sergeant to climb out of the truck. Two soldiers jump out of the back seat and unhitch the trailer. They open the truck’s rear door and climb in. Kurt holds his breath until he can see who is inside, and whether he’s dead or alive.
When the soldiers come back out, they are lifting a stretcher, with Mr Hudson lying on it. Kurt is very relieved to see that he’s most definitely alive.

“Mother?” Mr Hudson calls out.

Mrs Hudson rushes over to the stretcher and bursts out in tears. “Finn, whatever happened?”

“I accidentally shot myself while cleaning my rifle. I’ve been sent home for good.”

“Where should I take him?” one of the soldiers asks.

“Take him to the ward and see that he gets the very best bed,” the Earl orders.

Dr Roberts steps forward. “We only cater to officers, My Lord.”

The Dowager Countess scowls, “Dr Roberts, I’m no Jacobean revolutionary, nor do I seek to overthrow the civilized world. We just need one bed for a young man from this estate.”

“If it were within my power, you should have it, My Lady. I’m very sorry. Really. But this is a military hospital, and it’s not up to me to challenge the order of things,” Dr Roberts replies.

Miss Berry interrupts, “I’ll nurse him. I’d be happy to. Hudson won’t add to your workload.”

Dr Roberts shakes his head. “If I were to break the rule for you, how many others do you think would come forward to plead for their sons? The answer is, and must be, no.”

Mercedes leans toward Kurt and whispers, “It’s not right.”

“No, it bloody well isn't,” Kurt replies. His hands tighten into fists, angry at the doctor. Doesn’t he realize that Mr Hudson has just returned from the front? That the Hudson family are part of the very fabric of the Westerville estate?

The Dowager Countess gives the doctor a frosty look before turning to the family and remarks, “It always happens. When you give these little people power, it goes to their heads like strong drink.”

The Earl clears his throat and everyone turns their attention to him.

“This is foolish nonsense. You seem to forget that this is my house, and therefore, my word is law here. I don’t care about the RAMC’s protocol. He’s a Westerville man, and we take care of our own. If you have a problem with this, Dr Roberts, then take it up with your superior. But I won’t budge on this matter, and I’ll speak to the RAMC colonel-in-chief if I have to. Did you know that Prince Arthur and I fought side-by-side during the Boer War?”

Dr Roberts takes off his cap and wipes his brow. He nods and signals to the soldiers to bring the stretcher through the main entrance. Spratt leads the soldiers into the abbey with Mrs Hudson by her son’s side, clutching his hand as if she’ll never let go.

Kurt notices another soldier open the back of the trailer. Once a makeshift ramp has been set down, Firebird walks out onto the drive. Kurt is stunned to see Mr Blaine’s horse returned to Westerville. When the truck doors are once again closed, it’s obvious that Mr Blaine has not returned alongside his horse.

When Kurt hears the Dowager Countess cry out, he turns and notices her starting to teeter. He quickly goes to her side and links their arms to keep her from falling.

After a few moments, the Earl finally asks the question that is on everybody’s mind. “Where is
Lieutenant Blaine Anderson?"

“I believe that Lieutenant Anderson is still on the front. I only had orders to return his horse and
Private Hudson.”

“We would’ve received a telegram if anything had happened to Blaine, wouldn’t we?” the
Countess asks tentatively.

“One thing at a time. I’ll ring the War Office immediately,” the Earl replies. Before he enters the
abbey, he turns around. “Kurt, please take Firebird to the stables at once. Have Wesley look him
over for any possible injuries, and report back to me.”

“Yes, My Lord,” Kurt replies.

He takes Firebird’s lead and makes a cursory check of the horse, relieved when he doesn’t find any
obvious injury. The horse nuzzles into his neck, and Kurt thinks that he’s just as affectionate as his
owner.

As Kurt slowly leads Firebird to the stables, he considers what it might mean for Firebird to have
come back home without Blaine. Surely, if Blaine was injured, he would have come home with Mr
Hudson. But what if Blaine’s injury was so bad that he couldn’t be transported? Or even worse,
what if Blaine is dead?

Tears well in Kurt’s eyes at the possibility. They’ve been apart for so long, and now there’s
nothing. Kurt clenches his jaw, wanting so much to be at the front, and rip apart every German
with his bare hands.

“Who do we have here? That’s Firebird!” Wesley exclaims when Kurt enters the stable.

Kurt looks up at the stable boy and nods.

“Where’s Mr Blaine? Has something happened to him?” Wesley asks.

“We don’t know. Mr Hudson was injured and was sent home with Firebird. His Lordship is
currently talking with the War Office on the telephone. He wants you to look over Firebird for
injuries and report back to him.”

Kurt sits down on a hay bale, his body trembling as tears start to pour down his cheeks.

Wesley sits down next to Kurt and throws an arm around him in silence, until the sobs turn to
sniffles. “Surely, the Andersons would have heard if something had happened to Mr Blaine.”

“It’s the uncertainty that is getting to me,” Kurt mutters.

Wesley rubs circles on Kurt’s back.

“Why don’t you return to the abbey and find out the news? I’ll check out Firebird thoroughly and
join you over there to give His Lordship my findings.”

Kurt nods and stands up. Before he leaves, Wesley adds, “Make sure you let me know one way or
another as soon as you find out.”

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Kurt paces to and fro in the corridor, his eyes fixed on the study’s closed door. The family have
been there for half an hour. Surely, if it was good news, they wouldn’t take so long.
When he sees his father enter the corridor, he says, “I can’t wait any longer to hear news of Mr Blaine.”

“We all feel that way, Kurt. I’ll ask His Lordship directly,” the butler replies.

Mr Hummel knocks on the door and enters the study, where the family is gathered. “Ahem. I beg your pardon, My Lord, but we're all very anxious to know the news of Mr Blaine.”

“Yes, of course. Gather the servants, and I’ll be downstairs in five minutes.”

Mr Hummel leaves the study, where Kurt is waiting impatiently. “Call everyone to the servants’ hall at once! His Lordship will explain what he’s found out about Mr Blaine.”

Kurt rushes to gather everyone, pleased that Wesley is also downstairs. When the Earl enters the servants’ hall, the staff stand up.

“Please sit, everyone. The good news is that Blaine is alive and well. He’s still with his unit on the front somewhere in France. It seems that his brigade was dismounted and now forms part of the Royal Army’s infantry.”

Kurt looks up and sighs with relief. At last, he has confirmation that Blaine is still in one piece. He wants to shout for joy and cry at the same time but knows that he needs to keep himself together.

“But why would the Royal Army dismount a perfectly good cavalry officer like Mr Blaine? Have they lost their senses?” Mrs Sylvester asks.

The Earl musters up a weak smile for the cook. “That’s an excellent question, Mrs Sylvester. This Great War is like no other. The soldiers have already seen machine guns that automatically fire bullets in rapid succession for as long as the trigger is pressed. And even though chemical gases have been used in warfare before, it’s never been on the scale we’re seeing the Germans use it now. I, for one, am glad that Blaine isn’t on Firebird and in the line of fire.”

“But why is Firebird back at Westerville, My Lord?” Wesley asks.

“Hudson told me that Blaine was fearful for Firebird’s future. Horses that aren’t assigned to a cavalry unit are used like pack mules to transport supplies. Blaine saw an opportunity to get Firebird back to Westerville, and he took it.”

“And how about Mr Hudson?” Mr Hummel asks.

“It appears that a few days ago, Hudson was wounded while cleaning his gun. The bullet was removed in the field hospital, but it will take some time for Hudson to fully recover. A comprehensive investigation of the shooting concluded that it was an accident. Hudson’s war record is exemplary, and he’s been given an honorable discharge.”

Mr Hummel is pleased with this news about Mr Hudson. He knows that this will calm Mrs Hudson’s fears about her son’s fate and make her proud. “I might’ve known. We couldn't be the only household left untouched by this Great War.”

Once the Earl has left the servants’ hall, Mercedes turns to Kurt and asks, “Can you walk with me to the church this afternoon?”

“If you want me to,” Kurt replies.

“I do, because I'd like to say a prayer for them. For both of them.”
Although Kurt doesn’t believe in God, he’s happy to accompany Mercedes to the village church. He’ll use that time to consider how fortunate he is that his lover is alive and still in one piece.

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Two days later...

Kurt can’t wait any longer.

He’s deliberately avoided Mr Hudson’s bed in the abbey’s patient ward for the past two days. There have been too many people clucking around Mr Hudson already. Kurt still reads to injured officers at night, but has avoided the crowd surrounding the abbey’s favorite soldier. He chuckles to himself when he recalls the conversation between Miss Berry and Mrs Hudson he overheard the first night.

*Miss Berry inspects Mr Hudson carefully.* “I should wash him. This bit can be grim. Sometimes we have to cut off the clothes they’ve travelled in, and there’s bound to be a lot of blood.”

“I can do that, Miss Berry. After all, I am his mother. There’s nothing that I haven’t seen before,” Mrs Hudson retorts.

“But I’m training as a nurse,” Miss Berry counters.

“Training is the operative word here, Miss Berry.”

“How will I perform my duties at the front if I don’t get practical experience beforehand? And I did promise Dr Roberts that I would tend to Hudson personally. Now, please get me some hot water.”

Mrs Hudson sighs. “How hot should the water be?”

“Warm more than hot. And bring some towels as well,” Miss Berry orders.

Kurt can still remember the look on Mrs Hudson’s face when she had to follow Miss Berry’s orders. Miss Berry has hardly moved from Mr Hudson’s bedside since.

“Good evening, Mr Hudson. Miss Berry, why don’t you take a break?”

Miss Berry shakes her head. “I’ve learnt that it’s very important to not leave a patient alone when he’s first wounded so no sign goes unnoticed. The RAMC can't spare a nurse to watch over every man.”

“But I can do that for a bit,” Kurt suggests.

Miss Berry rubs her chin, mulling it over. “Well, I would kill for a bath. Are you sure you don’t mind sitting with him?”

“He won’t be alone. Not for a moment. I promise,” Kurt replies.

Mr Hudson springs to life. “Miss Berry, before you go, could you sing me a song?”

Miss Berry beams at Mr Hudson’s request. She goes to a patient whose face is partially bandaged, and Kurt can hear them whispering. The patient nods and sits down at the piano, and Miss Berry starts singing.

*They were summoned from the hillside*
They were called in from the glen,
And the country found them ready
At the stirring call for men.

Not for the first time, Kurt wonders if staying at the home front is the right decision. Although he doesn’t relish the grim realities of war, he wants to do his part, too.

Keep the Home Fires Burning,
While your hearts are yearning,
Though your lads are far away
They dream of home.
There’s a silver lining
Through the dark clouds shining,
Turn the dark cloud inside out
Til the boys come home.

When the song is over, Kurt notices the dopey smile on Mr Hudson’s face. Miss Berry looks over to Mr Hudson and blows him a kiss before leaving the ward. It’s plain as day that they are in love.

Mr Hudson sighs, “Miss Berry has such a beautiful voice. I missed it so much while I was away.”

“How are you doing? Is there anything I can do for you?” Kurt asks.

“I’m okay. My leg hurts a lot, but the pain gets milder each day. I feel stiff after being in a bed for so long, but Miss Berry gives me regular massages. The only thing I need right now is some male company. I’ve got Miss Berry and my mother clucking around me all the time. Sometimes, it can get a bit too much.”

“I can certainly believe that. I’m glad I’ve finally got you alone, Mr Hudson. Please tell me everything - and I mean everything - about Mr Blaine.”

Mr Hudson chuckles. “I’m surprised that you’ve waited two days to talk to me. Mr Blaine is perfectly fine. A bit thinner now that he’s not eating those fancy meals at the abbey. I’ve always known that Mr Blaine was short, but I hadn’t realized how tiny he is.”

“Is he getting the care packages from Mrs Sylvester?”

“He certainly is, but you know Mr Blaine - generous to a fault. He shares slices of fruitcake with his men. Mr Blaine is very popular with his unit, and it’s not just about the food. He’s taken the time to get to know each soldier individually. He’s there for them when they’re scared or sick and cheers them on when there is good news from home. Every one of his soldiers would gladly put himself on the line to protect Mr Blaine. His unit is considered the battalion’s finest. The colonel has spoken to the brigadier-general, and they plan to promote Mr Blaine at the very first opportunity.”

“I didn’t peg you as the sort of man who eavesdrops,” Kurt teases.

“It was my job to drive the officers around! They talk about all sorts of things in the truck. I keep my mouth shut but my ears open.”

“So what’s it really like on the front?” Kurt asks.

“The fighting is horrific. The Fritzes have machine guns that can kill so many men in the space of seconds. The soldiers on both sides are digging trenches to keep safe. There’s a no man’s land that separates them, and it’s very slow to advance.”
“What are the trenches like?”

Mr Hudson shudders. “You don’t want to know, Kurt. It gives me nightmares. If the soldiers aren’t fighting or training, they are bored stupid.”

“Did you see Mr Blaine a lot?”

“Every day,” Mr Hudson confirms.

“Did he ever mention me?” Kurt asks.

“All. The. Time. I can always tell when Mr Blaine receives a letter from you - he has an extra spring in his step. And Kurt - he never ever takes off that ring.”

Kurt twists the promise ring on his finger. “I never take it off either.”

“Kurt, can you get me my kit bag?”

Kurt grabs the bag from under the bed and deposits it on Mr Hudson’s lap.

Mr Hudson takes a bulky envelope out. “Mr Blaine gave me loads of letters to bring back with me. I’ve delivered all but one.”

Kurt takes the offered envelope. “Thank you, Mr Hudson. You don’t know how much Mr Blaine’s letters mean to me.”

“Oh, I think I do. Now go and read it. I see Miss Berry by the entrance.”

Kurt rushes downstairs and barges into the butler’s study. “Mr Hudson just gave me a letter from Mr Blaine! With your permission, I’d like to ride Firebird and read it in private.”

The butler consults the clock on the wall. “Very well, Kurt. If anyone asks, I’ll inform them that you are exercising Firebird. Make sure you’re back in time to serve the afternoon tea.”

After grabbing a few apples, Kurt races to the stable, saddles up Firebird, and walks the horse to the fields. Confident that Firebird is fine, Kurt changes the gait to a gentle trot. Kurt laughs when he realizes that Firebird is leading him to the lake. When they get to the special spot, Kurt dismounts Firebird and retrieves the apples from the saddlebag. Firebird could use some fattening up a bit.

He takes out the blanket and sits by the old oak tree. He opens the envelope and is surprised when Blaine’s pocket watch falls onto his lap. He opens the letter and reads.

My dearest K,

You are probably shocked that I sent Firebird back with Hudson, but this war is no place for a horse. I’m not even sure if it’s a place for any sane man. I spend most days overseeing my unit digging ditches and doing other things without Firebird. The only good that has come from Hudson returning home is that I was able to arrange for Firebird to join him. Please make sure that Wesley exercises him each day. I would also like to think that you would ride him as you inspect the tenant farms.

I enclose my beloved pocket watch for you. It’s not very practical in the field - my hands are too busy gripping a machine gun. It’ll take some time to get used to my new wristwatch. It’s not a thing of beauty, but it is infinitely more sensible. The pocket watch is for you to keep. I like the idea of
something of mine that no-one else can see being close to you.

My mother sent me a photograph of Michael Devon, and he really does look like Cooper. It’s hard to believe that he’s already three months old, and I haven’t met him. Now that he’s no longer a newborn, it looks like the Westerville estate has its male heir. Let’s hope he’s the first of many sons for Cooper and Quinn! To be honest, I’m rather relieved that the pressure is off to produce an heir. I can’t imagine being intimate with anyone else but you. I’ll still be expected to marry a wife with a sizeable dowry to keep the Westerville estate financially secure. Sometimes I wish a leprechaun would appear with a pot of gold. Wouldn’t that be grand!

My days and nights are filled with activities surrounded by people, yet I’ve never felt so lonely in my life. Captain Duval is the very best of friends, but I have secrets that I can’t reveal to him, or anyone else for that matter. It’s only when I’m with you that I feel I can be my true self and share those carefully guarded secrets. The only thing that is getting me through each day is the hope - no, the certainty - that we’ll be together one day.

Do you remember my shirt that you wore the night before I left for war? I sleep with it next to me each night. If I press my nose into it, I can smell you. I know it’s sounds silly, but it’s one other way I can still feel connected to you.

I love you fearlessly and forever,

B

xoxoxo

Chapter End Notes

Song Rachel Berry sings - “Keeping the Home Fires Burning” performed by John McCormack (1914)

Trivia: World War One sparked the invention of plastic surgery. Shrapnel was the cause of many facial injuries, and unlike the straight-line wounds inflicted by bullets, the twisted metal shards produced from a shrapnel blast could easily rip a face off. Horrified by the injuries he saw, surgeon Harold Gillies, took on the task of helping victims and pioneered early techniques of facial reconstruction in the process.

Want to see the photo of Kurt, which Blaine has in his breast pocket? Blaine in the trenches? Datshitrandom on Tumblr created some incredible artwork for some of the recent chapters. I’ve gone back and included them in the relevant chapters, but here are the links to Kurt’s photo and Blaine in the trenches. Please give her love and/or reblog.

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I also thank Dblmalfunction, who performed a detailed final review, although all mistakes are mine.

I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: Kurt makes an important decision.
June 1915, Westerville
Kurt

Kurt’s body sags with relief after reading Blaine’s letter. It’s one thing for the War Office to report that Blaine is alive and well, but it’s comforting to read the words from Blaine himself. Not for the first time, Kurt wishes that he could do something more to help Blaine.

He knows that his efforts on the home front are helping to feed the troops, but somehow it doesn’t feel like enough. Not when his love is on the battlefront, attacking the Germans. He’s a strong young man and should be fighting for his country. He already finds people staring at him and whispering when he’s in the village. He wants to shout that he’s not a coward. That his father is recovering from a near fatal heart attack... That the Westerville estate needs him to increase their food production for the troops...That his lover needs him safe so that he can focus on the war.

There are countless reasons why he’s still on the home front, but none of them feel right when he’s reading a letter from Blaine.

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Miss Lopez looks ups from her Photoplay magazine. “I don’t see why I have to look after Lady Quinn’s baby. All Master Michael ever does is cry, eat, and poop. And drool… How could I forget the drooling? When are his blooming teeth going to grow in?” Miss Lopez complains.

Mercedes rolls her eyes. She’s still the one who looks after Master Michael every night. And while Miss Lopez changes his nappies, she’s responsible for boiling and sanitizing them.
“There are a lot worse jobs that you could be doing. Think of the men on the front.”

“Times are changing, and I could have a new life somewhere else.” Miss Lopez holds up her magazine on a double-page spread about Mable Norman. “She was nothing when she started, you know? Her father was a carpenter and they’d no money, and now she’s a shining film star. Can’t you look after Master Michael during the day?”

“I’m too busy planting vegetables in the gardens to take him on as well,” Mercedes replies.

Mrs Hudson interrupts, “Enough, Miss Lopez! How can you possibly complain when my Finn is convalescing upstairs in the ward?”

“At least he’s made it to upstairs,” Miss Lopez mutters under her breath.

Kurt has had enough of this conversation, which only highlights Miss Lopez’s lackadaisical ways. “I have some rather good news.”

“We could do with some good news. Go on and tell us,” Mrs Hudson urges.

“I’ve passed my driving test. Even though my lessons with Lady Quinn were rather interesting, to say the least, I’ve learnt enough to obtain my license.”

Mr Hummel smiles. “Kurt, that’s excellent news. The family has suffered for long enough with Lady Quinn’s driving, and who knows when Mr Hudson will be able to resume his driving duties. You’ll be the fill-in driver until Mr Hudson is ready.”

Kurt has noticed that his father tends to be in a rather good mood lately. Why, he’s even caught the butler humming a ditty as he was decanting the wine. And Mrs Hudson looks so happy it’s as if she’s walking on air. He wonders if this means what he thinks it does.

~~~

Kurt knocks on the study door before entering with the afternoon tea tray.

The Earl looks up from his papers. “Excellent timing, Kurt. I’m in need of a cuppa. There’s something I’d like to discuss with you.” The Earl looks at the RAMC officers that are working at their desks. “If you please, I’d like a few minutes alone.”

“Yes, Lord Anderson,” the officers reply, and they quickly leave the study.

“It seems more difficult each day to find a place in the abbey where I can be alone. I might have to resort to the stables,” the Earl laughs.

Kurt pours the tea and serves the Earl a slice of Victoria sponge cake.

“Dr Harrison is dropping not so subtle hints that Hudson will be well enough soon to be removed from the ward. He says that Westerville Hospital is overflowing with patients, and they need the beds here.”

“Surely others could be transferred out before Mr Hudson, My Lord?” Kurt asks.

“I agree, if it wasn’t for Rachel. She’s tirelessly tending to Mr Hudson, and spends each night sleeping on a chair by his bedside. I’m not comfortable with her spending nights in a ward filled with young men, no matter how injured they are.”

“I can see your point. There is a spare bed in my room now that Mr Evans is at war. Mr Hudson
could move in with me, and I could look after him at night,” Kurt offers.

“Thank you, Kurt, but that won’t be necessary. It was my first thought as well, to move Hudson to the servants’ sleeping quarters. However, when I mentioned that to Rachel, she adamantly disagreed. She said that Hudson still needs someone with nursing skills to look after him. And it wouldn’t do for her to sleep in the male servants’ sleeping quarters.”

“I’m not sure what to suggest,” Kurt replies.

“Rachel was quick to propose an alternative solution. She proposes that Mr Hudson take over Blaine’s bedroom. This way, she could tend to him during the night as their bedrooms are next to each other, without inconveniencing anyone else in the abbey.”

“B-But what about Mr Blaine?” Kurt asks.

The Earl replies, “This war will go on for far longer than any of us had hoped. By the time Blaine returns, Hudson should have made a complete recovery and be reinstalled in his room over the garage.”

“What about Mr Blaine’s things?”

“This is why I’m speaking to you, Kurt. Could you please pack his clothes and personal items in trunks, and have them stored in Mr Hudson’s room in the garage?”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“Very well then. When you leave, could you let the RAMC officers know they can return to the study?”

“Yes, My Lord.”

After passing the message on to the RAMC officers, Kurt goes to the storage room and retrieves two trunks. He enters Blaine’s bedroom and starts to pack his things. Each item he packs fills Kurt with memories - the outfits from the tailor in Exeter, the shaving brush, the top hat that was forgotten in the drawing room the night of the Westerville ball.

Even though Mr Hudson using Blaine’s bedroom is a temporary measure, it gives him an uneasy feeling. With Blaine’s things packed away, will he fade in everybody’s memory? Is this an omen that Blaine won’t return to Westerville Abbey?

Kurt has to hand it to Miss Berry. Her solution is ingenious. She now has a plausible excuse to be seen going in and leaving Mr Hudson’s bedroom at all hours of the night. Kurt knows that what will go on behind closed doors will be more than what nursing strictly entails.

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After completing his nightly duties, Kurt sits down on the old chair in the butler’s study, and carefully studies his father and Mrs Hudson. The housekeeper’s eyes sparkle and Kurt can practically see her body thrumming as she pours out the tea. His father is smiling as well, and his eyes don’t leave Mrs Hudson for a single second.

When Mrs Hudson smooths down her skirt and sits down on the sofa, his father says, “Kurt, we have some important news. Mrs Hudson has agreed to be my wife.”

Kurt can’t say that he’s surprised, but he smiles widely nonetheless, and gets up to give Mrs
Hudson a hug. “This is wonderful news. Congratulations to you both. Have you settled on a date yet?”

“No, not yet. There are a few logistics we need to work out first,” his father replies.

Mrs Hudson smiles. “I want a simple wedding, after the Sunday service, but your father wants a wedding like the family would do it, with a big reception. But most of all, I want to wait until Finn can walk me down the aisle.”

“Will you continue working at the abbey?” Kurt asks.

His father nods. “I told His Lordship our news this afternoon. He was very pleased for us.”

Mrs Hudson stands up. “I’ll leave you two to discuss the details. I’m going upstairs to tell Finn our good news.” Before leaving, she gives the butler a peck on the cheek, and Kurt thinks his father’s dopey smile is so sweet. He has never seen this side of his father before.

Mr Hummel turns his attention to his son once Mrs Hudson has left. “I wanted you to be the first to know, after His Lordship. I loved your mother so much... I never thought I would remarry. But I realized how lonely I was when Mrs Hudson came along. She’s been such good company, and I’ve slowly fallen in love with her. It was after my heart attack that I realized I’m not getting any younger, and someday you’ll be off living your own life.”

“I understand, Father. I really do. I can’t imagine being with anyone other than Mr Blaine, but I get lonely too. But mostly I feel so frustrated that I’m not doing my part in the war effort.”

“But you are, Kurt. Think of how much more food crops and dairy the estate is producing now,” Burt counters.

“That’s true, but now that the new system is in place, I’m not needed as much. I’ve given it a lot of thought, and I want to enlist.”

Mr Hummel stares at his son for a few moments and replies, “I’m not happy about it. I don’t want you to leave for the front. You’re my only child, and I can’t imagine losing you.”

“But I can’t keep living like this.”

Mr Hummel says, “I have to keep reminding myself that you are no longer a little boy. You’re a man now, and you need to do what feels right for you. Just promise me that before you come to a decision, that you’ll think it through and consider what Mr Blaine thinks about it as well.”

Kurt sighs. His father knows that Blaine doesn’t want him to join the military. He certainly doesn’t need either his father’s or Blaine’s permission to join the Royal Army, but he does need to think through all the factors before coming to a decision.

“I promise,” Kurt replies.

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“Kurt, I’ve written to the chemist and the bookshop in Exeter. You are now authorized to put purchases on the Anderson account,” the Dowager Countess reports.

Kurt, who is driving the Dowager Countess home from her outing in Exeter, glances in the car’s rear-view mirror and catches her eye. “Thank you, My Lady. Mr Blaine wants more soap and shaving cream, and he can never have too many books.”
After taking a left turn, Kurt remarks conversationally, “There were a lot of women coming out of
the town hall after today’s meeting.”

“Yes, the Women’s Institute’s numbers have increased ever since I agreed to be its patron. It’s the
curiosity factor of being in the same room as me. They probably all thought I was dead.”

“Do you think the WI is going to make a difference in the supply of food, My Lady?” Kurt asks.
He doesn’t know much about the newly-formed institute, but their objectives are to encourage
women to get involved in growing and preserving food.

“Absolutely. Women are desperate to help their men on the front in any way they can. Those sign-
up sheets you prepared are filled with names. The autumn crop will be harvested in no time at all.
There are plenty of women in this county who want to make sure that there is enough food for this
nation and our soldiers.”

Kurt is pleased that there will be enough labor in the fields and dairy farms. The Women’s Institute
seems a sensible way to manage the women’s efforts on the home front. He frowns when he
thinks that he’ll be the only young man still working at the Westerville estate.

“Kurt, why the glum face?” the Dowager Countess asks.

“I can’t enlist in the Royal Army due to my farmer classification, and neither my father nor Mr
Blaine wants me to.”

“Your father has no-one but you, and Blaine loves you. Of course they don’t want you to enlist.
Who can argue with them?

“So, I’m to stand by while the lads on the farms go to war? Even Sebastian is at the front in the
medical corps,” Kurt insists.

“Ha! That’ll come as a nasty shock,” the Dowager Countess chuckles.

“Oh, you can make fun of him, My Lady, but Sebastian is fighting for his King and country, and
I'm not.”

“Well, I daresay you won't have long to wait.”

“Well, I hope you're right.”

“Do you? Because I don’t. I hope very much that I am wrong. I’ve heard that the Royal Army now
recruits men with the special farmer classification.”

Kurt thinks this is very interesting news.

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As soon as he can, Kurt makes a trip to Exeter to buy things to send to Blaine. After making
numerous purchases at the chemist’s, he goes to the book shop. He decides not to buy anything too
deep and meaningful like Reflections on War and Death by Sigmund Freud or The Good
Soldier by Ford Madox Ford. Instead, he buys the latest novel by P. G. Wodehouse and Of Human
Bondage by Somerset Maugham.

When he exits the book shop, white feathers are thrown in his face.

“Where’s your uniform?” one woman sneers.
“You coward! Why don’t you enlist?” another shouts.

The handful of women jeering at him disappear when they find a new victim. Kurt brushes his jacket to make sure that all the feathers are off.

*I’m not a coward. I’m not a coward.*

Kurt heads to the recruitment office around the corner.

~~~

**One week later...**

Kurt packs a box with presents for Blaine. In addition to the toiletries and books, there’s cakes, dehydrated beef, chewing gum, hand-knitted socks, candles, and photographs. He takes a deep breath and starts to write the accompanying letter.

*My Dearest B,*

*You can’t imagine everyone’s shock when they saw Firebird exit the military truck without you. Your father immediately called the War Office to make sure you were alive and well. It was only your letter that reassured me that it’s true. I don’t know what I would do if you were to die before we saw each other again.*

*Mr Hudson is back home. His recovery is slow, but it’s made sweeter by Miss Berry’s round-the-clock attention. Miss Berry has now abandoned the idea of nursing at the war front. She’s decided that her efforts are best made at Westerville Abbey, tending to the injured soldiers. Sure, she still gives her nightly vocal performances in the ward, but her other time is spent exclusively with Mr Hudson. I can’t believe that nobody else realizes that they’re in love.*

*I have some good news. My father and Mrs Hudson are getting married! It’s wonderful to think that they have found love and happiness in their twilight years. It’s comforting to know that whatever I plan to do, my father will be looked after by someone who loves him.*

*No doubt that your grandmother has already written to you about her latest pet project, the Women’s Institute. I’m impressed by how the women are working together with the Ministry of Food to get food produced for this nation and its troops. Mrs Hudson is the WI’s manager for the Westerville estate. She’s an excellent choice - she’s smart, sensible, and is no stranger to hard work. Wesley is her assistant, and he’s teaching her about the different tenant farms on the estate. She already knows how to drive a tractor, so it won’t take her any time at all to learn how to drive a truck.*

*I’ve written to you before about this, but I feel I should be doing more for the war effort. The Women’s Institute overseeing the crops and dairies on the Westerville estate has made me rather redundant. Now that my father is healthy, and happy with Mrs Hudson, I’ve been giving a lot of thought to what I should do.*

*I understand your need to keep me safe, but I’m not a porcelain doll that is easily breakable. Although I’m someone special to you back home, I’m also a man. I have the same overwhelming need to protect those that I love, as you do. When I watch the newsreels at the village cinema each week, I want to fight for my country and loved ones as well.*

*I went to the Royal Army’s recruitment office last week and had an interesting talk with the officer from the Royal Flying Corps. I know that many military officers are sceptical about the use of aeroplanes in the war, but I’m convinced that they do help the troops, like yours, in the trenches.*
The RFC is mostly used for nighttime observation missions, collecting photographs of the enemy’s positions. There’s a risk that the enemy may spot them and shoot the aeroplane down. However, the RFC is currently equipping their aeroplanes with guns as well. And they use parachutes in the event they need to escape.

After passing a series of tests on my eyesight and reflexes, I enlisted as an RFC pilot. I did this with the knowledge that I won’t be on the front, but still helping and supporting you and the Royal Army. I leave tomorrow for a six-month training program somewhere in Great Britain that I can’t disclose (I’ve already had the lecture on writing specific locations in letters). Once completed, I’ll have a two-week leave, and then I’ll join the war efforts on the continent.

Your family and the staff at Westerville Abbey weren’t in the least surprised by my enlistment - although they were surprised that I’m going to be a pilot. Besides Wesley (who’s a Chinese citizen and therefore ineligible), I’m the only young male left on the Westerville estate. Your father had me go to the fancy shop in Exeter to buy the best boots they had on offer.

The good news is that I’ll be home for Christmas during my leave. My father and Mrs Hudson will get married on December 28th so that I can be the best man. By December, aren’t you entitled to some home leave as well? I’m planting the idea in your mind as you might mention December to your commanding officers. I really, really, really want to see you again before I leave for the continent.

Mr Hudson gave me several ideas about what to put in the parcel we’re sending to you. I hope you don’t mind, but it contains my aunt’s lavender soap that I use every day. I also enclosed an undershirt that I’ve slept in for the past week. I think you sleeping with my shirt is simply adorable. I’m taking the fancy sandalwood soap that you use with me to training. We can be hopeless romantics together.

I know my enlisting will worry you, and I’m sorry about that, but the truth is, it hurts every moment that I’m not doing my part in the war. Please know that I love you so much, and that this is exactly why I want to help the war efforts. Every man is needed to end this war as soon as possible.

You can write me care of the RFC and they will make sure that the letter is delivered to me.

I love you fearlessly and forever.

K

Xoxoxo

Chapter End Notes

Trivia: By the end of WW1, the Women’s Institute had helped raise Britain's food self-sufficiency from 35% in 1914 to over 60% by 1918. Nationally, they played a key role in promoting women’s suffrage, employment, and education rights, as well as healthcare, and child welfare.

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I also thank Dblmalfuction, who performed a detailed final review, although all mistakes are mine.
I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: A glimpse of Sebastian working as a RAMC medic on the front.
This chapter features Sebastian, who works in the Royal Army Medical Corps on the front. I’ve tried to balance keeping it realistic, but not very gory. There is mention of blood, wounded soldiers, men dying, and thoughts of self-inflicted injury. If you have any concerns, please send me a message on Tumblr or an email at VoyageAsia4@gmail.com. No anons please - I will only answer privately as I don’t want to spoil it for others.

There is a two-month time jump from the previous chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

September 1915, near Loos, France

Sebastian

“Corporal Smythe, use your hand to keep pressure on the wound! I don’t want him bleeding any more before I can apply the gauze.”

“Yes, sir!” Sebastian looks down at the soldier as he applies more pressure. He is relieved that this patient is unconscious. He can’t bear to see their terrified expressions. Soon, the gauze is wrapped around the soldier’s leg.

“Move him on out! Tell triage that he needs urgent attention.”

“Yes, sir!”

Sebastian and the other stretcher-bearer carry the wounded soldier through the trenches. There is still artillery fighting, so he keeps his head low, careful to avoid the soldiers that are still firing. Sebastian accidentally steps into a puddle and can feel the water seep into his boot. “Bloody hell!
There must be more to life than this!” Sebastian mumbles to himself.

*BOOM!*

A bomb explodes nearby, and knocks them off their feet, making them drop the stretcher. Sebastian lowers his head between his legs to avoid the dirt that is raining down into the trench. He’s breathing hard, but he tries to slow it down before he has another panic attack. He can hear the heavy footsteps of his immediate officer approaching.

“You all right, Corporal Smythe?”

“I think so. Yeah, I’m all right.” Sebastian opens his eyes and sees his sergeant check the soldier they dropped.

“He’s dead,” the Sergeant states.

“W-was it because we dropped him?” Sebastian asks with a trembling voice.

“That leg would have had to been amputated. I doubt that he would have made it through the surgery.”

A new round of German machine gunfire begins, and a soldier drops dead right in front of Sebastian. Not for the first time during this war, Sebastian wishes that he was anywhere else but in a bloody trench.

“Get these bodies away! Come on, Corporal Smythe!”

“Yes, sir!”

Twelve hours later, the firing ceases. Sebastian thinks it was pointless, because neither side has made any advance on their position. After he has lifted the last stretcher and placed it in the field ambulance, the Sergeant comes over.

“That’s the last stretcher for our shift. Get in the truck and head back to the Regimental Aid Post.”

“Yes, Sir, Sergeant Karofsky.”

When they arrive at the Regimental Aid Post, the other stretcher-bearers immediately go to the dormitory to sleep, but Sebastian knows he’s too wound up to fall asleep anytime soon. After retrieving his haversack, he heads to the mess tent to have a fag and a cup of tea.

Once the water has boiled, he fills the tin teapot and sits down at one of the empty tables. He takes off his boots and dries his feet with a rag. He’s seen enough trench foot to know what awful things can happen if he doesn’t keep his feet dry. Sebastian pours himself a mug of tea, takes a sip, and closes his eyes.

“You look very comfortable there, Corporal Smythe.”

Sebastian turns around and sees Sergeant Karofsky standing in front of him. He immediately jumps up and stands to attention, giving a hand salute.

“At ease, Corporal. We’re finished for the day.”

“I know a guy, who knows a guy…” Sebastian smirks.

“I bet you do.”

While Sergeant Karofsky prepares his tea by adding milk and two teaspoons of sugar into the mug, Sebastian takes a good look at him. He doesn’t know much about the new sergeant, who started working in his unit a few days ago, after the old sergeant was shot leaving the trenches.

Sebastian notices that Sergeant Karofsky is a big man - not only tall, but bulky like a rugby player. He looks a few years older than him - probably in his mid-twenties. At times, the Sergeant’s manner is gruff, but he certainly knows his stuff. He’s excellent at giving first aid in the field and managing the stretcher-bearers to transport injured soldiers to the bearer posts quickly.

Sebastian decides to start a conversation. “You won't believe it, but when I was back home, I thought, ‘Medical Corps. Not much danger there.’ How wrong can a man be?”

Sergeant Karofsky chuckles, “I think it comes down to luck. If a bullet's got your name on it, there's nothing you can do. If not, you thank God you're alive.”

“Ah, but to be alive in a trench? I’m not so sure,” Sebastian quips.

“The good news is that we'll be relieved by another unit. We have one week of training and work at the field hospital, one week on the front, and then one glorious week off for rest.”

Sebastian sighs, “I can’t wait. So, where are you from, Sergeant Karofsky?”

“Essex. Left school when I was 16 years old and became an orderly at the local hospital. I was interested in medicine, but hated emptying chamber pots and other shit like that. A couple of years later, the RAMC were recruiting in the area. They promised to train me as a medic, so I enlisted. That was a couple of years before the war.”

“Now I understand why you are so good at your job on the field. I know if I’m injured, I’d want you by my side, administering first aid.”

When Sergeant Karofsky’s cheeks pinken, Sebastian realizes that his remark came off as a bit flirty, but the Sergeant isn’t angry. How interesting...

“So, what’s your story, Corporal?” Sergeant Karofsky asks with a gruff voice.

“I’m from Devon. Like you, I left school when I was 16 years old, but I went into service. Started as the hall boy and worked myself up the ladder to become the first footman. I would have been promoted to valet if it weren’t for the war.”

“Good family?” Sergeant Karofsky asks.

“As good as upper-class families can be, I guess. I worked for the Earl of Westerville. The butler expects a lot, but he’s fair, I’ll give him that.”

Sergeant Karofsky slides his empty mug across the table. “I’m heading off to get some shut-eye. Thanks for the tea. Now that I know that you’re a footman, I’ll make sure that I crook my pinky finger when I next have a cup of tea with you.”

Sebastian laughs at the joke, and Sergeant Karofsky joins in. He can see the Sergeant’s eyes crinkle, and his face soften as his body shakes with hearty laughs. Sebastian wonders whether this is the Sergeant’s true character, a strong contrast to the one who barks orders in the trenches.
Sebastian knows one thing for sure: he wants to find out more about Sergeant Karofsky.

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Sebastian groans, “Please tell me that this is the last box we have to bring in. My back is killing me.”

Sergeant Karofsky inspects the back of the truck. “Yes, that’s the last of the delivery. Take ten, everybody, then meet me in the mess tent. We’ll practice bandaging.”

Although Sebastian prefers working in the field hospital to the trenches, the days are still long and tiring. They’re responsible for moving the injured to and from the hospital on stretchers, and bringing in new supplies that are delivered. Any spare time is spent training.

Sebastian uses the communal latrine before going to the mess tent. He sits down with the rest of the medics on one of the benches. Corporal Wilson, the unit’s Medical Officer, starts the training session.

“Time is of the essence. Your first aid must be quick so infection doesn’t set into the wound, so that the casualty doesn’t bleed to death. Their survival depends upon you to quickly get them to someone with specialized knowledge or with specialist equipment. Abdominal wounds, for example, need to be operated on within six hours in order for the patient to survive.”

Sebastian looks around the mess tent, and notices that many of the other medics aren’t paying attention, which is normal during Corporal Wilson’s long-winded lectures.

“We’ve adopted the French system of triage. Simply put, triage is a system for first responders to prioritize treatment of the injured. It’s our job to divide the injured into three groups. Slightly hurt soldiers receive immediate attention from you, and are sent back to fight. Those needing greater care are transported by you on stretchers, and taken to one of the field hospitals near the front lines. The last to be seen are soldiers deemed to be beyond help.”

Sebastian stifles a yawn. Corporal Wilson always starts his lectures with explaining triage.

“Attention!” Sergeant Karofsky shouts.

All the medics immediately stand to attention.

“I see some of you nodding off. This training could save lives. I want you to take a good look at the person next to you.”

“Yes, sir!” the men shout. Sebastian looks at the medic to his right.

“This man could be the one that saves your life. Do you want him sleeping during training?”

“No, sir!” the men shout.

“If I see anyone not paying attention, everyone’s pudding rations will be withheld for a week. At ease.”

Corporal Wilson interrupts, “Thank you, Sergeant Karofsky. Let’s get the supplies out and we’ll practice bandaging gunshot wounds to the legs.”

Sergeant Karofsky does a quick count. “We have an odd number. Corporal Smythe saw me do this the last time we were at the front. I’ll pair up with him and see how much he remembers.”
Sebastian picks up the supplies before approaching his Sergeant, who is lying down on the floor waiting for treatment. “The first thing I should do is rip your trousers to expose the wound, and use the carbolic lotion to wash your injury.”

“Let’s pretend that’s already done,” the Sergeant replies.

Sebastian pretends to soak the gauze in the carbolic solution.

“And what should you do if there is excessive bleeding?” Corporal Wilson calls out.

Sebastian uses both hands to apply pressure to the Sergeant’s upper thigh. He can feel the well-developed muscles flex against his touch. Sebastian can’t help but use his thumbs to gently stroke the area. It’s been nine months since he joined the RAMC, nine months of no sex. Lord knows he wants it - needs it - but buggery is a serious crime in the military.

“Now it’s time to wrap the gauze around the injured area. Make sure that it’s tight enough to stop the bleeding, but not too tight to cut off circulation,” Corporal Wilson instructs.

Their eyes lock together, and Sebastian carefully winds the gauze around the Sergeant’s thigh, making sure to smooth it down on every pass. And if his hand slips and moves further along the Sergeant’s leg, no one is the wiser. Although the Sergeant’s expression is unreadable, Sebastian can see his cock stiffening beneath his trousers. He smiles, knowing everything he needs to about Sergeant Karofsky’s sexual preference.

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At dusk, the RAMC unit piles into a truck, headed to the front. The infantry plans to make a move that night to advance their position. Sebastian is sitting next to Sergeant Karofsky along the bench, and he can feel his thick muscular thigh press against his.

“Do you hear from back home often?” the Sergeant asks.

“No, my parents can’t read or write. I do get regular care packages and letters from Westerville Abbey. Now you know how I get condensed milk and sugar. It’s hard to believe that the abbey has been turned into a convalescent hospital.”

“I bet the Countess teaches them to drink tea with their pinky finger crooked,” Sergeant Karofsky chuckles.

“I’m curious, Sergeant. Do you think I could ever get a transfer back to the abbey’s hospital, seeing as it’s war work?” Sebastian asks. He’s been trying to figure out how to get away from the front, and the abbey hospital might be the answer.

Sergeant Karofsky thinks about it before answering, “Well, you’d have to be sent home from the front first. And then you might have to pull a few strings. But no, you couldn’t get a transfer from the front to work at the abbey unless something happened to you.”

The truck stops, and the men get out. Sebastian puts on his helmet and throws his first aid haversack across his back. The fighting hasn’t yet started, so the medics take positions along the trench. Sebastian finds a lonely spot and lights a fag. The silence and waiting start to get to him. This could be his last day of his life.

If the British Army is making an offensive move, they’ll be ‘going over the top’ - climbing out of the trenches and keeping low, until they reach the enemy’s front line trenches, where they will attack them with rifles or bayonets. Sebastian’s been through this before, and there are so many
things that can go wrong. As soon as the soldiers are over the top, they’re in the enemy’s field of fire. Their machine guns can mow down hundreds of men in no time at all. There are also complex networks of barbed wire that are difficult to see in the dark. Sebastian shudders to think of the number of injured men he’s tried to release from the barbed wire with clippers from his haversack.

Sebastian hears a round of machine gunfire whistle above him. Pretty soon, he’ll have to go over the top himself to treat and retrieve the wounded soldiers. He can already imagine their wailing cries, their horrified faces, and mutilated bodies. And as usual, he’ll be a sitting target with no weapon. Machine guns can’t see the white cross insignia on his coat sleeve.

Sebastian startles when a rat races over him, scurrying to find a crumb to eat. This is a bloody nightmare. I can’t do it anymore!

He takes out another fag and his lighter. Before he flicks the flame, he gets an idea. It might be crazy, but if he did it, he wouldn’t have to go out there again, and he could return to Westerville Abbey. If he flicks his lighter and holds the lighter above the trench line, the enemy would surely shoot. His hand would be injured, and he would have to leave the RAMC.

His fingers tremble and it takes several attempts before the lighter has a flame. He slowly raises his hand and…

He feels someone grab his wrist and throw his arm down.

“Don’t do it,” Sergeant Karofsky hisses. “I know how you’re feeling, we all get tempted at one time or another. But it’s not worth it. You’re important, and I’m not going to let you do it to yourself.”

Sebastian’s body starts heaving, and he somehow manages to suppress the sobs caught in his throat. No one has ever told him that he’s important before. When his breathing returns to normal, he looks at Sergeant Karofsky and says, “Thank you.”

“Are you going to be all right, Corporal?”

Sebastian nods. In the distance, he can hear the command for the first unit to go over the top.

“Stay in the trenches and deal with the injured here. Under no circumstances are you to go over the top. Understood?”

“Yes, Sergeant Karofsky.”

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Sebastian sits alone at a corner table in a bistro, nursing his pint of beer. His unit has been given a week’s rest after seeing combat action in the Battle of Loos. They were dropped off in some nondescript town west of Loos - a place where British soldiers usually take their short leaves.

After filling their bellies with mediocre food and ale, the rest of the unit left for a well-known whore house. While they urged him to join them, Sebastian feigned fatigue. He knows that they won’t have whores that would cater to his sexual preference.

Sergeant Karofsky sits down next to him and slides a fresh pint of beer in front of him. They lift their mugs and say “Cheers” before taking a sip.

The Sergeant wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “That tastes so good. Where are the other lads?”
“They’ve gone to Madam Barbier’s around the corner. It seems that nobody wants to die a virgin,” Sebastian replies.

“What about you?”

“Do I look like a virgin?” Sebastian smirks. “Besides, Madam Barbier’s won’t have the type of person I’m looking for. Will you join them, Sergeant?”

Sergeant Karofsky shakes his head and takes another sip of beer.

Sebastian decides it’s time to make his move. He leans forward and whispers, “Do you like dick?”

“What’s it to you?” the Sergeant answers gruffly.

Sebastian licks his lips. “I think your dick could mean a lot to me, especially if it’s in my mouth...or ass...or both.”

Sergeant Karofsky quickly downs the rest of his pint of beer. He sets down the empty mug and stands up. He whispers, “Room 24,” before leaving the bistro.

Sebastian lights a fag and waits an additional 15 minutes so that no one can make a connection between the two of them. He returns to the hotel and climbs up the stairs. The corridor is quiet and Sebastian knows that the men won’t return until the early morning, when they’ve run out of money and the whores kick them out.

He knocks on the door to Room 24. When it opens, Sergeant Karofsky quickly pulls him in and slams him against the door. Clothing is quickly removed and flung onto the floor, and their entangled bodies flop onto the bed. Firm hands roam his body and make their way down to his ass. Sebastian wants this so badly, he feels like he’s about to burst. After quick and rough preparation, that’s just on the right side of pleasurable pain, Sebastian feels the blunt head of the Sergeant’s cock enter him and bottom out.

There’s no small talk - Sebastian’s ears are filled with panting and grunting, and the slap of balls against his ass. The Sergeant is pounding him into the mattress and the friction on his cock feels all sorts of right. Sergeant Karofsky pulls him up by the hips so that Sebastian is on all fours. The pounding intensifies as the Sergeant slams into Sebastian’s prostate with every thrust. It’s exactly what Sebastian needs. He needs to blot all wartime images from his head and just feel... to remember what it feels like to be alive. The Sergeant wraps his hand around Sebastian’s cock and strokes in time to the thrusts. Sebastian clenches his ass when he climaxes, and the Sergeant quickly follows suit.

Once the Sergeant withdraws his softened cock, he rolls over away from Sebastian. Soon after, snores are filling the room as the Sergeant settles into a deep sleep. They’ve had their release, and Sebastian knows it’s time to go. He’s not a silly romantic like Kurt and doe-eyed Mr Blaine. He quickly dresses and quietly limps out of the room.

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The unit stands at attention during Sergeant Karofsky’s morning inspection.

“I don’t understand why we’re repairing a bridge. It’s a job for the Royal Engineers,” Corporal Brown remarks.

“Just be glad that we’re not going to the front,” Sebastian whispers.
Sergeant Karofsky walks over to face Corporal Brown. “Some of the roads and bridges to the front have been destroyed. The Royal Engineers are stretched thin as it is, so the RAMC agreed to help out. Our work will help get ammunition and supplies to our boys in the trenches, who are fighting our enemy. Got a problem with that, Corporal Brown?”

“No, sir!”

“Good. Monroe, Brown, Thomas, McMurphy - you’ll be taking the new planks from the truck to the bridge. The rest of you will start prying old boards off the bridge.”

Sebastian joins the men walking toward the old wooden bridge. It doesn’t look fit enough for a pony and cart to cross over it. Wooden planks are dangling underneath, and one side railing has a large gap. He’s never been a fan of heights so decides to work beneath the bridge, just before the water’s edge.

Sebastian works for hours, systematically yanking wooden debris from the bridge and stacking them in a pile on the shore. He stops to wipe his brow - it’s hard work on a sunny autumn day. Sebastian suddenly hears a crack, then feels his head burst with pain, and cold water seeping through his clothes as he tumbles into the river.

A strong hand grabs Sebastian’s arm. “I’ve got you. Just relax your body so that I can pull you out.”

Sebastian looks up to see worry on Sergeant Karofsky’s face as he wades through the water, and pulls him back to the shore. Sebastian closes his eyes, and suddenly, there is darkness.

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Sebastian can hear activity around him, and he slowly opens his eyes. The lights hanging from the ceiling are blinding, so he closes them again. His head is pounding, and when he touches it, he feels the gauze wrapped around his forehead. He moans and a doctor immediately comes over.

“Corporal Smythe. Welcome back. You’ve been unconscious for five days. How many fingers am I holding up?”

“Two… or three? Don’t know. They’re... blurry. My head… It hurts. What happened?”

The doctor reads Sebastian’s chart. “Your unit was repairing a bridge when a soldier accidently dropped a plank over the side. It hit you, and it caused a serious head injury.”

“Huh,” Sebastian says, his head still spinning. “Will I… be okay?”

“Yes, but there are long-term effects, like the headache and dizziness you are currently experiencing. The most worrisome effect is delayed responsiveness. You must be 100 per cent alert to do your job as a medic. The RAMC has already approved an honorable discharge. You’ll be returning home as soon as you’re well enough to travel.”

A small smile forms on Sebastian’s face. He’ll never have to return to the front again.

Chapter End Notes

This is the only chapter in the story that doesn’t feature Kurt or Blaine.
Trivia: During World War I, triage was developed to handle the unprecedented waves of casualties pouring off battlefields. It’s estimated that on the Western front alone, the wounded that returned to the firing line, represented a manpower saved of 1,600,000.

Datshitrandom has created two wonderful manips for the previous chapter. One is of Cousin Rachel as a nurse, and the other is of Burt and Kurt. Please go check them out and give the artist some love.

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I also thank Dblmalfunctin HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: Blaine in the trenches.
There’s a mention of soldier becoming injured in this chapter - it’s not graphic at all. If you have any concerns, please send me a message on Tumblr or to my email at VoyageAsia4@gmail.com. No anons please - I will only answer privately.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

December 1915 - Ypres, Belgium

Blaine

“Are you ready to go, shrimpy? We’re due for our briefing in half an hour,” Captain Duval reminds him.

“Almost. I’ve just received a letter from my grandmother, and I want to read it first,” Blaine replies.

“You and your letters. I’m still trying to figure out who’s the mysterious ‘K’. Are you sure it’s not Lady Katherine Wilde?” Captain Duval asks, waggling his eyebrows.

Blaine scrunches his nose. “Absolutely not!”

When Captain Duval has left their sleeping quarters, Blaine carefully opens the envelope and takes out the letter. A photograph drops out, and Blaine picks it up and sees that it’s Kurt in his RFC uniform. Blaine’s heart races as he carefully takes in every inch of the photo. Kurt looks so handsome in the uniform. Kurt’s face has thinned out a bit, accentuating his jawline. His eyes are filled with determination, and Blaine realizes that Kurt looks like a man ready to join the war. He
adds the photograph to his leather travel wallet, to be studied in much more detail later, and begins to read his grandmama's scrappy handwriting...

20th November 1915

My dearest Blaine,

I had thought I would live out my last years visiting family and peacefully going about my business. How wrong I was! My days are a whirlwind of governors meetings at the village school, the Women’s Institute, and the Westerville Hospital. Your mother thinks that I’m the patron of too many organizations and insists that I hand over the Westerville Hospital to her. Over my dead body! What she doesn’t seem to appreciate is that I’m not a fragile old lady, and I’m more than capable of handling everything.

As you know, Sebastian returned to the abbey with a head injury. This week, he went back to work as a medic at the abbey’s hospital. I sometimes see him outside my bedroom window, helping men with artificial legs learn to walk again. I never took Sebastian to be a patient and caring sort of man. War can do strange things and change people in the most unpredictable ways.

I enclose a photograph of Kurt. Your mother insisted that it be taken before he left for the RFC. One copy is framed and sits proudly on the mantel with the other photographs of the Westerville men fighting in the war. Last week, I had Quinn drive me to Exeter. Whilst she was at her knitting circle, I made a visit to the photography studio. It was simple to order extra copies of Kurt’s photograph. I can be sneaky when I need to be!

Hummel receives regular letters from Kurt, who’s learning how to fly aeroplanes. You’ll certainly never find me in one of those contraptions. I like my feet close to the ground, thank you very much. After his leave next month, Kurt will be in the No 22 squadron stationed somewhere on the continent. You might want to find out if his squadron will be located near you.

I’m counting down the days (29) until you are returning to Westerville on home leave. Seeing you once again in one piece is the only Christmas wish I have. I’ve already formulated a plan on how you and Kurt can spend some alone time together. It’s foolproof! This time, I’ve really outdone myself, if that’s even possible.

Both Cooper and Evans also have home leave for Christmas. Hummel and Mrs Hudson plan to get married a few days after Christmas. I don’t usually bother attending servants’ weddings, but with all the Westerville men home, it’s a real cause for celebration. I’m counting on you to escort me to the church.

Stay safe, and God bless you.

Your ever-loving Grandmama

Blaine wipes a tear from his cheek. His grandmama writes faithfully every week. He checks the time (will he ever get used to his wristwatch?) and places the leather photo wallet and letter into his trunk.

Blaine hears a knock on the door and calls out, “Enter”.

Privates Larsen and Morris enter the room.

“Is your trunk ready, Lieutenant Anderson?” Private Larsen asks.

Blaine nods. “Yes, it’s filled with enough paperwork to last a lifetime.”
Blaine checks in at HQ and sits down with his fellow officers find out about what is going on at the front line.

Major Ashmore begins the briefing. “As you know, it’s been quiet on the front these past few weeks. I guess that Germans also have families and are preoccupied with plans for home leave at Christmas.”

Blaine laughs with the rest of the officers. It’s true that he’s been daydreaming about his home leave in a couple weeks’ time. It’ll be the first time he’ll be back at Westerville since the start of the war, and he can’t wait to see his family… and Kurt.

“Having said that, the Fritzes are still in their trenches just a few hundred yards away. There have already been two battles fought here, and there’s nothing to say that there won’t be another. Maintenance is the operative word during your time on the front line for the next few weeks. Your units will need to repair, deepen, widen, and strengthen the trench. In addition, you’ll be laying new barbed wire, and your captain has the plans for the positioning. There are new strategic areas that could very well entrap German soldiers. Any questions?”

The room is silent. Blaine counts his blessings that no fighting is anticipated.

“You’ll be in the front trench for eight days, then four days at the rest camp. Your captain has the duty roster.”

Blaine gets up and collects the relevant papers from Captain Duval. After reading the instructions to ensure that he understands them, he salutes Major Ashmore as he leaves.

“Lieutenant Anderson, I need to speak to you before you head to the front. Please take a seat until everyone has left.”

Blaine sits down again, wondering why the Major has singled him out. Once all the other officers are gone, Major Ashmore approaches him.

“I’m pleased to inform you that you’ve been promoted, Captain Anderson.”

“Thank you, sir!” Blaine cries out, delighted with the news.

“It’s well deserved, Captain Anderson. You’ve made the transition from cavalry to infantry quickly, and you’ve proven yourself time and time again on the battlefield.”

“Thank you, Major. Does this mean I’ll be transferred from the brigade?”

“To be honest, I don’t know. You’ll be informed during your home leave.”

“Major, if it’s all the same, I’d rather stay with this brigade. My men mean a lot to me and…”

“Understood, Captain Anderson. Now you better go find your unit on the front line.”

Blaine gives the major a salute. When he leaves the room, Captain Duval is waiting outside for him.

“Congratulations, Captain Shrimpy.”

“You know?” Blaine asks.

“Of course I know. I’ve got your new insignia in my pocket, and a needle and thread packed in my trunk,” Captain Duval replies.
A cold gust of wind blows, and Blaine closes the top button of his heavy woolen coat. He follows Captain Duval though the zigzag maze of trenches until they arrive at the front line. His unit’s soldiers are waiting for him in front of his dugout.

Blaine addresses his soldiers, “There’s no fighting expected during our time at the front. We’ll be doing the usual trench maintenance work. We’ll go over the top to lay out new barbed wire at some point.”

“Lieutenant Anderson, how many sentries will our unit provide?”

“It’s Captain Anderson now,” Captain Duval interjects.

When the soldiers give him a puzzled look, Captain Duval shows the new insignia to the men and hands it over to Blaine.

“Hip hip hooray! Hip hip hooray!” the soldiers shout. They slap Blaine’s shoulder and shake hands with him before they set off on their duties.

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Blaine sets down his pen, takes off his glasses and rubs the bridge of his nose. Although he’s exempt from the tiring manual labor, there are different claims on his time - chiefly, the never-ending paperwork. In addition to dealing with general military bureaucracy, he’s also expected to master an ever-growing body of tactical and technical instructions. He knows that this will only increase in his new role as captain.

He pours himself a cup of tea and opens the tin of biscuits that Mrs Sylvester made and sent in the last parcel. He treats himself to two, for it won’t be long until he’s on leave and he’ll be able to replenish his stash of treats. He can’t wait to see his family again, and to meet Michael Devon for the first time. But mostly, he can’t wait to be back in Kurt’s arms.

It’s been 16 months since he’s last seen Kurt, and their time together is starting to feel like a dream… albeit a very nice one. Although they write each other each week, he longs to see Kurt, to touch him, and reestablish their connection. It’s not that his love is fading, because it feels just as strong as ever. But he needs to fill up the well again - make new memories that he can recall and cherish while he’s fighting in this war.

Captain Duval enters their dugout, takes off his gloves, and rubs his hands to warm them. “It’s bloody cold out there, and tonight we’re on barbed wire patrol. The men are getting a nap before we go over the top.”

“We? Are you joining us?”

“I’ve got two units working tonight. Of course I’m going to join you. A captain’s job isn’t all about paperwork and giving out orders. Sometimes, you need to lead by example.”

After a two-hour kip, the captains dress for their nighttime mission. Blaine can’t help but rub his scarf on his cheek before putting it around his neck - after all, it was hand-knitted by Kurt. He checks his trouser pocket to ensure that he has the horseshoe lucky charm. He does the buttons up on his coat and puts on his metal helmet. After they have put their boots on, they head out to join their units.

Everywhere is dark and damp on this cold winter’s night. Blaine is again thankful that his father insisted on him buying a good pair of boots before he left for the war. His privates carry reels of barbed wire, wooden stakes and other necessary equipment.
Captain Duval consults his map. “Lieutenant Davies, your unit will lay down the barbed wire here. When you’re finished, return to the trench.

“Yes, sir!” Lieutenant Davies replies.

Captain Duval continues, “Captain Anderson, your unit will lay down barbed wire 500 yards from here. I’ll lead the way.”

Blaine and his unit quietly follow Captain Duval until he stops. The privates start pounding the wooden stakes into the frozen ground and wrapping the barbed wire around them. Suddenly, bullets whistle past them.

“Get down, everybody!” Blaine orders.

The soldiers all lie down on the snow-covered ground, shaking with cold and fear. When five minutes have passed without any further gunfire, Blaine looks up to see if there are any casualties. His heart sinks when he sees Captain Duval’s arm ensnared in the barbed wire and bleeding.

“Get the medics at once!” Blaine orders.

Two privates crouch down and leave quickly. Blaine goes over to the barbed wire and finds Captain Duval barely conscious. “Stay with me, Captain Duval. Help will soon be on its way. I won’t leave you here to die.”

A medic and two stretcher-bearers arrive soon after. The large medic takes some cutters from his first aid haversack and quickly begins to set Captain Duval free.

“Get him to the bearing post at once! He needs urgent attention,” the medic barks at the stretcher-bearers.

Once Captain Duval is removed from no man’s land, Blaine sags with relief that his friend has made it out safely. Usually, it’s impossible to disentangle a soldier from the barbed wire without the German snipers’ shots killing him. He looks at the medic and asks, “Do you think he’ll live?”

The medic nods. “He’s got a nasty gunshot wound on his arm, but as long as it doesn’t get infected, he’ll be okay. Other than that, his shoulder is dislocated. The doctors at the bearing post will fix that.”

“You saved his life.”

The medic gives a weak smile. “All in the line of duty, Captain.”

“What’s your name?” Blaine asks. He wants to include this soldier’s efforts in his report.

“Sergeant Karofsky.”

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The rest of the front-line trench duty goes by quickly. There’s paperwork to fill out, and he’s captain of both units now that Captain Duval has been injured. Blaine doesn’t know what he’s doing half the time, but his soldiers are working harder than ever to make it easier for him.

Once the fresh troops have arrived, Blaine leads his soldiers through the maze of trenches until they get to the rest camp. The first thing Blaine wants to do is to clean himself. He’s made do with a washcloth and cold water during their time in the front trench, but he still feels filthy. He gathers
his toiletries and towel, and heads to the barn that has been converted into a bathing house.

There are three large wooden tubs filled with steamy hot water. Each one can accommodate four soldiers. When Blaine joins the queue, the soldiers push him ahead. When the whistle blows and the men bathing get out, Blaine strips off his uniform and hangs it on a nearby hook. He carefully enters the tub and sighs when he feels the hot water envelop his body. He lathers up the soap with his washcloth and scrubs himself until his skin turns pink.

“You smell like my sweetheart,” Private Larsen says.

Blaine’s cheeks pinken when he realizes that the soldiers in the tub can smell the lavender soap.

“That’s sort of the point,” Blaine remarks.

“You’ve got a sweetheart back home?” Private Larsen asks.

“Maybe I do,” Blaine replies with a sheepish smile.

“I bet your sweetheart is pretty. Men like you always get the pretty ones,” Private Morris says.

“Beautiful is the word I would use to describe my sweetheart,” Blaine replies. Images of Kurt’s precious face float through his mind. ‘Beautiful’ still doesn’t do Kurt justice. Near-perfect, stunning, captivating, and enticing are a few additional words that come to Blaine’s mind.

The whistle blows, indicating the end of the current bathing session. Blaine reluctantly gets out and dries himself off quickly, for the winter air is bitterly cold. He puts on a freshly-laundered pair of underdrawers. Kurt had been right in knowing that he would need so many pairs. Blaine makes a mental note that he needs to figure out ways to thank him for the advice.

Once dressed, Blaine heads to the mess tent for dinner. He detests the Maconochie stew, filled with sliced turnips, carrots, potatoes and small bits of questionable beef in a thin soup, but it fills up his belly. He’s already got a list of his favorite foods for Mrs Sylvester to cook when he’s at Westerville Abbey for home leave.

Blaine sleeps solidly for 12 hours - the cot is far more comfortable than what he experiences in the front-line trench. After dressing and eating a quick breakfast, he goes to the officers’ building to submit his paperwork.

“Ah, Captain Anderson, I’m glad you’re here,” Major Ashmore greets.

“Do you have any news about Captain Duval?” Blaine asks. He’s anxious to hear the latest update about his friend.

“Captain Duval was removed from the barbed wire quickly enough to avoid infection. He’s been sent back to Blighty to recover.”

“Thank goodness,” Blaine replies.

“That’s not why I wanted to see you. I was impressed how you seamlessly took over Captain Duval’s command at the front line. The soldiers respect you and accepted your authority immediately. The brigadier-general has approved your permanent position as a captain in this troop.”

“Thank you, Major Ashmore,” Blaine replies.
Blaine’s belly is doing flips. He wants to stay with the soldiers whom he’s fought side by side with for over a year. Continuing with his troop is a dream come true.

“There’s just one slight problem. With Captain Duval out of action, I need you here for the foreseeable future. You’ll have to delay your home leave until I can find a relief officer.”

“Yes, sir,” Blaine replies with every ounce of obedience he can muster.

Major Ashmore continues, “I know that you need a break and you deserve to go back home. I think we all do. I’m looking everywhere for a relief officer, but I’m coming up empty-handed. Every troop is stretched thin with officers taking their leave to coincide with the Christmas and New Year holidays.”

“I understand, Major Ashmore. Many of my men haven’t had home leave yet. I’ll do my best to keep morale high over the Christmas season. Please let me know if a relief officer becomes available. My brother and other Westerville men will be on leave over Christmas.”

Major Ashmore replies, “I’m still looking, but don’t raise your hopes. The Royal Army is stretched thin enough as it is.”

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Blaine opens his trunk and takes out the Christmas present he made for Kurt. It’s not much, but it’s the best that he could do under the circumstances. He found a used shell case and engraved it so that it became a work of art. For the past few months, he’s carefully worked on it each night that he was at the rest camp.

He engraved daisies on the shell case because they’re Kurt’s favorite flower. He hopes that one day it’ll be used as a vase, and he can provide a never-ending supply of daisies to fill it. On the bottom and the top, he engraved the unbroken pattern that is also on their promise rings. Blaine knows that it’s not perfect, but he hopes Kurt will appreciate the sentiment.

He wraps the shell case in the army issue paper for the post. He had wanted to deliver it in person, but that plan was dashed now that he’s taking over Captain Duval’s position. He sits down at his desk and pulls out stationery and a pen. He has many letters to write tonight, but he starts with the most important one.

My dearest K,

Don’t open the parcel yet - it’s your Christmas present. You’re now wondering why I’ve sent it to you by post, and not giving it to you in person. I have some rather unfortunate news - my home leave this month has been cancelled.

I was recently promoted to Captain, which I’m rather pleased about. I so wanted to give you this unexpected but delightful news in person. However, fate decided otherwise.

We were in the front-line trench last week. One night, we were installing new barbed wire in no man’s land. Captain Duval was hit by a bullet and fell into the barbed wire. We were able to pry him free, but he’s dislocated his shoulder and was shot in the arm. He’s now returning to England for surgery and to recuperate.

I’ve taken over his position in the brigade. Since there are no other captains available to stand in for me this month, I’ve been told that my home leave is cancelled. I’m needed here, and I can’t argue with that.
Since I’ve learnt that my leave is delayed, I bury my head in the pillow and cry each night. It’s not fair that I’m not able to come home after spending over a year fighting on the continent. It’s not fair that I haven’t met Michael Devon yet. But mostly, it’s not fair that all my dreams of spending time with you, of showing you how much I love you, have vaporized into thin air.

When I close my eyes at night, I realize that I probably won’t see you until after the war is over. But when will that be? It won’t be anytime soon. Both sides are stuck in trenches and making very little advancement. I can’t see how the Allies or Germans will have an eventual victory. It’s a hopeless situation.

I wish this letter was filled with good news, and sprinkled with amusing anecdotes about my daily life. But K, my heart aches so badly. Please write me soon and comfort me. Tell me you love me, tell me that you’ll wait for me. But please, tell me your dreams of what our future will be like. Your loving words and dreams will help me get through this nightmare of a war.

I love you fearlessly and forever.

B

xoxoxo

Chapter End Notes

As I wrote the letter in this chapter, my heart ached for Blaine too!

The photo of the communal baths is entitled “THE BRITISH EXPEDITIONARY FORCE ON THE WESTERN FRONT, 1914-1915” © IWM (Q 110658).

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I also thank Dblmalfuction, who performed a detailed final review, although all mistakes are mine.

I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: Kurt returns to Westerville Abbey on home leave.
December 1915

Kurt

On a cold winter’s night, Kurt lands the aircraft on the runway, assisted only by flares. Once it’s stopped in position, he turns off the engine and jumps out of the two-seat plane. He approaches Lieutenant Barker, who is writing on a clipboard.

“Excellent, Cadet Hummel. You’ve passed the last test of landing in the dark. Let’s go inside to finish talking. It’s freezing out here.”

Kurt follows the Lieutenant into the aircraft hangar. Once they enter his office, Kurt takes a seat in front of the Lieutenant’s desk.

“You’ve got full marks for the night-time landing test, Cadet Hummel, or I should say 2nd Lieutenant Hummel. Your training is now completed, and you’ve passed with flying colors. After your leave, you’ll be posted to No. 4 Squadron, which is currently based in France.”

“Thank you, sir,” Kurt replies, pleased that he’s now a qualified RFC pilot.

Lieutenant Barker hands Kurt a set of pilot wing and cap badges. “Make sure these are sewn on before you report for duty.”

“Yes, sir!”

The Lieutenant crosses his arms and frowns. “There’s one thing that has been weighing on my mind. Kurt Hummel is such a German-sounding name. You’ll need a code name that sounds more
English… A name which will make it clear that you’re with the Allies. Let me know what it’ll be before you leave.”

“Yes, Lieutenant Barker.”

“Tomorrow at 08:00 hours, you’ll be flown to the Netheravon Airfield in Wiltshire. From there, you’ll be transported to Devon by truck. Any questions?”

Kurt stands up and gives a hand salute. “No, sir. It’s been a privilege to train with you, Lieutenant Barker.”

Lieutenant Barker stands up and salutes Kurt. “It’s been my pleasure, Lieutenant Hummel. I expect great things from you. You’re one of the RFC’s finest. Now, go join the others celebrating in the canteen.”

Kurt walks quickly to the canteen, hardly believing that it’s his last day of training. It has been a long six-month journey to become a pilot. He first started at the School of Military Aeronautics in Reading, where he endured four weeks of ground instruction. Kurt was a good student, memorizing the workings of aneroid barometers, the components of a plane’s engine and other important information.

After successfully passing the written exams, Kurt had been thrilled when he was posted to a training squadron at Brooklands in Surrey. The War Office requisitioned the motor racing circuit, and established an RFC training base. An aircraft factory was also built on the grounds, and Kurt was able to train using the very latest Airco DH.1 plane. Kurt found out that he enjoyed piloting a plane and was actually very good at it. His keen eyesight, quick reflexes, and diligence in training earned him the top position in his class.

After three months, he had logged 20 hours flying solo. He was then selected for higher training. For the last two months, Kurt has been flying a variety of aircrafts, and now specializes in aerial photography. It’s a real art to trigger the camera, located in the aircraft’s floor, at regular intervals, and fly at the same time.

All eyes turn to Kurt when he enters the canteen, where the rest of the cadets are drinking and celebrating the end of their training. Kurt smiles and holds up his pilot wing and cap badges.

“Hip, hip, hooray!” everyone shouts.

“Let me buy you a pint!” Cadet Ball offers.

Kurt nods and sits down at a table filled with some of his friends. He takes the sewing kit from his aviation bag and starts to sew the new flying badge onto his cap.

“You never stop working, Hummel. Don’t you ever get tired?” Cadet Mannock asks.

Kurt laughs, knowing that most RFC cadets are from upper or middle class families. “The days in the RFC are not as long as those of a footman. I’m used to long days and hard work.”

Cadet Bishop joins the table and sets down a pint of beer for Kurt.

“Can you sew my badges on as well?” Cadet Newland asks.

“I’ll sew the badges of everyone at this table if you help me with something.”

“Deal!” everyone shouts, chucking caps and badges into a pile in front of Kurt.
“I’ve got to think of a code name before I leave tomorrow morning… A name that sounds more British than Kurt Hummel.”

Cadet Mannock nods. “Good idea. We can’t have you confused for a Hun.”

The table is silent for a moment or two. “How about Westerville or Westie?” Cadet Newland suggests.

Kurt shakes his head. “I doubt the Earl of Westerville would like his second footman to use that name.”

Kurt knots the end of the thread and starts to sew another flying wing emblem on a cap.

“I’ve got it! How about the Flying Porcelain?” Cadet Maddock says.

The other cadets nod and cheer.

“That’s perfect! Blighty is famous for its porcelain china. Besides, your skin is as white as snow,” Cadet Ball agrees.

Kurt doesn’t think it’s a perfect code name, but it’ll do, particularly since he must inform Lieutenant Barker of one before leaving tomorrow morning.

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When the military truck passes through Westerville village, Kurt’s heart starts racing. He can’t wait to be back at the abbey, and see his father and friends once again. He looks down at his hand and twists the promise ring on his finger, bitterly disappointed that Blaine won’t be on home leave as well.

Kurt pulls out Blaine’s letter, which he received only days ago… The letter that informed him that Blaine’s home leave was deferred. Instead of the usual cheery contents, the letter is filled with despair. Kurt always worries about Blaine’s safety in the front-line action, but now he also worries about Blaine’s state of mind. He can certainly understand how upset Blaine is by having his home leave deferred, and appreciates how hard Blaine has taken the news.

With a busy week filled with flying tests, Kurt hasn't had a moment to reply to the letter. He thinks about what he’s going to write to comfort Blaine and prove that they’ll get their happy ending. He has so many incredible dreams about their future together - it’s what keeps his love burning during their time apart. However, even to Kurt, their future is made up of vague ideas. Who knows if Blaine will still enter the Indian Civil Service after the war. It’s still possible that Blaine will marry Miss Cohen-Chang. One thing that Kurt knows for sure is that this Great War is already changing people and their expectations in life.

The military truck slowly travels up Westerville Abbey’s long drive. Although the December air is brisk, Kurt can’t help but open the window and poke out his head. As the truck approaches the abbey, he can see figures gathered in front - the Andersons on the front steps and the servants forming a V-line. Kurt is amazed that he’s getting the formal greeting - the one that is usually reserved for distinguished guests.

When the truck stops in front of the abbey, his father opens the door. “Welcome home, Cadet Hummel.”

The Earl immediately comes forward. “I see you now have your flying wings. Welcome home, Lieutenant Hummel. You’ve done Westerville proud.”
Kurt is touched by the Earl’s words, and after giving him a grateful smile, he can’t help but rush into the arms of his father, who is standing tall and proud. They tightly embrace, and Kurt truly feels at home. When they let go of each other, his father turns around and discreetly takes a handkerchief out of his pocket to dab his eyes.

Kurt notices that the staff are taking his kit bags from the truck to bring inside. He looks around and is surprised to see both Lord Cooper and Mr Evans are already at the abbey on their home leave.

The Earl places his arm around Kurt’s shoulder and says, “I think it best that we all go indoors for the proper greeting before we all freeze to death.”

Once inside, each Anderson family member gives Kurt a warm hug, with welcoming words. Kurt gets an unexpected long embrace from the Dowager Countess.

The Earl once again comes toward him. “I’m certain that you want to go downstairs, and speak to your father and friends. Make sure that you get plenty of rest during your stay - you’re not expected to work. Perhaps tomorrow, we can have a chat about the RFC? I’d like to know more about what they do and your opinion on the training.”

“Yes, My Lord,” Kurt replies, astonished that the Earl is interested in his personal experiences during his RFC training. For the first time, he realizes that maybe his position in the RFC has changed the Earl’s perception of him.

Kurt goes downstairs to the servants’ hall for a cup of tea and is surprised to see all the staff waiting for him.

“Kurt, you look so handsome in your uniform,” Mercedes coos.

“Turn around so that we can see you from all sides,” Mrs Hudson says.

Mrs Sylvester looks around the hall. “Where’s the cake, Brittany?”

“Sorry, Mrs Sylvester. I’ll go get it now.” Brittany rushes out of the room and soon returns with the cake.

Kurt licks his lips when he sees the layered chocolate cake, iced with chocolate frosting and topped with clementine sections. “Is it somebody’s birthday?”

Mrs Sylvester laughs. “No, silly. It’s for you. Her Ladyship wants you to have a proper celebration on your first day of home leave. Brittany, where’s the cake knife and server?”

“Sorry, Mrs Sylvester. I’ll go get it now,” Brittany replies and rushes out of the room.

Mrs Sylvester rolls her eyes. “I don’t know what I’m going to do with that girl. She’s been so dozy lately, even more than usual.”

“Leave Brittany alone,” Miss Lopez snarls. “She’s got plenty more important things on her mind than obeying every single one of your orders.”

Kurt is relieved when Brittany returns, as it breaks the tension that is building between the cook and the lady’s maid. When Mrs Sylvester starts slicing the cake, Kurt turns to Mr Evans and asks, “When did you arrive back in Westerville?”

Mr Evans yawns. “I arrived yesterday morning. It took almost a week to get from Turkey to
Westerville. I’m still recuperating.”

“So, it’s true that you were in Gallipoli. I’ve read about the countless deaths. Was it really bad?” Kurt asks.

Mr Evans leans closer and whispers, “It was worse than you could ever imagine. The whole campaign was pointless. But it’s best not to talk about it in mixed company.”

Kurt nods and focuses on the enormous piece of chocolate cake in front of him. Kurt takes his first bite, closes his eyes and lets out a moan. After eating RFC meals for the past six months, it tastes like a slice of heaven.

“So you’re back.”

Kurt opens his eyes and sees Sebastian before him.

“Sebastian, come join us and have a slice of chocolate cake,” Kurt offers.

“I’m no longer a servant. I work as a medic in the abbey’s convalescent hospital,” Sebastian replies.

“Does that matter when we’re talking about a slice of Mrs Sylvester’s delicious chocolate cake?”

“I guess not,” Sebastian agrees, and he sits down at the table.

Once a slice of cake has been served to Sebastian, Kurt says, “My father wrote to me that you were injured at the front. I trust you’re fully recovered.”

“I still get awful headaches, which affects my sleeping at night. Sometimes I feel dizzy and lose my balance, too. However, I’m getting used to having to live with these things.”

“I’m surprised you’re still in the RAMC. My father wrote that you had received an honorable discharge,” Kurt comments.

“I did receive an honorable discharge. I was sent to Westerville Abbey to recuperate. As I was lying in my bed in the ward, I was trying to figure out what I should do with my life. I don’t fancy returning to domestic service, but working in a factory with lots of women isn’t particularly appealing. As I looked around the ward, I realized that I could still be useful as a RAMC medic, but on the home front. I spoke to Major Roberts, who is in charge of the Abbey, and I now help officers in the hospital ward.”

“It sounds like you’ve found your calling.”

Sebastian shrugs. “Once this war is over, I’ll move on to something else. But for now, the work is a thousand times better than being a medic at the front.”

“Is it as bad as everyone makes out?” Kurt asks.

Sebastian nods. “Your body aches from sheer exhaustion and is irritated by lice, and when you drop down at night, rats will play hide and seek over your body. Let’s just say that you’re smart to have chosen a job up in the air and not down in those filthy trenches.”

Sebastian looks at the clock on the wall. “Mrs Sylvester, will the patients’ luncheon be ready on time? It’s always served at half past twelve.”

“Well, today they’ll be served at one,” Mrs Sylvester informs the medic.
Sebastian rises from his chair. “I’d best be off now. Kurt, why don’t you come visit the ward this evening? As much as the patients enjoy Miss Berry’s nightly musical recitals, they’ll enjoy some new male company as well.”

Kurt goes upstairs to the male servants’ sleeping quarters, and unpacks. He then lolls about in a long hot bath. When he returns downstairs, all the staff are in the main entranceway, decorating the abbey and the Christmas tree. He joins in by climbing the ladder and hanging the baubles on the upper part of the tree. He enjoys the abbey’s Christmas traditions, and it doesn’t seem like work. It gives him time to spend catching up with his friends at the abbey.

He visits Mr Hudson in the garage, who is still limping from his self-inflicted leg injury. Kurt isn’t surprised in the least to find out that Miss Berry insists even now that Mr Hudson sleep in Blaine’s bedroom - for medical reasons, of course.

During his walk back from the garage, his stomach rumbles, and he realizes it’s dinner time. When he arrives in the kitchen, Spratt and Mrs Hudson are heading up the stairs with platters. He turns to his father, who is balancing a large serving platter and a gravy boat. “Do you want any help?”

The butler shakes his head. “No, Kurt, it’s your first day back. You sit down and relax.”

“But why is Mrs Hudson bringing a dinner platter upstairs?”

Mr Hummel lets out a deep sigh. “There aren’t any young men available anywhere in Westerville to fill the vacant footmen positions. Mrs Hudson is worried about my health, and insists on helping. Of course, I’ve told her that I’m fully recovered and in good health. But she went directly to His Lordship, who agreed with her plan of having women acting as footmen.”

Kurt very much approves of the housekeeper’s actions. He’s comforted in the knowledge that Mrs Hudson looks after his father’s well-being. She’ll be an excellent wife for his father.

Mrs Sylvester shouts over to him from behind the kitchen’s oven, “Go sit down in the servants’ hall, and I’ll bring your dinner.”

Kurt goes to the empty servants’ hall and patiently waits for his dinner. His eyes widen when he sees Mrs Sylvester enter, carrying a tray that contains a plate of roast lamb, vegetables, gravy, and mint jelly.

“Her Ladyship says you are to eat like a king during your home leave. You’ll have the same as the Andersons upstairs.”

“Thank you, Mrs Sylvester. I think any king would be pleased to have this dinner before him.”

Kurt savors every bite of his roast dinner. He has only eaten this well on Christmas days, and he wants to remember everything about the meal. He wonders how Blaine can stay so trim, eating like this each and every day.

Once he’s finished, Kurt returns the tray to the kitchen, and heads upstairs to the hospital ward. There are a few dozen beds in rows with nurses checking on patients. Sebastian is helping a patient back into bed, but when he notices Kurt, he walks over.

“Sebastian, what would you like me to do? I used to read to those patients who had been blinded, or I could just chat with someone who is going through a rough time.”
Sebastian glances over at the far corner. “There’s an officer over there who just arrived two days ago. He has a shoulder injury, but he’s going to be fine. His name is Captain Duval, and he fought side-by-side with Mr Blaine.”

Kurt’s eyes light up. “Thank you, Sebastian.”

Kurt tries to calm himself as he approaches the officer’s bed. Blaine has mentioned Captain Duval in every single letter. Not only is he Blaine’s commanding officer, but he’s also his best friend on the front. He needs to find out everything he can about Blaine, without giving himself away.

Captain Duval looks up and smiles. “I’ve never met a RFC pilot before. What have I done to deserve the honor?”

Kurt smiles. “I just received my flying wings yesterday. I’m on home leave for two weeks. My father is the butler, and I used to be the second footman at the abbey. I’m Lieutenant Kurt Hummel.”

“I’m Captain Nick Duval.”

Kurt finds a chair and pulls it over to the bedside. The captain stares at him for a few minutes, and Kurt feels rather awkward.

“You’re K,” Captain Duval states.

“I beg your pardon?” Kurt asks.

Captain Duval leans toward him and whispers, “You’re the K that sends Captain Blaine Anderson letters each week. The letters that Blaine reads each night before going to bed. The ones that leave a dopey grin on Blaine’s face.”

“How did you guess?” Kurt asks softly.

“The ring. Blaine wears an identical ring. He never takes it off. And you smell like him. You must both use the same lavender soap.”

Kurt drops his head to hide his pinkened cheeks. He’s not sure what to do. He can’t really deny it, but he’s terrified what will happen if he admits it to Captain Duval.

“You know, I originally thought that K was Lady Katherine Wilde, but Blaine was adamant it wasn’t. I then suspected that Blaine was in love with someone who his family wouldn’t approve of. I thought K could be a housemaid, but never in a hundred years would I have guessed that K is actually a footman.”

“I’m not expecting you to approve, but I hope you’ll keep this to yourself, Captain Duval,” Kurt begs.

“Of course. How can I not approve of someone who makes Blaine so happy? You know, men together happens more often than you think. When you spend four years at an all-male military academy, you soon realize that there are plenty of things that go on behind closed doors. Now, you probably want me to tell you everything about Captain Blaine Anderson.”

“Yes, please!” Kurt exclaims.

For the next hour, Captain Duval tells countless tales of Blaine during his time on the continent. Some are of heroics on the battlefield, others are of silly antics that happened during local rest
leave, and still others are about observing Blaine during his quiet time letter writing. Kurt soaks it all up, and he gets a picture of what Blaine’s life is really like at the front.

“You really love him,” Captain Duval remarks. When Kurt gives him a quizzical look, he adds, “It’s only been the Dowager Countess who spends countless hours by my bedside, wanting every morsel of information about her favorite grandson.”

“I can believe that,” Kurt chuckles.

Captain Duval joins in the laughter, but soon starts coughing. Kurt immediately jumps up to get him a glass of water. He carefully checks the Captain’s shoulder and arm to ensure that no damage has been done.

When Captain Duval is settled back down, he says, “So tell me about yourself, K.”

Kurt tells the captain about his life on the farm, his time at Westerville Abbey as the second footman, and his training in the RFC. Captain Duval is an excellent listener, asking questions and chuckling at some of the amusing anecdotes.

“K, the more I get to know you, the more I realize that you and Blaine are a lot alike. You both make your families a high priority. You’re also both caring people, who are sensitive to others’ needs. I’m glad that I’ve met you, in spite of being in a hospital ward.”

Kurt’s cheeks pinken at Captain Duval’s kind words. It means the world to him that Blaine’s best friend thinks that he and Blaine suit each other well. “Thank you, Captain Duval. I’m glad I’ve met you, too. I’m pleased that you think that way, in spite of Blaine and I having an unconventional relationship.”

Kurt decides that he can confide his deepest fear to the captain. “Blaine sent me a letter last week, telling me that his brigade needs him at the front, and his Christmas home leave has been deferred.”

Captain Duval sighs deeply. “I suppose that’s because of me. Many officers have home leave for Christmas, and I doubt that the brigade can do without him.”

Kurt continues, “Blaine’s letters are usually cheerful, but this last one is different. It’s filled with unhappiness and distress. I’m worried about him.”

“I can believe that Blaine is unhappy at the moment. For the past few months, his downtime has been filled with thoughts about his home leave - what he’ll eat, who he’ll see, and how he’ll spend the time. I think his daydreaming got him through some of the worst times in the front-line trench. I’m sure that Blaine has opened up to you and let you see a more private part of him in that letter. Blaine will get over it quick enough. He’ll focus on boosting the morale of his troops. He’ll soon figure out that his daydreams will come true, just not for this Christmas.”

Kurt isn’t so sure about that. He’s leaving for France in the new year and won’t be at Westerville Abbey during Blaine’s future home leave. Kurt notices Captain Duval trying to suppress a yawn.

“I had best let you get some sleep, Captain Duval. Is it okay if I stop by tomorrow?”

“I’d like that very much,” the Captain replies, before closing his eyes.

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The following morning...
Kurt leaves the library and closes the door. He’s just had a very informative conversation with the Earl. He was very interested to learn about the RFC aircraft and training. The Earl even recounted tales of the hot air balloons that were used for artillery observation during the Boer War. Times have certainly moved on during this Great War.

As much as Kurt enjoys being back at Westerville Abbey and reconnecting with his father and friends, he wants some time alone. In spite of the winter’s cold air, he heads to the stables. He saddles up Firebird and heads out to the fields. When he’s riding Blaine’s horse, he feels as free as he does when he’s piloting a plane. There are no limits to what he can achieve.

Firebird leads him through the barren fields and slows down to take the path towards the lake. Kurt dismounts the horse, he takes the heavy woolen blanket from the saddlebag, and wraps it around himself, before sitting under the old oak tree. It’s a special place for him - the place where he received his first kiss. It seems a lifetime ago that he and Blaine were here during the Westerville fox hunt.

Kurt thinks about how he’ll respond to Blaine’s letter. He wants to cheer Blaine up and knows that he needs to write about his dreams of their future together. Although many versions float through his mind, he’s not sure which ones are best to tell Blaine in a letter. They’ve been so careful not to reveal their true identities in the letters, in case they fall into the wrong hands.

Kurt can hear horse steps walking towards the lake, and closes his eyes. He doesn’t really want to have a conversation with Wesley at the moment.

“Lieutenant Hummel, I hope you’re taking good care of my horse.”

Kurt recognizes the voice and wonders if he’s made it up in his head. He turns around and is stunned by whom he sees.

Chapter End Notes

Trivia: On average, British soldiers were allowed home leave every fifteen months during World War 1 (there were those pesky problems of distance and getting past the German ships in the English Channel). Shorter leaves were given regularly, which were taken closeby to where the soldiers were fighting. Home leave played a vital role in supporting the morale of troops, allowing fighters to rest, and letting families reunite.

In a couple’s hours, I start the long journey back to the USA for summer holidays. Chapters will be posted 4-5 hours later than usual for the foreseeable future.

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I also thank Dblmalfuction, who performed a detailed final review, although all mistakes are mine.

I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: Christmas at Westerville, and of course, you’ll discover who greets Kurt by the lakeside, if you haven’t already guessed!
December 1915
Kurt

“Lieutenant Hummel, I hope you’re taking good care of my horse.”

Kurt turns around and is stunned to see Blaine.

Kurt’s mouth can’t form any words as he gawks at Blaine, who is looking as handsome as ever in his military uniform. He jumps up and rushes to his love, pulling him into a tight embrace. “H-how are you even here?”

Blaine chuckles at Kurt’s shocked expression. “The Canadian Army is also stationed with my troop on the front, and it’s too far for them to go home for Christmas. Captain Ruby offered to take over my duties during the holidays, and I jumped at the chance.”

“God bless the Canadians,” Kurt whispers, still stunned that Blaine is here with him in their very special spot on the Westerville estate.

Blaine lifts Kurt’s head and gazes into his eyes. “Please tell me that you’re happy to see me … That you still love me…”

Kurt holds him closer, if that’s even possible. “Captain Blaine Anderson, I still love you fearlessly and forever.”

Kurt’s hands frame Blaine’s face, as he pulls him in for a kiss. Even though Blaine’s lips are chapped and dry, they feel perfect. When Blaine deepens the kiss, Kurt presses against his shoulders and gently walks him back a few steps so that his back is against the oak tree. Kurt moves his arms to encircle Blaine’s neck and presses forward until their bodies are seamlessly together. Blaine holds him tight, letting out little breathy moans, and Kurt knows that Blaine is feeling loved and cherished. When Kurt needs to breathe again, he pulls back but leaves their foreheads touching so as not to lose their intimate connection.
“I love you fearlessly and forever, too, Lieutenant Kurt Hummel.”

Kurt stares into Blaine’s warm hazel-colored eyes, reveling in being with his love once again. All senses are heightened as he looks at Blaine, and he enjoys the taste of his lips, the feel of his skin, and the scent he’s longed for while they’ve been apart. Kurt doesn’t know whether ten seconds or ten minutes pass, while he’s absorbed in Blaine’s arms.

They turn around when they hear horse footsteps approaching on the path to the lake. Wesley stops his horse in front of them. “Mr Blaine, I’ve been sent out to find you. You’re expected at the abbey for a late luncheon. The Countess was most insistent. She thinks you love Firebird more than her, judging by how quickly you took off for a ride.”

“Thank you, Wesley. You’re one of the few people who know why I really took off to find Firebird,” Blaine says, then turns to smile at Kurt.

Blaine gives Kurt a peck on the cheek and says, “I’m riding Firebird back to the stables. You can ride Nightingale.”

Kurt shows his agreement by squeezing Blaine’s hand lovingly before making his way over to mount Nightingale. Kurt pauses when he hears Blaine whispering to Firebird. He turns to see Blaine stroking his horse’s neck and saying, “I’ve missed you so much, but this war is no place for a horse.” Blaine mounts Firebird, pulls back the reins, and gallops away, leaving Wesley and Kurt to follow.

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The family are crowded around a table in the library, the only common room that the RAMC hasn’t completely taken over for the hospital. The butler quickly accepted Kurt’s offer to help serve the late luncheon. Now that Blaine is back at Westerville Abbey, Kurt wants to spend as much time around him as possible, even if it’s in the role of a footman for the Andersons.

The Countess sets down her glass of wine. “Now that Blaine’s home, Hudson will have to return to his room over the garage.”

Miss Berry pouts, “But Hudson isn’t fully recovered yet from his leg injury. How am I supposed to nurse him at night if he’s not in Cousin Blaine’s bedroom at the abbey?”

Blaine pats Rachel on the hand. “That’s fine with me. I’m more than happy to sleep anywhere that isn’t a trench. I don’t want to move Hudson from my bedroom while he’s still convalescing.”

“But where will you sleep?” the Countess asks. “All the bedrooms in the abbey are being used over the holidays.”

The Dowager Countess clears her throat. “I have a perfectly sensible solution. Why doesn’t Blaine stay at Dower House? It’s been vacant since I moved into the abbey at the beginning of the war. My house will give Blaine the opportunity to sleep in peace and recover from his long and tiring days on the front.”

The butler interjects, “But who would look after Mr Blaine at Dower House, My Lady? The staff are stretched thin enough as it is.”

The Dowager Countess waves her hand dismissively. “Hummel, I appreciate how hard it is to maintain standards in these difficult wartimes. There’s simply not enough well-trained staff. However, isn’t your son also on home leave? Perhaps Kurt could stay at Dower House as well, to tend the nighttime fires. It would give both men the opportunity to rest before going to the front in
the new year. Would you be willing to do that, Kurt?”

Kurt nods, appreciating that her true intention is to provide them with some private time. “That sounds like a sensible idea, My Lady. I’m more than happy to serve Mr Blaine at the Dower House while he’s on leave.”

“Well, that’s settled then. It does seem like it’s the most practical arrangement,” the Countess declares.

Kurt can’t believe what has just happened. The Dowager Countess has arranged for them to spend their nights together…. alone. He steals a glance at Blaine, who looks like the cat who got the cream.

“Isn’t it time for the ladies to leave the men to their discussions?” the Dowager Countess suggests.

Kurt immediately goes to her side to help her out of her chair. As she rises, she whispers, “Make my grandson happy during his leave.”

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After the luncheon service, Kurt packs a bag and walks to Dower House. Although it’s only 4:30 p.m., the sun has already set. Kurt loves the long summer hours, but hates the short December days. Once Kurt enters Dower House, he turns on the lights, grateful that His Lordship had installed electricity, in spite of the Dowager Countess’ insistence that she’d never use it. He systematically takes off the drop cloths from the furniture, dusts and sweeps. Once he’s satisfied with the common rooms, he collects his bag and heads upstairs.

Kurt peeks into the Dowager Countess bedroom, and he feels as if he’s stepped back in time to the Victorian era. There’s a canopy bed, lamps with fringed shades, and more white lace than he’s ever seen in one room before. He scrunches his nose, and decides that this bedroom won’t do for Blaine and himself. Who wants to be reminded of the Dowager Countess when in bed with their lover?

He pokes his head into the rooms down the corridor and decides that he and Blaine will use one of the more understated guest bedrooms. He cleans the room thoroughly and kneels to lay logs in the fireplace. As soon as the fire is lit, he hears footsteps thundering up the stairs.

“I got here as soon as I could,” Blaine says, panting after running the short distance from the abbey. Blaine pulls Kurt up and holds him closely. “I’m so happy to be here with you. Isn’t my grandmama rather clever?”

Kurt chuckles and kisses the top of Blaine’s head. “She’s a right ole schemer. She would’ve been an excellent politician, if women were allowed to hold a seat.”

Blaine suddenly places a hand over his mouth to cover a large yawn. “I’m sorry, Kurt, but I’m absolutely exhausted. It’s been a long journey from France to Westerville, and I haven’t slept in forever.”

“Then, let’s wash and put on our nightclothes,” Kurt suggests.

As the men prepare for bed, they sneak glances at each other, hardly believing that they are together again. Kurt turns down one side of the bed for Blaine to climb into and then joins him from the other side. Their bodies quickly find each other, as if they’re drawn together like magnets. Kurt uses one arm to wrap around Blaine, while the other hand’s fingers card through his curly locks. Although Blaine’s hair is shorter than before, the top has been left longer, allowing the natural curls to show themselves. Kurt feels puffs of hot air on his neck as Blaine’s breath evens
out, and he falls into a deep sleep.

It’s not the most romantic reunion on their first night, but as long as Blaine is safely in his arms, it’s perfect.

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Two days later…

On Christmas Day, all the family members and servants attend the Christmas morning service at the Westerville Church. The Andersons sit in the front pew, while the servants are seated a few rows behind. Instead of listening to the vicar, Kurt stares openly at the back of Blaine’s head, counting down the hours when the curls are released from the pomade and he can run his fingers through them.

Once they are back at the abbey, the servants quickly finish their morning chores. By noon, they have all gathered in the servants’ hall, which is decorated with holly and ivy. In true Westerville tradition, they eat roast turkey with all the trimmings for lunch.

After they’ve pulled open the Christmas crackers and put on the paper party hats, the Christmas pudding and eggnog are served. Everyone tucks into the tasty treats, in spite of just having eaten the large main meal. When Mr Hummel has finished his pudding, he sets his spoon down on the empty plate, looks at the clock on the wall, and announces, “The family will be waiting for us upstairs.”

Everyone takes their plates to the kitchen scullery and bounds up the stairs to the main entrance, where the Anderson family is gathered next to the huge Christmas tree. Kurt’s eyes immediately zoom in on Blaine, who is standing next to his brother with his nephew sitting over his shoulders. The next Westerville tradition begins, and the Countess distributes a present to each servant.

“Happy Christmas, Mercedes. This is for you,” the Countess says cheerily, handing the head housemaid a length of cloth that can be made up into a frock.

“Thank you, My Lady,” Mercedes says, and she curtsies before returning to the group of servants.

Once the female staff members have received their presents, the Earl takes over and hands out the presents for the men. As customary, Mr Hummel is called forward first. The Earl hands Mr Hummel a thick hardcover book. “Happy Christmas, Hummel.”

Mr Hummel inspects the book’s title - The Royal Families of Europe. “Oh, my. I shall find this very interesting. Thank you, My Lord.”

When Mr Hummel starts to walk towards the rest of the servants, the Earl calls out, “There’s one more present.”

Kurt raises one eyebrow, because no-one has ever received a second present for Christmas before. The Earl reaches into his jacket pocket and retrieves a key.

Mr Hummel returns to the Christmas tree, and takes the offered key. He reads the brass plate that the key is attached to, which says Hummel Cottage. “I don’t understand, My Lord.”

“It’s the key to the old groundskeeper’s cottage on the estate. It’s now ready for you and Mrs Hudson to move into after the wedding. I took the liberty of renaming it Hummel Cottage. It has a nice ring to it, don’t you think?”
Mr Hummel takes a handkerchief from his jacket pocket and dabs an eye. “Yes, My Lord, I like the sound of it, too. Thank you.”

Kurt is the next one to be called out, and he’s surprised when the Earl hands him two large boxes. He carefully opens the first one and gasps when he pulls out a knee-length tan leather coat used by RFC pilots. Kurt can tell that it’s expensive as his fingers brush along the coat’s soft supple leather. It’s fur-lined, so it will keep him warm on his nightly reconnaissance missions.

“My Lord, this coat is beautiful, but how can I accept such an extravagant gift?”

The Earl shakes his head. “How can a coat be too expensive for a man who’ll be risking his life as a RFC pilot to help the troops on the ground? I know your uniform allowance won’t go very far, but you’ll need this.”

“Thank you, My Lord,” Kurt replies.

“The best thanks you could give me would be to knock a few of the Huns out of the sky. Extra points for shooting down the Red Baron.”

Kurt hands the coat to Mercedes, and opens the next parcel. He smiles when he takes out a pair of high-quality boots - the exact same as those Blaine had received before leaving for the front.

Blaine laughs, “Kurt, you’re a fully-fledged Westerville man, now that my father has given you a proper pair of boots for the war.”

Kurt’s heart squeezes when he sees smiling faces all around him. He’s a part of this special group of people, both upstairs and down, and that makes him special, too. He’ll wear the pilot coat and boots with pride, knowing that everyone at Westerville Abbey is rooting for him.

Once the remaining presents have been distributed to the rest of the male servants, Mr Hummel announces to the staff, “We best get back to work, if we want to serve Christmas dinner on time.”

Another Westerville tradition is that the servants have a Christmas lunch, and the Anderson family has a Christmas dinner. This year Mrs Sylvester and her kitchen staff also need to cook a Christmas meal for the wounded officers at the abbey, which will be served in the late afternoon.

Mr Hummel walks toward Kurt and whispers, “We’re rather thin on the ground today with two Christmas meals. Would you mind setting up the cold food buffet in the library, and looking after the Andersons?”

“Yes, Mr Hummel,” Kurt replies with a wink. He’s only too happy to help out any way he can, and if it means he’s in the same room as Blaine for a few hours, so much the better.

Later, after Kurt has put away his new coat and boots, he gets to work setting up the cold buffet. Kurt brings the platters of cold meats, cheese and biscuits upstairs to the library. A few moments after his arrival, Blaine enters the room, pushing a wheelchair.

“Sometimes it feels like we’re living in a second-rate hotel, where the guests keep arriving, but nobody seems to leave,” the Dowager Countess declares.

“Grandmama, please! I want Captain Nick Duval to join us for Christmas. We’ve been like brothers since we trained together at Sandhurst, and he was my Captain before he was injured. It wouldn’t feel right if he wasn’t with me today.”

The Countess smiles. “Captain Duval, you’re most welcome to join our Christmas celebrations.”
Blaine, why don’t you move him near the fireplace, so that the captain is nice and toasty.”

Kurt is reminded how Blaine looks after people he cares about and is glad that Captain Duval is here with the family, and not in the hospital ward. Kurt serves the ladies glasses of sherry and the men their Scotch and sodas. He places a throw blanket over Captain Duval’s lap and takes his position against the far wall.

Lord Cooper raises his crystal-cut glass and clinks it against his brother’s. “Blaine, you’ll never believe it, but the Anderson Arms in the village now has strict opening hours in the name of helping the war effort. Be thankful that father has a well-stocked cellar at the abbey.”

The Earl adds, “The new laws are aimed at munition workers, who are receiving high wages for the first time in their lives. They spend too much money on drink, whereas they need to be fully sober in order to produce functioning munition.”

The Dowager Countess sets down her glass of sherry. “King George has taken a pledge of abstention for the duration of the war, although he makes some exceptions for ‘medicinal purposes’. I wonder what ailment he’s treating on Christmas Day.”

Lord Cooper chortles, “I bet the King has got a long list of medicinal reasons. Now, let’s get to important part of the day - the Christmas presents.”

In true Westerville tradition, presents are distributed from the eldest to the youngest. The Dowager Countess opens up a present, which is a metal implement that has levers, screws, and ratchets. Kurt thinks that it looks as if it belongs in the garage instead of Her Ladyship’s hands.

“Oh, this is nice. This is… What is it?”

“What does it look like?” the Countess replies.

“Something for getting stones out of horses’ hooves?” the Dowager Countess guesses.

The Countess smiles and replies, “It’s a nutcracker. We thought you’d like it...to crack your nuts.”

Kurt watches as the family opens presents of cigars, perfume, books, music discs, and the like. Nine-month-old Master Michael is sitting on Blaine’s lap, waiting their turn as the two youngest family members. Kurt can’t help notice how good Blaine is with his nephew, keeping the young boy amused, by softly singing This is the Way the Ladies Ride in his ear and bouncing him on his knee. It tugs at his heartstrings, and not for the first time, Kurt wishes that he could be a father.

“Blaine, I have something special for you,” the Countess says, and hands him a large box.

Blaine gets Master Michael to help pull off the bow and tear the wrapping paper. Once opened, Blaine pulls out a Burberry trench coat.

“Oh, the coat is beautiful. It’s so much nicer than my greatcoat. It’s warm and ventilated, but still weatherproof. Thank you, Father and Mama.”

The Countess gives Blaine a hug, and says, “It’s so hard to think about you in those filthy trenches on cold winter nights. I can only hope it brings you some warmth and comfort.”

Master Michael crawls towards the remaining presents, and the family focuses on him opening his presents - a spinning top, a toy train, and a teddy bear.

“I have one last Christmas present for everyone,” Miss Berry announces. When each family
member is looking at her, she continues, “I’ve prepared a song to perform today.”

“That’s not fair!” Lord Cooper cries out. “I bet you’ve been practicing for ages, while I’ve been stuck on the beaches of Tripoli.”

Miss Berry giggles. “It’s an old song that is now popular again. I’m sure you can join in the chorus.”

Miss Berry whispers in Blaine’s ear, and Kurt’s curiosity is piqued when Blaine nods, sits down at the piano, and starts to play.

O come, all ye faithful  
Joyful and triumphant  
O come ye, o come ye to Bethlehem  
Come and behold Him  
Born the King of Angels!

Kurt has heard this Christmas carol before. His heart quickens when he hears Blaine’s smooth tenor voice join in the chorus. Soon, Blaine’s voice is drowned out by Lord Cooper’s singing.

O come, let us adore Him  
O come, let us adore Him  
O come, let us adore Him  
Christ the Lord

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After the Andersons have finished their Christmas dinner, and the ladies have adjourned to the study, Kurt quickly carries the platters and dishes down to the kitchen scullery. As he waits patiently for the tray of coffee and petit fours, his father enters the kitchen and approaches him.

“Mr Blaine has told the men that he’s exhausted, and will retire to Dower House as soon as he has finished his glass of port. I’ll have Mr Evans tend to the ladies upstairs. It’s best if you go to Dower House and light the home fires.”

“Yes, Mr Hummel,” Kurt formally replies, although it feels as if a party is going on inside his belly. He can’t wait to spend some quality alone time with Blaine - his best friend, soulmate, and lover.

Chapter End Notes

Are you surprised that Blaine did get his home leave? I couldn’t keep Klaine apart any longer! After Kurt and Blaine, the Dowager Countess is my favorite character to write. I feel as if Maggie Smith (the actress who played the role in Downton Abbey) looks over my shoulder, telling me what she would say and do. I hope you approved of her scheming to have Kurt and Blaine together, privately.

Song Miss Berry performs: O Come, All Ye Faithful. The Latin version was written in the 1600s, but an English version performed by John McCormack was extremely popular in December 1915.
Trivia: In December 1914 (one year before this chapter), there were small-scale unofficial ceasefires between the German and British troops on the front line. Accounts suggest that men sang carols to each other from their trenches, and in some cases, the soldiers left their trenches and met in no man's land. They exchanged presents, took photos, and kicked the soccer ball around. It’s now known as the “Christmas Truce of 1914”.

Extra trivia: Both Burberry and Aquascutum take credit for creating the trench coat that was popularized during World War One. Officers in the trenches needed something that was shorter, lighter, more flexible, better camouflaged, warm but ventilated, and still weatherproof. The trench coat, as it soon came to be known as, fit the bill perfectly. The Royal Army provided enlisted men with their uniforms (which included old-fashioned greatcoats), but officers were provided a £50 allowance to outfit themselves. An officer from the upper class would have his uniforms custom made, and would certainly have purchased a trench coat.

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I also thank Dblmalfunctio, who performed a detailed final review, although all mistakes are mine.

Next up: Blaine and Kurt celebrate their own private Christmas. I like to call it a smuff feast - smut and fluff combined.
December 1915

Kurt

When Kurt arrives at Dower House, he lights the fires in the parlor and bedroom to warm the place up. When the logs are burning brightly, Kurt takes a quick bath, wanting to get rid of his sweat and the smells of the abbey’s kitchen. It was hard work today to serve Christmas meals to both the Andersons and the wounded officers in the abbey’s hospital ward.

Once he’s dried off, he pokes around Blaine’s trunks, which he moved earlier from the garage to Dower House. He finds an undershirt and a very soft woolen jumper, and hopes that Blaine won’t mind him wearing them. When he’s put on his pajama bottoms he looks in the mirror and decides that he doesn’t need to shave.

Kurt hums a Christmas carol as he puts away the food provisions that Mrs Sylvester has given him for Dower House. There’s plenty of food for both a late-night supper and breakfast. Honestly, the cook has provided them with enough food to last the entire home leave, and Kurt is more than happy with that. He’s noticed that Blaine’s face is thinner now than before the war, and Kurt wants to fatten him up a bit before he returns to the front line.

Kurt was surprised when his father gave him a leftover bottle of wine to take to Dower House, but he instantly knew how he was going to use it. He lights a hob on the cooker and pours the wine in a copper pot, adding sugar, cloves, cinnamon, and orange slices. He hears the front door open and Blaine call out, “Kurt! Where are you?”

“In the kitchen,” Kurt shouts back.

Kurt stirs the ingredients in the pot, and smiles when he feels Blaine’s body pressed against his back, softly kissing his neck.

“You smell heavenly, and you’re wearing my jumper, which is far too small on you. I swear you’ve grown since I last saw you,” Blaine observes.
Kurt turns around to face Blaine. “I have grown a couple of inches in the past year, but I see that you haven’t,” Kurt teases.

“It’s not fair,” Blaine says, pushing his bottom lip forward.

“I really like you as you are. I think you’re the perfect height,” Kurt says and envelopes Blaine with his arms.

“I’m the perfect height to do this,” Blaine murmurs and begins to kiss and nip at Kurt’s neck.

Kurt’s cock twitches when he feels the mix of Blaine’s soft lips and playful bites. He loves the attention, although he doesn’t want to get too desperate too soon. After all, they have all night together.

Kurt lifts up Blaine’s chin so that he can gaze into his warm honey-colored eyes. “You were very clever getting out of Miss Berry’s vocal performance and charades after dinner.”

“Well, I was very motivated to return to Dower House as soon as I could. Even my mother couldn’t refuse a soldier’s need to rest his weary bones.”

“When are you next expected at the abbey?” Kurt asks.

“Eleven a.m. I’ll be distributing boxes to the tenant farms. The rest of the family will be distributing boxes in the village.”

Kurt’s heart swells with pride upon learning that the Andersons plan to continue this honorable tradition during wartimes. The servants get the day off and are given a box containing presents and food to take home to their families. In addition, boxes are distributed to the poor and to those who depend upon the Andersons for their livelihood.

“Now I know why my father asked for my help at 11 a.m. I suspect I’ll be driving you around to the farms.”

“I certainly hope you will. I rather fancy getting lost in a remote location on the Westerville estate with you,” Blaine replies and starts kissing and sucking on Kurt’s neck again.

“I’m sure that can be arranged,” Kurt smirks. “Now, go take a bath while I get our evening snack ready.”

“Yes, sir, Lieutenant Hummel!” Blaine replies and gives him a hand salute.

Just before Blaine leaves the kitchen, Kurt calls out, “Do you want me to run the bath for you?”

Blaine shakes his head. “I’m a big boy now and can do it by myself.”

“In that case, I’ve placed your special chamomile oil and sandalwood soap next to the tub. Make sure that you use them. I want to memorize those scents again.”

Kurt places Mrs Sylvester’s special treat in the oven to warm up and continues to stir the mulled wine. Once everything is ready, he places it all on a silver serving platter and takes it upstairs to the parlor, setting it down near the fireplace to keep warm.

Kurt can hear Blaine loudly singing *Jingle Bells* all the way from the bedroom one floor up. He climbs the stairs, enters the bathroom, and giggles at the sight of Blaine. His wet hair has been pushed up to a point on the top of a head, like Father Christmas’s cap, he’s got a soap-bubble
beard, and he’s scrubbing his body with a loofah, singing very loudly.

“Oh, Kurt, I didn’t realize you were here,” Blaine says sheepishly, then ducks under the water to remove any trace of soap bubbles on his face.

Kurt takes a folded towel and opens it wide. “Come on, Father Christmas. The food is ready in the parlor.”

When Blaine gets out of the tub, Kurt’s eyes rake over Blaine’s body. His eyes darken to stormy grey, as they take in every inch from Blaine’s toes to the top of his head.

“Do you like what you see?” Blaine asks, batting his long eyelashes.

Kurt can tell by the tone of Blaine’s voice that he’s nervous about his verdict. “I’m not the only one whose body has changed since we last saw each other. You might not have grown taller, but look at those abs and biceps! I didn’t think it was possible, but you’re even more gorgeous.”

Blaine’s face lights up at Kurt’s reply. He walks to Kurt, who rubs his body dry with the towel. “I’m hoping for a thorough inspection of you, too.”

Kurt chuckles, “That can be arranged… but later. Let’s go downstairs first and have our treats.”

Kurt goes downstairs to add another log to the fireplace while Blaine gets dressed. He’s surprised when Blaine enters the parlor wearing his pajama bottoms, cuffed up at the ankles, and his well-worn flannel shirt, which they bought together in Southampton.

“I think it’s only fair that I get to wear your clothes, if you are wearing mine.”

“I-I like it… It makes you look like you belong to me,” Kurt confesses.

“I do belong to you,” Blaine replies sincerely.

They sit down on a soft blanket in front of the fire, and Kurt pours two glasses of mulled wine. He sets out the platter of warmed mince pies, dates, figs, and chocolate. Kurt smiles when he sees Blaine’s eyes widen and lick his lips. Blaine puts his hand on a mince pie, but then quickly releases it, and lifts up the platter.

“Kurt, please take the first mince pie.”

Kurt shakes his head. “These are all for you. I’m not used to eating something so rich, but thank you for offering them to me first.”

Blaine snatches a pie and takes a large bite, and closes his eyes and groans as he chews. “You can’t believe how much I’ve missed Mrs Sylvester’s cooking. Let’s just say that the Royal Army’s food fills you up but isn’t tasty. You’ll soon find out.”

Kurt chuckles, “We’ve all been rather surprised about how quickly you go through the fruitcakes Mrs Sylvester sends you.”

“Don’t let Mrs Sylvester know, but I share the fruitcakes with my soldiers. Their families can’t afford to send food to them. It seems rather selfish to keep the fruitcakes all to myself.”

Kurt pokes the fire and adds another log, before he lies down on his side, using one hand to prop up his head. He’s content, watching Blaine eat and listening to stories about the front. Blaine doesn’t filter his stories, like he must in his letters, and he talks about the horrific conditions in the
“I’m so glad that you’ll be at an RFC base and not in the trenches. I’d be sick with worry about you going over the top,” Blaine confesses.

“Do you ever see the RFC pilots?” Kurt asks, hoping there might be a way he could meet up with Blaine during his rest leaves.

Blaine frowns. “Only from the air - we hear them at night, soaring through the skies. It’s comforting to know that the pilots are taking photographs of enemy positions. We get them by the next morning, and it helps us figure out what to do next.”

“At least we know each other’s units, so we can find out if we’re close by. I’d like to know if I was flying over your patch of the trench.”

“Kurt, we’ll figure something out. As a captain, I have more control over my roster, so I could try to coordinate our rest leaves to be at the same time.”

“I’d really love that,” Kurt agrees.

“Kurt, I’m sorry that I don’t have a present to give you today. When my home leave was delayed, I sent it by post. It should be here any day.”

Kurt chuckles. “Well, I don’t have a Christmas present to give you either. I’ve sent it to you at the front.”

“Then I’ll have something to look forward to when I return to France.” Blaine picks up a plump dried fig from the platter and moves his hand towards Kurt’s mouth. Kurt takes a bite of the fig, which tastes of honey, jam, and butterscotch, with a nuttiness from the numerous seeds contained inside. Once he’s finished the bite, Kurt says, “That’s the first time I’ve tried a fig. It’s wonderful.”

Blaine’s hand returns to Kurt’s mouth to feed him the last morsel of the fig. This time, Kurt takes the offered fruit in his mouth, and licks Blaine’s fingers. Blaine’s hazel eyes darken with longing, flitting from Kurt’s own eyes, down to his mouth, and then back up again.

Kurt slowly chews the fig, enjoying watching Blaine, for no one has ever looked at him that way - as if they want to devour him. Kurt picks up a chocolate and feeds it to Blaine, whose plump lips keep Kurt’s fingers in his mouth. Blaine sucks and rolls his tongue over his fingers, and Kurt feels fire inside his belly.

When Blaine finally lets go he whispers, “I want to do that again… with my mouth… only not with your fingers…”

Kurt knows exactly what Blaine means. Many a night, he’s tried to recreate the sensation of Blaine’s mouth covering his cock, but it wasn’t the same with only lotion and his hand. No matter how much he wants it - craves it - he wants this night to be focused on Blaine. Kurt glances at Blaine’s body and notices that his pajama bottoms are ridiculously tented by an erect cock.

“I think it’s my turn to explore your body. Judging by the state of those pajama bottoms, you’re not wearing underpants, Captain Anderson.”

Blaine’s cheeks redden. “I only have knee-length underdrawers, which I thought might kill the mood tonight. By the way, it was smart of you to make me take a dozen pairs before I left Westerville Abbey. So many soldiers had lice down there with only one pair. Next week, we’ll go to Exeter, and I’ll buy two dozen pairs for us both.”
Kurt stands up and slowly takes off his borrowed jumper and undershirt. “You really want to talk about the practicalities of knee-length underdrawers right now?”

Kurt hooks his thumbs in his pajama bottoms and slowly pulls them down. “I think we’re better discussing the benefits of wearing tightly-fitting boxer briefs.” Kurt wiggles his ass as he makes a show of stepping out of his pajama bottoms.

“You look so incredibly sexy in my briefs,” Blaine moans and presses a hand over his clothed cock.

Kurt can’t help but slowly spin around, giving Blaine a complete view of the tightly-fitting boxer briefs covering his body. Due to the daily exercising during his RFC training, he’s developed muscles everywhere, and the briefs leave nothing to the imagination. When his back faces Blaine, he feels a nip on one of his ass cheeks.

“Uh-uh, you can look but you can’t touch,” Kurt teases.

“K-Kurt. I can’t help myself. You’re simply irresistible.”

“I think it’s your turn to take off your shirt… Well, technically speaking, it’s my shirt.”

Kurt gazes longingly as Blaine makes a show of pulling on the front of his shirt and popping the buttons off, then tossing it behind him. When Blaine crawls towards him, Kurt puts a hand on his chest, causing Blaine to fall down gently. Kurt positions Blaine on his back, and sits on him, straddling his legs on each side of Blaine’s. He leans down, capturing Blaine’s lips in a deep kiss, filled with desire and the promise of things ahead. When Kurt licks his lips, Blaine opens his mouth eagerly, and Kurt thrusts his tongue inside, exploring every crevice. He places a hand on Blaine’s hip, while the other is tugging at his curls. Kurt does everything he can think of to claim him - to let Blaine know that he belongs to him and that Kurt belongs to Blaine.

Kurt pulls back to take a good look at Blaine, whose eyelids are hooded and whose lips are ruby red. When Kurt captures his bottom lip and gently sucks, Blaine’s hips buck forward, and he can feel a stiff cock pressed against him. Kurt has no idea what he’s doing, but decides to follow his instincts.

Kurt’s lips travel down Blaine’s body, as he experiments with kissing, nipping, and licking. When his mouth reaches Blaine’s nipple, he encircles the stiff nub with his wet tongue. Blaine’s moans let him know that he’s doing something right, so he decides to linger there. He takes the nub between his teeth and gently bites, which has Blaine thrashing his head side to side. When he blows air on the nipple and suckles, Blaine’s hands squeeze his shoulders firmly.

After repeating his ministrations to Blaine’s other nipple, Kurt continues his exploration downwards, avoiding Blaine’s cock, until he gets to his upper thigh. He sucks hard at the soft skin, and when he lifts his lips, he’s rather proud of the red bruise that he’s left there - something that others can’t see, but will remind Blaine of whom he belongs to.

“I-I need something… anything…” Blaine begs.

Kurt finally looks at Blaine’s cock. It’s not as long as his, but it’s thicker, and there are droplets of pre-cum seeping out. He tentatively licks the tip, and decides he likes the taste… And wants more of it. He remembers what he had liked when Blaine had done this for him, and swirls his tongue over the tip, round and round. With his tongue, Kurt gently pulls the foreskin back and then pushes it forward again, making sure the area is wet with his saliva.

“T- that feels so good,” Blaine stutters. “I’m not going to last long.”
Kurt places one hand on the base of Blaine’s cock, and engulfs what he can in one swift movement. His mouth feels full, and he loves the weight on his tongue. When Blaine grips his hair and moans, Kurt starts bobbing up and down Blaine’s length, taking as much as he can. Blaine grips his hair tighter, and Kurt hums at how good that feels. He continues to lick and suck as best as he can, working along the length of Blaine’s cock.

“I-I’m gonna… I-I’m gonna…” Blaine moans, eyes screwed shut with pleasure.

Kurt reaches down to Blaine’s balls, and he gently massages one in his hand. He can feel Blaine’s thighs tighten and quiver, so he quickens the speed of his mouth. Soon after, his mouth is filled with hot fluid as his lover climaxes. He slows down the pace and keeps going until Blaine’s cock is flaccid. Kurt gives a sweet peck to the head and then inches his body up towards Blaine’s head. He grins when he sees Blaine with his eyes closed and a sweet smile on his face. Kurt pulls him into his arms and rubs his back and waits until Blaine comes back to him.

“You look so beautiful like this,” Kurt says, smiling down at Blaine.

“Gghh… That was the most amazing experience of my life.”

“I’m glad that I could be of service,” Kurt chuckles.

Blaine raises his head from Kurt’s chest, looking upset. “Surely, you must know that I don’t think of you like that when we’re like this? I’m in love with you! I certainly wouldn’t let just anyone do that.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that I was someone servicing you. A poor choice of words,” Kurt replies.

“If you give me five minutes, I’d like to do the same for you,” Blaine says eagerly.

It’s only now that Kurt realizes that his cock is straining painfully against his boxer briefs. He’s overwhelmed with how much he wants Blaine in an intimate way. “I wouldn’t last five seconds with your mouth on me. If you don’t mind, I might have another idea.”

“So far, I’ve loved all your ideas,” Blaine purrs.

“I’ll be back in ten minutes. In the meantime, could you put another log on the fire?”

“Of course, I’ll keep the home fire burning,” Blaine smirks.

Kurt kisses Blaine’s forehead, and stands up, retreating to the bathroom upstairs. He splashes cold water on his face, which also cools down other parts of his body. Kurt has a kernel of an idea of what will happen next. Even though he doesn’t have any experience, he suspects it’ll work out fine. Blaine is also new to this type of intimacy and is willing to experiment. He eyes the chamomile oil next to the tub, and it gives him inspiration for his next move.

It’ll all work out fine.

When Kurt returns to the parlor, he notices that Blaine has stoked the fire and its warmth fills the air. He’s surprised to see Blaine laying on his back, slowly stroking his cock, and that it’s fully erect again.

“I see you’ve been busy while I was gone,” Kurt observes.

“Only getting ready for anything you want,” Blaine replies with a smirk.
In that moment, Kurt wants anything and everything with Blaine. He musters up enough courage to sound like he knows what he’s doing. “Lie on your front.”

It’s almost comical how quickly Blaine rolls over on the blanket in front of the fire. He strips off his boxer briefs and straddles Blaine’s thighs. He tentatively rubs his hand over Blaine’s ass, which is perfectly round, soft to the touch, but muscular and firm.

“Are you sure you want to experiment?” Kurt asks.

“Absolutely. Anything with you will feel delicious,” Blaine confirms.

Kurt takes a few drops of the chamomile oil and slicks up his cock. He then spills some drops onto Blaine’s ass, and massages them into his skin until he feels the muscles loosen. Every so often, his fingers dip between Blaine’s ass cheeks.

“That feels so good,” Blaine moans.

Once Blaine sounds breathless and needy, Kurt rubs his cock over Blaine’s ass. When he feels Blaine push back towards him, Kurt positions his cock between Blaine’s cheeks and starts moving. Kurt places his hands on Blaine’s shoulders for leverage, and then works up a steady pace. Kurt is suddenly overwhelmed with how much he wants - how much he needs. Sweet and slow is suddenly not enough. He picks up the speed and frantically slides his cock to and fro against Blaine. He can tell that Blaine is enjoying it as well, as he notices him clutching the blanket tightly and rutting into it.

Blaine encourages him. “That feels incredible. Are you going to cum for me? I want to hear it, my gorgeous Kurt. Let me know how good it feels for you. I want you to explode all over me.”

That’s all Kurt needs to let go, giving himself over to wave upon wave of pleasure as he cries out, cock pushed hard and pulsing against Blaine. Kurt can feel Blaine’s ass clench as he climaxes as well.

Blaine turns over gingerly, and cradles Kurt’s head tenderly against his chest while they both come down from their highs. “I love you, fearlessly and forever.”

It takes a lot of energy for Kurt to reply, but that doesn’t mean that the sentiment isn’t reciprocated. “I love you, too.”

They force themselves to get up to quickly tidy up the blanket and dishes in the parlor, before making their way upstairs to the bedroom. After a quick wash, they tumble into bed and fall asleep in each other’s arms.

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Kurt blinks when the morning sun hits his face. The bedroom is warm with a recently rekindled fire. When he opens his eyes and sits up, he sees Blaine’s smiling face with a breakfast tray.

“Good morning, my love.”

“Blaine, you didn’t have to bring me breakfast in bed. What time is it?”

“Eight AM. Enough time to eat breakfast and let me show you how much I love you,” Blaine replies, waggling his eyebrows.

The breakfast tray is soon forgotten, as Blaine shows Kurt just how loved he is… with his fingers,
lips, and mouth.

Chapter End Notes

The photo for this chapter is Dower House, where Blaine and Kurt stay over their home leave.

Trivia: The average height of a British soldier was 5’5” (1.6 meters). Many men were undernourished when they joined the army. However, within their first year, due to physical training and eating three square meals a day, soldiers put on an average of 14 lbs (6 kilos) of weight, and grew by about 2 inches (5 cm).

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I also thank Dblmalfuction, who performed a detailed final review, although all mistakes are mine.

I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: Mr Hummel and Mrs Hudson’s wedding.
December 1915
Blaine

Blaine squeezes Kurt’s thigh when the car stops in front of Westerville Abbey’s garage. The last few hours he’s spent with Kurt, delivering Christmas boxes to the tenant farmers, have gone quickly. They’re wearing their military uniforms, and when he closes his eyes, he can imagine them both seen as equals in everyone’s eyes. Blaine doesn’t think he’s better than Kurt - no, he firmly believes that Kurt is the stronger person. But society likes to put people in neatly defined boxes and dictate how they should behave. Blaine thinks of himself as a round peg in a square hole.

He’s in love with a man.

Kurt interrupts his thoughts. “With most of the servants visiting their families today, I’m serving at luncheon. You best go inside and help the Dowager Countess down the stairs. You know how much she hates to be late for a meal.”

“I’d much rather go back to Dower House and do other things,” Blaine replies, waggling his eyebrows.

“There’ll be plenty of time for that later,” Kurt laughs.

Blaine reluctantly leaves the car, because later will never be soon enough.
Blaine raises one eyebrow when Quinn enters the library for luncheon. Instead of her usual dress, she’s wearing a suit made of a grey jersey material.

“What on earth are you wearing, my dear?” Pamela asks.

“It’s the latest fashion from Paris. I had this made by Coco Chanel.”

Quinn turns around slowly, allowing everyone to get a view of her new grey suit. “It’s so comfortable, and it’s loose enough that I can wear it while I’m driving the dairy and produce to the Ministry of Food depot.”

“I think you look marvelous in it, darling, but I’ve never thought of you as a practical lady,” Cooper chortles.

Quinn places her hands on her hips. “I think you’d be amazed at how practical I can be. This war isn’t only about men fighting on the front lines. The women back at home are doing their part, too.”

The Earl intervenes, “Both men and women are doing their parts in this great war, both on the continent and the home front. Now, shall we eat?”

Blaine can’t help but stare at Kurt as he serves the luncheon of cold meats, vegetables, and cheeses. He’s still wearing his RFC uniform and he looks so handsome and dashing. It’s only when his grandmama kicks his foot that he diverts his eyes and begins to eat.

Once they’ve finished eating, they sit down in the nearby sofas and chairs by the fireplace. Blaine can’t get used to having only one room available for the family downstairs, now that the abbey has been converted into a convalescent hospital.

While Kurt clears the table, Hummel and Mrs Hudson bring in the after-luncheon trays, and serve the coffee and petit fours. Blaine sees the besotted look on Hummel’s face when he steals glances at Mrs Hudson. Blaine is pleased that they were able to find love and comfort in their twilight years.

“Mrs Hudson, I have something to give you for your wedding day,” Pamela says, handing her a large package.

When Mrs Hudson opens it up, she pulls out a high-quality blue suit. Blaine remembers that his mother had worn it several times during the London Season.

“My Lady, I can’t possibly accept this gift,” Mrs Hudson exclaims.

“Poppycock, Mrs Hudson. I’ve heard rumors that you’re planning to wear a plain grey dress for your wedding. That simply won’t do. It’s customary that you wear something blue on your wedding day. The suit will be yours to keep, so it’s not something borrowed. I’ll have Miss Lopez fit it for you tonight.”

Hummel steps forward. “Your Lordship and Ladyship, I was going to discuss this with you after luncheon, but now is as good a time as any. Brittany, the cook’s assistant, and Miss Lopez won’t be returning tonight after visiting their families.”

“Why ever not?” Pamela asks. “Miss Lopez didn’t mention this to me yesterday.”

Mrs Hudson replies, “They left a note under my door in the middle of the night, which I read this morning. It appears that they’ve found new jobs in a munitions factory at the Woolwich Arsenal in
Grandmama exclaims, “How selfish of them! They’ve left you high and dry on the eve of your wedding. It’s impossible to find loyal staff nowadays.”

“Do you hanker for the days of serfdom?” Cousin Rachel asks.

“I hanker for a simpler world. Is that a crime?” grandmama huffs.

Pamela pipes in, “This war has changed so many things. These days, young women have so many available options. We can’t live in a bubble and expect things to stay as they were.”

Her husband nods. “It’s a brave new world we’re heading for. No doubt about that. We must try to greet it with as much grace as we can muster.”

Pamela sets down her cup. “With Miss Lopez not returning, how will we have the blue suit fitted for Mrs Hudson in time for tomorrow’s wedding?”

Kurt steps forward. “I can do it this evening, My Lady. I have experience in sewing.” Kurt then turns to the housekeeper. “It would be an honor for me to tailor this suit for you, Mrs Hudson. I want my future stepmother to look magnificent on her wedding day.”

Mrs Hudson replies, “Very well, I’ll wear this suit tomorrow. I’m very grateful, My Lady. And thank you Kurt for stepping in to tailor the suit for me last minute.”

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Blaine wakes up early the next morning, disappointed that Kurt’s side of the bed is empty and cold. He knows that Kurt had to get up early to help with the wedding preparations. Blaine closes his eyes and recalls the previous evening. They had spent it in front of the fireplace in Dower House’s parlor. He had read *The Voyage Out* by Virginia Woolf, which his mother gave him for Christmas, while Kurt altered his mother’s suit for Mrs Hudson. He loves how domestic the evening together had felt. Although they were doing separate things, they were still connected to each other. After Kurt had finished with the suit, they went to the bedroom and they connected in very intimate ways. Yes, Blaine could spend every night in such a way for the rest of his life.

“Rise and shine,” Kurt greets, entering the bedroom, and sets down a tray with buttered toast and a pot of tea.

“K-Kurt, what are you doing here? I thought you’d be busy with wedding preparations this morning.”

“Not too busy to help you get ready for the church service. I know exactly how I wish to style your hair. Besides, I haven’t yet had the opportunity to shave you. I’ll set out your outfit on the bed while you use the bathroom.”

When Blaine finishes his morning ritual in the bathroom, he returns to the bedroom and sits at the chair before the dresser. He eats the toast and drinks tea, while Kurt sharpens the straight-edge razor with a leather strop. After the hot, wet towel is taken off his face, Blaine can feel his cock thicken as Kurt massages his face to build up a lather. No matter how many times Kurt shaves him, Blaine can’t help but get a stiffie.

Kurt hums as he glides the razor along his face, and Blaine feels as if he’s died and gone to heaven. He opens his eyes when he feels Kurt’s hand encircle his cock and slowly starts to pump.
“Some things never change. Your cock was getting stiff before I even touched your face,” Kurt smirks.

“You don’t still have the razor in your hand?” Blaine asks, not wanting an accident to happen.

“No, I’ve finished shaving you,” Kurt replies.

Kurt’s hand grips his cock a little bit tighter, and he quickens the strokes, twisting at the top. Blaine’s hips have a mind of their own and buck upwards to the increasing friction. His breathing becomes irregular and suddenly waves of pleasure course through his body as he spills all over Kurt’s hand.

Once his breathing has evened out, Blaine opens his eyes to find Kurt licking the cum off his hand. Blaine’s cock twitches, because watching Kurt like this is both dirty and sexy.

“Can I return the favor?” Blaine asks.

Kurt shakes his head. “I’ve got to go back to the abbey and calm down my father.”

After washing his hands, Kurt takes a small dab of hair pomade and runs it through Blaine’s hair. He tries to keep the natural curls, but still create a polished look. Once he’s satisfied, he holds a mirror to Blaine’s face.

“Kurt, it’s really amazing. My hair is usually slicked back or a mess of frizzy curls.”

“I’ll teach you how to do it before you return to war. In the meantime, get dressed, and I’ll see you at the abbey.”

“You don’t need to go to the village hall?”

“Mrs Hudson has made many friends in Westerville, in her role as the Women’s Institute’s manager for the estate. They’re setting up the village hall and bringing the food to eat.”

Once Kurt has left Dower House, Blaine puts on the outfit that Kurt has laid out on the bed and looks at himself in the mirror. The tweed sack coat and trousers don’t fit him as well as they used to - his body has developed more muscles than he had before the war. Blaine can’t recognize himself. He feels as if he’s looking at a stranger dressed for activities in a bygone era.

He quickly strips the clothes off, and redresses into his military uniform. It symbolizes who he is now - an officer and a gentleman.

He walks to the abbey and heads down the stairs to find out if there’s anything he can do before the church service. The women staff are nowhere to be found, but he finds the men in the kitchen, watching Hummel pace in his wedding suit. The other men are wearing their military uniforms, and not for the first time, Blaine thinks that it makes Kurt look like a dashing gentleman.

“I’m far too old for a honeymoon. We’ll cancel the trip to Torquay and stay at Hummel Cottage instead. Besides, the men are at Westerville on home leave, and they should take priority over a silly honeymoon.”

Hudson sets down a glass of water. “The honeymoon has already been arranged, and I’m driving you to Torquay. Wait…. Are you nervous about what happens on the wedding night?”

Blaine can tell that by the heat flushing Hummel’s face that this is exactly what the butler is nervous about. He decides to save Hummel from an awkward discussion. “Good morning,
Hummel smiles when he realizes that he doesn’t need to answer Hudson’s question. “Good morning, Mr Blaine. Shouldn’t you be upstairs with your family?”

“There’s one thing I need to do before I join my family. Hudson, could you step forward?”

Blaine takes a small box from his pocket. “By decree of the Royal Army, I’m presenting you with the Silver War Badge, issued to service personnel who have been honorably discharged due to wounds or sickness from military service in this Great War. The 9th Queen's Royal Lancers are thankful for your service.”

“I get a badge?” Hudson asks with a tremble in his voice.

“You certainly do, Hudson. I’m sure if you ask nicely, Kurt will sew it on before the church service.”

Hudson stands just that little bit taller and prouder, and he gives a hand salute. “Thank you, Captain Anderson.”

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“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen. I now pronounce you man and wife together.”

The congregation claps and cheers as the couple walk down the aisle. Blaine admires the blue suit on Mrs Hummel, and thinks that Kurt is a miracle worker to have tailored it so perfectly in less than a day. He stands up and extends his right hand to offer his grandmama assistance getting up from the pew. Once she’s standing, Blaine tucks her left arm underneath his and waits for his parents to leave the pew before escorting her out of the church.

“I don’t see why Mrs Hudson was so insistent to have the wedding celebration in the village hall, when your parents were willing to hold it at the abbey. Hummel would have liked that,” the Dowager Countess states.

Blaine whispers, “It’s Mrs Hummel now. Perhaps she and her friends feel more comfortable in a village hall than a formal setting. Now, do behave, Grandmama. Everyone is looking at us.”

“They’re marveling that I’m still alive and manage to look beautiful with the most handsome man in Westerville by my side.”

They walk to the village hall, where Mr and Mrs Hummel are waiting in front to greet their guests. Naturally, his parents are first in the line.

“Thank you for coming, My Lord,” Hummel greets.

“A wonderful service.”

“Thank you, My Lord. Please understand that nothing is going to change,” the butler reassures him.

“I doubt you'd agree, Mrs... Hummel,” the Countess says.

“We’ll try to keep the changes manageable, My Lady.”

Blaine and his grandmama are next to offer their congratulations before they enter the village hall. There are pennant banners hung across the ceiling and the long tables are set with savory pies,
cakes and sweetmeats. Blaine settles himself and his grandmama in seats, and takes a look around. Hudson is surrounded by young ladies admiring his new silver war badge. Cousin Rachel, who’s sitting opposite of Blaine, has her arms folded and is obviously not happy about the attention Hudson is receiving. Kurt is flitting around, renewing local acquaintances and meeting Mrs Hummel’s friends. Blaine wishes he could be by Kurt’s side, enjoying himself and not sitting next to his grandmama.

When the guests have all taken their places around the long tables, Hummel stands up with a glass in his hand. “Before we eat, I believe, as the groom, that I have the right to a few words. I will not be prolix, but it must be right that I am the happiest and luckiest of men. That a woman of such grace and charm should entrust her life’s happiness to my unworthy charge... passeth all understanding. To my wonderful bride!”

The guests stand up and raise their glasses. “To the bride and groom!”

When the guests have finished eating, the tables are moved to the side. Cousin Rachel’s gramophone is set up in the corner, playing dance music. After a time, Blaine approaches the housekeeper. “May I have this dance, Mrs Hummel?’’

Mrs Hummel readily agrees, and they exchange pleasantries as they dance. “Thank you, Mr Blaine, for giving my son the silver war badge. Finn has been feeling incredibly guilty since the accident, as if he let you and the Royal Army down.”

“There are all sorts of war injuries, Mrs Hummel. Who’s to say that being shot by a German bullet is any braver than having to deal with intense training under difficult circumstances? You should be proud of your son - I know I’m very proud of Hudson and his contributions to the war effort.”

A new song starts playing. Although he hasn’t heard it before, he recognizes that it’s a ragtime song. He looks around in amazement, not knowing the dance steps. “What dance is this, Mrs Hummel?’’

“It’s the foxtrot, Mr Blaine. It’s the new craze from America. You’ll have to learn a lot of new things when the war is over and you set out for the next London season.”

“I guess I will,” Blaine agrees. Kurt approaches and asks Mrs Hummel for a dance. Blaine returns to his seat next to his grandmama and watches Kurt gracefully whirl his stepmother across the dance floor.

When the song is over, Hummel clinks his glass. “I like more old-fashioned music. Kurt, could you sing that song about Somerset for me?”

Kurt shakes his head. “I’d need someone to play the piano.”

Blaine jumps up from his seat. “I know the song. I’m sure I can accompany Kurt.”

Blaine sits down at the piano in the corner and practices a few notes of the song’s chorus. Kurt comes over and whispers, “You’ll need to play the song in a higher key, like you would for a lady.”

“Are you sure?” Blaine questions.

“I’m afraid so.”

After the introductory piano notes, Kurt starts singing.
Oh, we come up from Somerset,
To see the Great Review;
There was Mary drest in her Sunday best,
And our boy Billee too.
The drums were rolling rub-a-dub,
The trumpets tooted too,
When right up rode His Majesty,
An’ says ‘An who be you?’

Blaine stumbles on some of the notes, as he first takes in Kurt’s singing. Of course, he would be a countertenor. His voice is so pure and angelic that it takes his breath away. Blaine laughs when Hummel joins his son in the chorus.

For we’m come up from Somerset,
Where the cider apples grow,
For we’re all King’s men in Somerset,
As we were long, long ago.
An’ when you’re wanting soger boys,
An’ there’s fighting for to do,
You just send word to Somerset
An’ we’ll all be up for you!

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After waving goodbye to the newlyweds when they set off for Torquay, Blaine accompanies his grandmama to the abbey and helps her up the stairs to her room. Once he’s satisfied that she’s comfortable, he walks to the stables. He saddles Firebird and mounts him, taking off for a long ride.

He’s missed the freedom he feels riding Firebird, the wind whipping across his face and the horse’s power that he can sense between his thighs. But this war isn’t any place for a horse, and Blaine is grateful that Firebird is back in Devon and not on the brutal frontline.

When Blaine returns to the stables, he’s surprised to see his father chatting to Wesley. “Ah, there you are, son. I wanted to have a word with you.”

“Of course, shall we return to the abbey?”

The Earl shakes his head. “The RAMC staff are everywhere, and the family passes their time in the library. I’m afraid that this stable is the only place on the Westerville estate where we can talk in private.”

Wesley stands up. “I’ll take out the hounds for their daily exercise and training.”

When Wesley leaves, Blaine takes a good look at his father. He’s wearing his old military uniform from the Boer War. There are slight bags under his eyes and more wrinkles on his forehead. It must be very difficult for his father to share the abbey with the RAMC and not be the master of his beloved Westerville Abbey.

The Earl starts the conversation. “I’m proud of you, son. It must have been difficult for you when your cavalry unit converted into infantry. But you succeeded and even managed to get an early promotion.”

“I try hard, Father. My men count on me to lead them. If I don’t do this well, there would be even
more casualties.”

“You’re a true Anderson. It’s important to be compassionate, friendly, honorable, and reasonable with everyone you encounter, but especially those whose lives depend upon you. We are the guardians of Westerville and the traditions of the past.”

Blaine decides to broach the difficult subject. “How is the Westerville estate doing?”

“Would you believe that we have bumper crops and dairy yields with the women helping in the fields? That Kurt set up a new system of them working together, and Mrs… Hummel ensures that it’s continuing. That’s not to say that our financial woes are over - far from it. We make enough to service the bank loans, but what will happen when the war is over? We won’t need to produce as much food, and of course, there’s always a risk of a crop failure. No, I’m afraid that the Westerville estate’s future still depends upon you to marry a wife with a sizable dowry.”

“I see, Father. I’m not expected to marry during the war, am I?”

“No, but once this war is over, you should renew your courtship with Miss Cohen-Chang or other potential wives. There are quite a few wealthy war widows.”

Blaine feels disgusted that he could benefit from a soldier’s death by marrying his widow. However, that’s a discussion for another day. He decides to change the topic slightly. “It must be a comfort that Cooper and Quinn have produced a male heir.”

“Yes, Michael Devon is a bonny young lad, but we still need additional sons. More soldiers on the eastern front are dying from diseases than battle. It wouldn’t take much for an infected soldier to return to Great Britain and start a typhoid or influenza epidemic.”

“How horrible! I hope that Cooper and Evans stay healthy.”

“At the start of the war, I sent them netting to sleep under, to protect them from mosquitoes and other insects that could spread diseases like malaria.”

“On the western front, our largest killer is trench foot. Every day, I give thanks to you for my strong, sturdy waterproof boots.”

The Earl stands up and pats Blaine’s back. “I knew they would come in useful.”

Once the Earl has said goodbye and left for the abbey, Blaine runs to Dower House, knowing that Kurt will be waiting for him. After today’s wedding festivities, Kurt will be exhausted. There is nothing Blaine would rather do than to spend the rest of the day taking care of one Lieutenant Kurt Hummel.

Chapter End Notes

The song Kurt sings is “Up from Somerset” by Frederick Weatherly (1913). It’s believed to be used as recruitment song during WW1. Thank you Buttons'n'Bows for finding this gem.

Trivia: Between 1914 and 1918, hundreds of British factories altered their functions to make munition. Over 890,000 women joined the two million already working in factories. The munitionettes worked long hours for poor pay, in often hazardous
conditions.

Extra Trivia: Coco Chanel opened her first dress shop in 1915, and launched her first couture collection in 1916. With the WWI fabric rations in full swing, jersey was the most viable option for Chanel to use in her women's wear collections early on in her career. At the time, jersey material was typically used for men's underwear. It required little seaming for a comfortable fit, it draped well and suited Chanel's designs, which were simple, practical, and made women feel themselves.

A Downton Abbey movie has been announced, and the entire principal cast will return, except for Lady Rose. Maggie Smith has confirmed that she will play Lady Violet. No filming dates have been confirmed.

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I also thank Dblmalfuunction, who performed a detailed final review, although all mistakes are mine.

I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: The smuff feast continues.
December 1915
Blaine

When Blaine enters Dower House, he finds Kurt in the parlor, sitting by the fire. Kurt’s tongue is poking out, and his eyes are focused on finishing off a row of his knitting.

“Hey, good-looking. What’re you making?”

“Some wool socks for you. After hearing about trench foot, I want to make sure that you have several extra pairs so that your feet stay warm and dry.”

Blaine approaches him and kisses the top of his head. “That’s so sweet of you, my love. Trust me, every time I wear the socks I’ll think of you.”

Kurt smiles warmly in a silent reply. “When are you expected at the abbey next?”

Blaine sits down by Kurt’s side. “Not until tomorrow morning.”

“Is there anything special you wish to do tonight? I believe everyone at the abbey will be going to the village hall for the dance.”

Blaine shakes his head. “No, I’d rather spend it alone with you.”

“I’m almost finished with the socks. Why don’t you take a bath and get changed into your nightclothes? When you return, you’ll have my undivided attention.”

Blaine gives Kurt a peck on the cheek before getting up from the sofa. He walks toward the door, but stops when he hears Kurt call out.

“Oh, Blaine, I almost forgot to tell you, a parcel arrived for me today,” Kurt sing-songs. “It’s from a certain brave gentleman officer fighting in the war. He seems to have taken a liking to me -
sending me letters every week, and now a large package.”

“Is he cute?” Blaine asks.

Kurt scrunches his nose and rubs his chin for a moment or two. “Hmm…The cutest,” Kurt replies with a wink.

Blaine goes over and tickles Kurt until he erupts into a fit of giggles. “And do you write back to that cute officer with a large package?”

“Faithfully every week,” Kurt confirms.

“And what do you tell him?”

“I don’t dare write the fantasies I dream up at night about his large package, for fear that the letters might fall into the wrong hands. And I’m a very good boy.”

“And what if this cute officer prefers naughty boys?” Blaine whispers seductively in Kurt’s ear.

Blaine smirks when he sees Kurt slowly gulp. “I can be a naughty boy, too.”

Kurt sets down his knitting on the side table, and leaps up. He takes hold of Blaine’s hand and pulls him from the parlor and up the stairs. Kurt stops them on the intermediate landing, and presses Blaine’s body against the wall. He wraps one arm around his neck, while using the other hand to palm Blaine’s cock through his uniform trousers.

Kurt’s lips feel hot and demanding on his, and Blaine very much approves of this particular naughty boy. He feels desperate and dizzy when Kurt’s tongue explores his mouth and starts sucking on his tongue. He clutches Kurt’s back in order to stay upright. There’s nothing that turns Blaine on more than Kurt exhibiting such wanton lust for him. Blaine wouldn’t even complain if Kurt were to strip him bare on the cold drafty landing and have his wicked way with him right there and then.

Blaine feels a chill when Kurt lets go of him, and he whimpers at the loss of body heat. But he’s soon yanked up the remaining stairs, and suddenly his thoughts are solely on being alone and naked with Kurt. When they enter the bedroom, Kurt tells him, “Get out of your clothes, honey. We don’t want to ruin an officer’s uniform, do we?”

Blaine shakes his head and wonders what Kurt is thinking of doing, but regardless of what it is, he’s totally on board with the program. Blaine quickly strips and slips under the bed sheets.

Kurt adds a log to the fireplace and stokes the fire, so that warmth once again fills the room. While the fire crackles behind him, Kurt takes off his soft woolen jumper, gradually revealing his chest. He next undoes the drawstrings that keep his night trousers on, and they quickly drop and pool around his feet. He takes his boxer briefs off and climbs onto the bed.

Blaine’s gaze never wavers from Kurt as he undresses, and his breathing quickens. He feels privileged that he’s the only one to see Kurt like this. His cock is painfully hard, and in spite of what Kurt has planned, he needs a little relief. He grips his cock and slowly strokes it, but Kurt grabs his hand and pulls it away. “Uh-uh, sweetheart. That’s my job.”

Kurt spreads himself on top of Blaine, and kisses him slowly. Blaine loves feeling Kurt’s weight - it grounds him and makes him feel loved and cherished. He’s been very content with what they’ve been doing in bed, but lately he’s been thinking about more. The thought of being more intimate has been on his mind since the beginning of their home leave, if not longer. Blaine wants to take
everything Kurt will give him, and in return give everything to Kurt, namely his virginity.

When Blaine was 13 years old, his father sat him down and told him that sex with a woman is best when it’s with someone you love and want to be with for the rest of your life. Although Kurt isn’t a woman, he very much fits that description. Gossip in idle moments on the front line has made him aware of what two men do together. It sounds rather odd and a bit painful, but surely it must feel good if it’s the ultimate act.

Blaine’s biggest worry, however, is how to ask Kurt for this.

*Will Kurt think I’m a freak to want something like this? Has he even heard of two men doing this together? Will Kurt be angry that I suggested it? Will he still love me? Will he leave me?*

“Blaine, what are you thinking about? You’re here in our bed, but your mind is elsewhere.”

Blaine gently rolls Kurt off him and shifts to his side, so that they are facing each other. “You know that I love you and that I enjoy the time we spend together, whether it’s cooking dinner or doing things in the bedroom.”

“Especially the things in the bedroom,” Kurt whispers and gives him a deep lingering kiss.

Blaine’s cheeks tinge pink, but he decides to forge on. “I know we both like experimenting and finding out what makes each other feel good... and there is something else I want.”

“Do tell,” Kurt encourages.

“I’m not sure how to say it…”

“Just say it how you’re thinking it. I’ll figure it out,” Kurt suggests.

“I.. I want to experience everything, because you mean everything to me. A-and by everything, I mean everything two men physically do together.”

Blaine holds his breath while Kurt is silent. Did he go too far? Does Kurt even know what he means? Waiting for Kurt’s response feels like torture.

Kurt finally replies, “Oh, now I understand what you’re talking about.”

Blaine’s hands fidget with the hem of the eiderdown, and he turns his face so that it’s in the pillow, too afraid of what Kurt will say next. His body starts to tremble, and he wants to take all the words back. Soon, he feels Kurt’s hand rubbing his back and warm breathy kisses along his neck.

“Blaine, what’s wrong, honey? You were just talking about what you want, and then all of a sudden you closed me out. Let me in again.” After a minute of silence, Kurt adds, “I’d like to try that, too.”

Blaine slowly turns his head so that he’s facing Kurt again. “You would?”

Kurt’s fingers brush at a curl that has flopped onto Blaine’s face. “I’d like to try it. It’ll be a completely different experience for our bodies to be as one like that. When you imagine it, are you the one who’s… umm... giving or receiving?”

“I haven’t thought of it in that amount of detail. Maybe I should be the one receiving the first time, but we could change roles the second time - see if it feels different and whether we have a preference.”
Kurt continues to rub his back. “That sounds like a good idea. Why don’t we have a bath first? You feel so tense, and maybe it will relax you.”

“You always have the best ideas.”

Kurt leaves the bed for the bathroom, and Blaine can’t keep his eyes off his lover’s swaying hips. He can soon hear the water running from the bathtub taps. Kurt is right. His body really is tense after their discussion, and a bath might be the best thing to ease the awkwardness of their conversation into something more comfortable… and subsequently into the action that Blaine is so desperately craving. Blaine turns his head into the pillow and squeals, while his feet kick under the sheets. Tonight, he’s going to lose his virginity to the man he’s in love with.

When Blaine hears no more water running, he gets out of bed and joins Kurt in the bathroom. He finds his love immersed in the bathtub, smiling at him. And when Kurt smiles, his entire face lights up. Blaine joins him in the tub, where they take time to wash each other’s hair and body carefully and tenderly. Once they’re thoroughly clean, Blaine leans his back against Kurt’s chest. Kurt envelopes Blaine in his arms and gives him a gentle squeeze.

“Out of curiosity, why do you want to try it?” Kurt asks.

“All my life, I’ve been told how important that type of bond is for a marriage, and Cooper assures me it also feels bloody fantastic. I know we can’t get married, but I am bonded to you forever. I want to lose my virginity to the love of my life.”

“Oh, Blaine, you’re such a hopeless romantic,” Kurt replies with watery eyes.

Blaine lowers his eyes and blushes, and then looks at Kurt through his lashes. “If we’re being truthful, it turns me on so much when your fingers or cock are close to my ass.”

“Now the truth comes out!” Kurt teases, and he grabs and squeezes Blaine’s ass.

Blaine’s cock starts to stiffen again and goose pimples form on his arms. He turns his head and captures Kurt’s lips in a kiss. His heart races at the thought of what they are about to do.

“The water is getting cold. Should I top it up with hot water or do you want to get out?” Kurt asks.

“I definitely want to get out.”

They dry each other off, and when Blaine notices Kurt’s erect cock jutting out, he can’t help but feel proud that he has this effect on him. They walk together hand in hand to the bedroom and slip under the sheets.

Their hands explore, and their mouths kiss whatever skin they can reach as they simply make out for a while. Kurt’s hand slides down to knead and squeeze Blaine’s ass, and he dips a finger between the crack and rubs along his perineum and hole. Blaine can’t help but let out a moan, “That feels so good, Kurt. Before we, you know, can we experiment with a finger?”

Kurt’s finger carefully encircles his hole and rubs, but Blaine’s skin doesn’t give.

“Your finger is too dry. Try wetting it first,” Blaine suggests.

Kurt spits on his finger, and Blaine is excited at the prospect of having it inside him. It does feel better when Kurt’s finger explores him once again, but it quickly dries out. Kurt’s body moves down the bed, and Blaine wonders what Kurt has planned.
Bolts of pleasure shoot through Blaine when he feels Kurt’s wet tongue lavish the area. Blaine is shocked by what Kurt is doing with his tongue. It’s very intimate and somewhat dirty, but he loves the sensation. Maybe Kurt is on board with this form of intimacy more than Blaine had anticipated. That thought, along with Kurt’s ministrations, makes precum dribble from the tip of his cock.

“Oh my goodness, Kurt. That feels so good. Don’t stop.”

“It’s still not staying wet and slick. Maybe I should use some of your special oil?”

Blaine nods, so Kurt retrieves the chamomile oil and a couple of hand towels from the bathroom. Kurt moves Blaine’s body so that there is a towel underneath his buttocks, and dips his finger into the pot until it’s slick. Blaine can feel the mattress sink next to him, and he’s breathing heavily with anticipation of what’s to come.

Kurt kisses him, thrusting his tongue deeply into his mouth. As Kurt moves downward, he peppers sensual kisses along his spine, until he’s positioned between Blaine’s legs once again. His tongue then returns to Blaine’s ass, licking and sucking his balls and perineum. Blaine cries out when he feels the slick finger encircle his entrance, “I need… I need it now! No more teasing.”

Kurt’s finger ever so slowly enters him, and when he starts pushing it in and out, Blaine moans in discomfort.

“I don’t know how I’m going to fit inside you. You’re so tight,” Kurt says.

“I don’t know either. Maybe you should add some more oil?”

Kurt removes his finger and drizzles more oil over it. Blaine then feels the oil being poured around his hole, and his cock twitches from the sensation.

“Can you try to relax a little bit more, Blaine? I’m so nervous that I’m going to hurt you.”

Blaine concentrates on taking slow deep breaths. He starts to relax when he feels Kurt’s hand caress his thigh then inch up to massage his balls. Kurt works his finger slowly but deeply into Blaine’s hole. “I can feel it start to stretch. Can you add another finger?”

Kurt removes his hand and drizzles two fingers and Blaine’s hole with more oil, before pushing into Blaine again. Blaine feels a burn this time, but concentrates on relaxing his body so that Kurt’s fingers can slide in easier. Once he’s stretched a little more, Blaine pushes back on Kurt’s hand, needing his fingers to go deeper and faster. He sets the pace, and when Kurt’s fingers stroke along a nub, sparks shoot throughout his body.

Blaine moans, “Do that again, Kurt! It feels unbelievable.”

Blaine whimpers when Kurt removes his hand completely but smiles when he realizes that Kurt is now trying to use three fingers. He feels the stretch when Kurt moves his fingers to stroke in the same place as before. Before he knows it, Blaine is pushing his body down on Kurt’s wiggling fingers. Kurt is a quick learner and has Blaine writhing on the bed as he strokes the nub over and over.

“Kurt, I need you now. I want your cock inside me.”

Blaine feels an empty sensation when Kurt removes his fingers and slowly cleans them with the nearby hand towel. He decides that Kurt doesn’t really understand how desperate he feels. He dips his fingers into the pot of chamomile oil, grips Kurt's cock, and slowly starts to stroke.
Kurt tilts his head back, moaning at the sensation of Blaine working him over. "H-How do you want me?" he asks.

“I really don’t care as long as I can see your face. Why don’t I start on my back and you can be on top of me?” Blaine suggests.

Blaine lies back and spreads his legs so that Kurt can lie between them. He wraps both his legs and arms around Kurt’s body. Kurt guides his cock towards Blaine’s hole and slowly pushes in. Blaine closes his eyes and starts panting at the new stretch. Kurt’s fingers haven’t fully prepared him for the girth and length of his cock.

Kurt stops when he hears Blaine panting. “How are you feeling?”

Blaine opens his eyes and sees the concern written on Kurt’s face. “Stretched. You’re so big. Can you go slowly?”

“Tell me if you want to stop.”

“Kurt, don’t you dare! I’m ready for a little bit more.”

Kurt slowly pushes his cock in further, and when Blaine grips his back tightly, Kurt groans and stops. After a few moments, Blaine nods so Kurt continues. Blaine tries to remember to breathe while Kurt fills him and finally lets out a moan.

“How are you feeling?”

Blaine replies, “I’m more than okay. How about you?”

“I feel fantastic. You’re so hot and tight, but I want it to feel good for you, too.”

“It just takes a little time for my body to adjust to the feeling, but I want you so badly, Kurt.”

Kurt gently pushes until he’s bottomed out. “Can you give me a moment?” Blaine asks.

“Of course, honey. What does it feel like?”

Blaine presses a palm gently against Kurt’s cheek. “I feel so full and complete with you inside me. I don’t think anyone else could fit so perfectly; we fit together like puzzle pieces.” Blaine pauses for a moment because he’s overwhelmed. When he feels Kurt twitch inside him, he bites his lip. “I’m also incredibly excited. I’m not sure if I’m going to last long.”

Kurt tilts his forehead to press against Blaine’s and kisses him, “Neither will I. You feel so good.”

When Blaine nods, Kurt pulls his cock out slowly, and then pushes it back in. Now that Blaine is adjusted to accommodate the girth, he can enjoy the tingling sensation spreading throughout his body. He urges Kurt to continue by pressing his heels into Kurt’s back and squeezing his ass.

“Blaine… Blaine… you feel fantastic. Am I hurting you?”

“No, it feels really good for me, too. Can you go a little faster and maybe harder?”

Kurt squeezes his eyes shut as he picks up the speed and thrusts as deep as he can. When his cock hits Blaine’s prostate, sparks of pleasure fill Blaine’s belly and rush along his limbs.

“Look at me, Kurt,” Blaine asks desperately. “I’m not going to last much longer. I love you, I love you, I love you.”
Without slowing down, Kurt opens his eyes and gazes tenderly at Blaine. “I love you, too.”

Blaine reaches up to kiss Kurt hungrily. The moment he feels the slide of Kurt’s tongue, he can’t help but let go. He climaxes vigorously, shooting ropes of cum between them.

“Oh Blaine, I can feel your muscles clamping around my cock” are the last words Kurt says before he thrusts deeply one last time and moans.

Blaine doesn’t feel Kurt pulling out or the cum seeping from his hole. The first thing he’s aware of is a warm damp washcloth, cleaning his body.

“We made a bit of a mess,” Kurt comments as he throws the washcloth and hand towels on the floor.

“But it was the best type of mess. Dear lord, that was really incredible.”

“Are you sore now, Blaine?”

“A little bit, but it was completely worth it. You are completely worth it.”

Kurt’s eyes water. “I’m glad that we did this together. I’ve lost my virginity, too. That sort of bond means so much to me, especially since we’re both about to go to the front. Who knows what will happen to us.”

“Ssh, my darling. Tonight is for happy thoughts.”

Kurt rolls Blaine over so that he’s facing in the opposite direction. Blaine isn’t too happy about it until he feels Kurt’s warm body press against his, arms wrapped around him, and Kurt’s breath on the nape of his neck. They quickly fall asleep, their bodies and souls sated.

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The family spends the cold winter afternoon in the library, seated around the cozy fireplace. The ladies are playing a game of whist, Cooper is memorizing the song lyrics from the sheet music he received at Christmas, and the Earl is laughing at the satire and humor in the latest *Punch* magazine. Blaine is reading the Sunday Telegraph, looking over the sides every so often to admire Kurt standing in his usual position near the wall.

“Is there anything interesting in the papers?” Cooper asks.

“Just the nasty business of that British passenger ship, Persia. A German submarine has torpedoed and sunk it in the Mediterranean Sea off Crete, killing 343 of the 519 people on board.”

“I’m glad that Hiram and myself have agreed that Rachel would stay in England during the war,” Pamela says.

“But it’s so boring here,” Cousin Rachel laments.

“But it’s safe,” Michael counters.

Hummel enters the library and approaches the Earl. “Major Roberts wishes to have a word with you, My Lord. It’s about Westerville Hospital and the abbey’s ward.”

The Earl replies, “Send him in, Hummel. I have no secrets from my family. My mama is the hospital’s governess, and Rachel works on the ward.”
“As you wish, My Lord.”

A few moments later, Major Roberts enters the library, and Blaine takes a good look at him. Major Roberts’s hair is now completely white, he’s lost weight, and there are bags under his eyes. The Westerville doctor had retired in 1910, only to resume working when the war began. With the younger medical staff being sent to the continent, the doctor was left no choice but to join the RAMC on the home front.

“Lord Anderson, thank you for seeing me at a moment’s notice. As you are aware, I’ve been overseeing both Westerville Hospital and the Abbey’s convalescence ward. There are simply not enough hours in the day to do both jobs properly.”

The Earl replies, “Major Roberts, I appreciate that you’re overworked, but there are no other qualified doctors in Westerville.”

“I’ve spoken to the RAMC regional center and they’ve agreed that someone needs to be in charge of the day-to-day management of the abbey. I’m simply spread too thin.”

“But who could do this?” the Earl asks.

“The house management will be put into the hands of Corporal Smythe, your former footman.”

For a minute or two, the library is dead silent as each person is lost in their thoughts of what it’ll mean for Sebastian to be in charge of the abbey. Blaine is in two minds about the proposal. On the one hand, Sebastian certainly works all waking hours tending to the wounded officers. His dedication is most admirable. However, Sebastian is the same self-serving person who, in the past, has resorted to blackmail, lies, and other misconduct.

Blaine glances over at Kurt, who looks horrified at the prospect. There’s no love lost between Sebastian and Kurt’s father, especially after the blackmail episode, and the resulting heart attack. He can’t possibly see any good coming from Sebastian running Westerville Abbey’s hospital ward.


Major Roberts counters, “But he's not a footman now, is he? Someone who's had medical training has to run the place. Smythe is a corporal with real battle experience as a medic.”

“The men won't accept the authority of a corporal,” Cooper says.

Major Robertson nods. “I’ve thought of that too. I told my commanding officer, and he's prepared to have Smythe raised to the rank of acting sergeant.”

Blaine raises an eyebrow when he hears that Sebastian will be promoted to acting sergeant for being in the right place at the right time and not for anything to do with his experience and actions.

“Sergeant Smythe will manage the daily running of the abbey's ward, and I shall be in overall charge.”

The Earl protests, “But you have the hospital. Aren't we missing a tier? Surely, there should be someone here permanently who reports to you but oversees Sebastian.”

Major Roberts agrees, “That's correct. And I will make a decision when the right person presents himself. In the meantime, I do assure you, Corporal Smythe is very efficient.”

The Dowager Countess sets down her playing cards. “I say, good. If someone's to manage things,
let it be our creature.”

“Why? Are you planning to divide his loyalties?” Pamela asks.

“I wouldn't say I was planning it...” the Dowager Countess replies, allowing the rest of the sentence left unsaid.

During the last week of his home leave, Blaine falls into a routine. His mornings are spent in the hospital ward, speaking to the convalescing soldiers, particularly Captain Duval. In the afternoons, he spends time with his family, which includes excursions to Exeter to buy essentials, like new underdrawers. But it’s the nights he looks forward to the most, for they are spent with Kurt at Dower House.

They enjoy playing card games and singing duets while Blaine plays the piano. They have long discussions about what they value in life and how they wish their futures will unfold. They explore each other’s bodies and discover new pleasures. Oh, those pleasures! Blaine’s cock hardens at the thought of that new thing Kurt did with his tongue.

Just before the sun sets, Blaine takes a quick detour to the kitchen gardens before he returns to Dower House. He enters the greenhouse and goes immediately to the section filled with flowers. Using a pair of garden snippers, he cuts the stems of a dozen daisies.

Blaine can’t believe it’s already New Year’s Eve, and he still hasn’t given Kurt his Christmas present. He enters Dower House and races to the parlor, where Kurt is reading.

Kurt’s smile is so bright that it lights up the room. “Are those daisies for me?”

When Blaine nods, Kurt rises from his chair and slowly kisses him, before accepting the flowers. “You remembered that daisies are my favorites. I’ll go to the kitchen and put them in a vase with water.”

“Better still, why don’t you open that rather large package from a certain brave gentleman officer fighting in the war.”

Kurt goes to the corner and collects the present. When he unwraps it, he’s surprised by the engraved shell case. “Blaine, it’s lovely, but what is it?”

Blaine chuckles because it does look like a rather odd gift. “It’s a used shell case I found in no man’s land one night. With so much destruction around me, I wanted to create something beautiful. One of the lads is very artistic and showed me how to engrave a design. It’s supposed to be daisies so that it can hold your favorite flowers.”

“I love it!” Kurt exclaims, holding Blaine tightly against his body. “When you told me you weren’t coming home for Christmas, I sent your present to the front. It’ll be something for you to open when you return.”

“Any hints?”

“It’s not as beautiful as this, but it’s practical. It’s a Swiss Army knife.”

“What does the Swiss Army know about knives? They’re neutral in this great war.”

Kurt replies, “Just because they’re not fighting doesn’t mean that they can’t invent a useful tool or
two. Victorinox has come up with a multi-tool knife that can fit in your pocket. It looks really practical.”

After Kurt has put his flowers into the beautiful shell casing, he busies himself in the kitchen while Blaine runs himself a hot chamomile-scented bath and has a long soak. Once they’ve eaten their simple dinner in the kitchen, they decide to go upstairs and ring in the new year in their own special way.

“We’re going to have to say our goodbyes at Dower House tomorrow morning before we head up to the abbey,” Kurt says with regret. All too quickly, the last day of home leave is upon them.

Blaine gazes into his eyes, holding Kurt’s naked body close to his. Although they’ve just finished pleasuring each other, Blaine wants to do it all over again… and again.

“I wish that we were stationed together. Perhaps I should train to be a RFC pilot, too.”

“That sounds heavenly, but it wouldn’t guarantee that we’d be stationed together. We can only be truly together when this war is over.”

Blaine replies, “We’ll be together once the war is over, but it won’t be the same. My father has reminded me that I still have to marry a lady with a sizeable dowry.”

“I know, Blaine, but we’ll make it work somehow. Let’s focus on what we can do in the meantime.”

Blaine twists the promise ring on Kurt’s finger. “Kurt, promise that you’ll continue to write once a week. I live for those letters. They give me the strength to wake up each morning and face whatever the war brings.”

“Of course I will. I live for your letters as well. I love you fearlessly and forever, Captain Anderson.”

Chapter End Notes

Trivia: During WW1, soldiers made things for their loved ones, using the materials they had available to them. It’s now known as ‘trench art’. The chapter’s photo is of engraved shell cases created during WW1. I purposely left this photo in color so you can see its beauty.

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I also thank Dblmalfucntion, who performed a detailed final review, although all mistakes are mine.

I’m HK Voyage on Tumblr.

Next up: Kurt is stationed as an RFC pilot in France.
It’s wartime once again, and this chapter covers fighter planes, machine guns, and aerial fighting. Absolutely nothing gory. If you have any concerns, please send me a message on Tumblr or an email at VoyageAsia4@gmail.com. No anons please - I will only answer privately so as not to spoil things for other readers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nov 1916 - Somme, France
Kurt

Kurt lands his plane on the runway and follows the flares, which guide him where to stop. He’s the last plane back on base, but it was a perilous return journey, dogfighting with the German planes. Once he’s turned off the engine, he removes his flight goggles, jumps out of the plane, and speaks to the waiting maintenance crew.

“The plane was hit several times on the right side, although I think the engine is still fine. I saw a lot of tanks down there, so you best get the photographic film to operations as soon as possible. I used all the munition in the machine gun. The back sighting is a little off, so you’ll need to realign it.”

One of the crew asks, “Is it true? Did you shoot down a German plane?”

Kurt frowns and slowly nods. The cold night air is brisk, and Kurt turns up the collar of his leather pilot coat. As he walks to the office to prepare his report, he thinks about how flying has changed since he first enlisted in the RFC. During his first missions, his sole responsibility was to take photographs across the enemy line. Sure, snipers in the trenches would try to shoot him down, but
the plane was too high for an accurate hit. He would often see German planes in the sky, and they would wave to each other in passing.

However, the Fritzes were clever, and they installed machine guns on their aircrafts. There were so many downed planes soon after, that the RFC quickly followed suit. After a week of intensive machine gun training, Kurt was assigned a newly refitted plane. Now, when he flies, he’s expected to not only take photographs using the camera installed in the cockpit floor, but to also fire at the enemy aircraft. His hand-eye coordination is better than the average pilot’s, so he’s been successful at shooting down German planes.

When he reaches the RFC shed, he’s surprised to see a news crew waiting for him. Kurt has seen the BBC reporter and cameraman hanging around the RFC base for the past few days. He’s never heard of war film footage taken before, but he guesses that’s what they call progress.

“We’re with the BBC. Could you take a few minutes to talk to us?” the reporter asks.

Kurt replies, “Okay, if you make it quick. I have to write my report for Operations. The Royal Army needs the information as soon as possible.”

“This is Stephen Gibbs of the BBC. I’m at a RFC airbase near Somme, France. I’ve been investigating RFC’s crucial role in collecting information about the enemy’s position and weapons. Next to me is Second Lieutenant Kurt Hummel, otherwise known as the Flying Porcelain.”

“Good evening, Mr Gibbs,” Kurt says politely.

“The Flying Porcelain has just returned from a nighttime reconnaissance mission. Was it successful?”

Kurt replies, “I obtained photographs and information that the Royal Army’s operations will need for tomorrow’s fighting, and I returned to base in one piece. So yes, I guess it was successful.”

Stephen Gibbs continues, “Your fellow pilots have informed us that you shot down a German plane. Was it the Red Baron?”

Kurt shakes his head. “I didn’t recognize the plane’s markings, but it was most definitely not the Red Baron.”

“According to the RFC records, it was your fifth shooting down of an enemy aircraft during aerial combat. You’re officially a flying ace. Congratulations, Flying Porcelain.”

“I’m not sure that congratulations are in order. There are plenty of men on the ground that work hard to maintain the planes. They’re heroes too. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to write up my report.”

Kurt shakes his head in disbelief as he makes his way into the RFC shed. It seems that the BBC want to glorify the RFC pilots’ killing of people, and it doesn’t sit well with him. There are many heroes is this great war, especially those in the trenches on the front line, like Blaine.

Kurt takes his time writing up his report, noting the tanks and their positions, in case something happened to the photographic film. He sets out the details of the aerial dogfight and the coordinates for the plane that he’d shot down. When he’s filed his report to the duty officer, he leaves the airstrip for the barracks. Although it’s 3 AM, he’s too wound up to sleep. He decides to join the other pilots in the canteen for a steamy hot cup of tea.

When he opens the door, all the pilots shout out, “Three cheers for the Flying Porcelain!”
“Kurt, they’ve already found the plane you shot down. From the markings on the wing, they think it’s Boelcke,” Lieutenant Mannock reports.

Lieutenant Ball puts his arm around Kurt’s shoulder. “That would be bloody good news if it was. Boelcke creates the rules for German fighter planes. He’s the one who has the Fritzies fly in formation, rather than by themselves. Let me buy you a whiskey.”

Kurt shakes his head. “Thanks, but if it’s all right with you, I’d rather be by myself and have a cup of tea. It was awful out there tonight, and I need some time to...calm down.”

The other pilots nod, for they know how long it takes the Flying Porcelain to come down from the rush of adrenaline he experiences during his nighttime reconnaissance missions.

Lieutenant Newland approaches Kurt with a box. “This came for you tonight.”

Kurt takes the parcel sent from Westerville Abbey and sits by himself in a corner of the canteen. Once someone has brought him a pot of tea and a few biscuits, he opens it carefully, taking out each item individually. There’s the latest issue of The Gentleman's Magazine of Fashion, cigarettes for trading, hand-knitted socks (he can tell that Miss Berry has knitted them by the uneven tension between the rows and some sort of design resembling a deer), and lavender soap. He smiles when he sees the last item - a fruitcake. Kurt wonders how many fruitcakes Mrs Sylvester makes each month to be sent to the Westerville men fighting in the war.

At the bottom of the box is a letter from his father. He eagerly opens the envelope and begins to read.

My dear Kurt,

I hope this letter finds you well, and you can make use of the box’s contents. We read great things about the RFC in the newspapers, and I’m proud to tell people that my son is one of their finest pilots. I do fear for your safety, now that planes are shooting at one another. Please make sure that you don’t do anything foolish. I’d rather you come home in one piece than die as a hero, thank you very much.

Since this war began, there have been so many changes at Westerville Abbey, that it’s hard to keep track of what to tell you. Lady Quinn gave birth to a second son, Richard Phillip. There are now two boys to continue the Anderson line and the family traditions. Lord Cooper’s and Mr Blaine’s former nanny has been brought back into service as there is no one else to look after them.

Now that Sebastian is the RAMC manager of the abbey’s hospital, he’s a law unto himself. He constantly rubs it in that he’s now in charge of Westerville Abbey. Why, he even rings the doorbell at the abbey’s front entrance so that I’ll open the door for him. The bloody nerve! But lately, he’s gone too far. He suggested that the RAMC take over the butler’s office and that he should have a key to the wine cellar! Fortunately, His Lordship put his foot down and said he would have none of that. But I’ll give credit where it’s due - Sebastian is a very fine medic and goes out of his way to help the wounded officers.

Mrs Hummel and I are settling down nicely in our cottage. We still work long hours at the abbey, but Mrs Hummel’s companionship is the very best when we have time to relax next to the fireplace. There’s only one problem - it seems that my wife doesn’t know anything about cooking. Mrs Sylvester has been giving her lessons on the sly, but it hasn’t helped much. Take last Sunday, for example. She roasted a joint of lamb, following Mrs Sylvester’s specific instructions. But the plates were cold, and the carving knife could’ve done with a sharpening. And she served cabbage. Imagine that… Cabbage with lamb! She certainly didn’t appreciate my remarks at the dinner.
However, I think we’ve found a solution. Today, she suggested that we resume eating our meals at the servants’ hall, to save time and conserve electricity. I agreed right away. I’ll take Mrs Sylvester’s cooking over hers every time.

His Lordship insisted on the family’s doctor giving me a complete medical examination. You’ll be pleased to know that his final verdict is that I’m in tip-top shape. I put it down to having my daily walks and not eating too much (for reasons given above).

We are all looking forward to your return for home leave next month. Lord Cooper, Mr Blaine, and Evans will be here as well. Christmas is now everyone’s favorite holiday at the abbey.

Your loving father

Mr Hummel

Kurt sets down the letter and finishes his cup of tea. He misses his father and everyone else at Westerville Abbey. But mostly, he misses Blaine. Sure, they correspond faithfully each week, but it’s not the same as spending time together - simply being in each other’s company and loving each other.

Kurt suspects that Blaine is also located in the Somme area, although his letters can’t disclose his location. Knowing that Blaine is close, but so far away, is difficult. However, it does make him extra vigilant in the skies, knowing that his efforts will help Blaine down in the trenches. They haven’t been able to coordinate their local leaves. While Blaine is on a strict trench rota, Kurt’s schedule is more unpredictable. It depends upon the fighting and if RFC pilots are shot down.

Kurt mentally calculates that it’s less than a month before he’ll be on home leave and staying at Westerville Abbey. He hopes that Mr Hudson will still be residing in Blaine’s bedroom, and the Dowager Countess will once again offer Dower House to Blaine and himself. It would be too difficult to stay in the servants’ sleeping quarters, knowing that Blaine is only one floor away. Not after they had a magical two weeks last Christmas.

He picks up the box and makes his way to the barracks. After his night-time routine, he crawls into his bunk bed, closes his eyes, and lets his mind wander to what he wants to do with Blaine on next month’s home leave.

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Two days later…

Captain Wilson addresses the pilots in the aircraft hangars. “The winds are strong tonight. We’re pushing back everyone’s flight times for at least two hours to see if they’ll die down. But you must go up tonight. Last night’s mission revealed German tanks on the move, and we must find out their current positions. Return to the barracks, and I’ll get you when you need to go.”

Kurt groans internally at the news. He always exercises right before a mission, to loosen up his body and train his reflexes. With a two-hour delay or longer, he’ll need to do them all over again. He returns to the barrack with the rest of the pilots and climbs up to the top bunk bed.

Lieutenant Mannock takes out a canvas mat, marked with six symbols, and three dice. “Who’s up for a game of Crown and Anchor?”

The pilots quickly gather around the low table. “Hey, Flying Porcelain, are you going to join us?” Lieutenant Newland asks.
Kurt shakes his head. Most of the pilots come from middle and upper-class families and have money to spare for the gambling game. After years of low wages, Kurt doesn’t want to fritter away his hard-earned money like that. He’d rather save his wages and use them during his home leave next month.

Lieutenant Ball goes to the corner to crank his phonograph, and plays a disc.

*Let me call you sweetheart*
*I’m in love with you*
*Let me hear you whisper*
*That you love me too*

Kurt can’t help but think of Blaine as the song fills the air. He takes out Blaine’s most recent letter and reads it again.

*My darling K,*

*It’s been a rather dull week of training and paperwork after last week’s rota in the front line trench. Today, I was vaccinated against typhoid. If the British scientists are clever enough to create a vaccine, why can’t we figure out a way to get rid of the vermin and flies swarming the trenches in the first place? Make sure you ask your commanding officer if you can receive the typhoid vaccine. You can’t be careful enough in this war with the lack of decent sanitation.*

*Speaking of which, aren’t you glad I bought you a dozen pairs of knee-length underdrawers before you set off for the continent? I promise to replenish them during our home leave, but only if you wear the boxer briefs during your stay.*

*In your next letter, tell me about your barracks. I’m certain they are more cushy than the general’s dugout in the trenches. Have you heard of the new word cushy? All the soldiers use the word (although, not to describe their lot in the trenches). Cushy means comfortable, privileged or plush.*

*Each night, I hear the RFC planes soar above the trenches. I close my eyes and think that you must be up in the sky, protecting me. The thought helps me get through the long days and nights of combat. I can’t wait to see you again in a few weeks’ time.*

*I love you fearlessly and forever,*

*B*

*xoxoxo*

Kurt carefully returns the letter into the envelope, and places it into his metal box. He takes out the photograph of Blaine that was taken during their last home leave, and strokes his face carefully with his finger.

*Keep the love light glowing*
*In your eyes so true*
*Let me call you sweetheart*
*I’m in love with you*

“*The Flying Porcelain is thinking of his sweetheart back home again,”* Lieutenant Mannock jests.

Kurt quickly puts the photograph back into his metal box and locks it. When he notices that all eyes are still on him, he replies, “*Let’s hope that we all return safely tonight to see our sweethearts once again.*”
The conversation is interrupted when Captain Wilson enters the barracks, and the pilots stand to attention. “We’re cleared to fly tonight. Let's get moving.”

Kurt spends ten minutes doing his pre-flight exercises. He quickly checks his haversack before he puts on his pilot coat and scarf, and sets out for the RFC shed next to the runway. After receiving instructions for this evening’s reconnaissance mission, he does a final inspection of his plane. Although the maintenance crew are excellent at their jobs, he’s the one who risks his life when the plane is in the air.

Once Kurt is satisfied that all is in order, he climbs into the plane and starts the engine. He puts on his flight goggles and follows the flares to place him in the queue on the runway. Once he’s taken off, he notes the wind speed and mentally calculates the aerodynamics that will affect his steering.

Kurt soon spots the German fighter planes flying in formation, and he places one hand on the machine gun, ready for battle. When the enemy planes fly into range, Kurt presses the machine gun’s trigger to fire bullets.

*Rat a tat tat* *Rat a tat tat*

Once the round is finished, Kurt’s points the plane’s nose upwards and soars up high to evade the German’s air-to-air weapons.

Kurt prepares the machine gun for more firing, and he notes his fellow pilots’ positions. He decides to join Lieutenant Ball behind the German planes to launch the next offensive. Kurt steers the plane to swoop down on the opponent, and he sprays the area with bullets.

*Rat a tat tat* *Rat a tat tat*

After firing the round, Kurt uses the plane’s speed to climb back up again to an altitude safe from the enemies. He notices one German plane spiral downwards in a nose dive. His goggles are slipping all over his face, and it’s absolutely freezing. Kurt can’t even hear himself thinking with the din of the planes in the sky.

After he maneuvers the plane so that he is side by side with Lieutenant Ball, Kurt looks over the plane’s right wing, and curses when he sees two German planes approaching them. When Lieutenant Ball starts to turn his plane, Kurt steers his plane in the opposition direction. This will force the Germans to follow only one aircraft, and allows the other plane to circle around, and maneuver behind the attackers.

Kurt’s heart starts racing when the German planes follow him. He realizes that he’s in a weak position and tries to figure out how to avoid a shot and convert to a neutral position.

The plane violently shakes and the engine cuts off, and Kurt sees black smoke billowing in the air. His training kicks in, and he automatically reaches for the parachute. He’s practiced these countless times during training, so he knows what to do without thinking.

Kurt puts the parachute haversack on his back, opens the plane door, and jumps out. He pulls the parachute ripcord and...

Falls down… down… down into the dark night’s sky.

Chapter End Notes
Song playing in the barracks is “Let Me Call You Sweetheart”. Although this famous song was performed by Bing Crosby in 1934, it was actually written in 1910 and was a huge hit for the Peerless Quartet in 1911.

Trivia: There really was a German flying ace nicknamed ‘The Red Baron’ (whom you might have heard of from the Peanuts comics). Manfred von Richthofen is considered the ace-of-aces of WW1, being officially credited with 80 air combat victories. All the pilots mentioned in this chapter were indeed flying aces during WW1.

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I also thank Dblmalfunctio, who performed a detailed final review, although all mistakes are mine.

I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: It wouldn’t be a cliffhanger if I hinted at what is next to come!
Battle of the Somme

Chapter Notes

I’m sure you can tell by the chapter title that it’s still wartime. This chapter covers fighting (bombs and machine guns), and a battlefield injury. It also mentions blood, lice and battlefield deaths. Absolutely nothing in gory detail. If you have any concerns, please send me a message on Tumblr or an email at VoyageAsia4@gmail.com. No anons please - I will only answer privately so as not to spoil things for other readers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nov 1916 - Ancre, near Somme, France
Blaine

The British, French and other Allied officers are seated in pews at a large abandoned church, when General Haig takes his position behind the pulpit.

“I know this battle has been postponed repeatedly over this past month due to bad weather, but we’ll attack tomorrow morning at dawn. Our goals are to capture Beaucourt and push the Germans back by two miles. This is the last planned phase in the Battle of the Somme. Since July, we’ve already advanced the front by five miles. It’s up to us to advance it further.”

But at what cost? Blaine asks himself, critically. It seems to him that this has turned out to be a bloody battle of attrition. On the first day of the Battle of the Somme, the British suffered more than 57,000 casualties. As the fighting continued for months on end, hundreds of thousands of Allied soldiers have died on the battlefield.

“The key to the offensive is artillery. A few tanks are available to supplement the bombardment. The RFC will fly each night and report the Central Powers’ position as soon as they return.”
Blaine crosses his arms across his body. Artillery might be key to the offensive, but it doesn’t have the ability to cut all the barbed wire, destroy deep German trenches, and knock out all enemy guns.

“The political discontent in London would be muted by a big victory during this battle. The capture of Beaumont Hamel and Serre would go some way to redeem the failure on the first of July, and it would obtain ground on which we would have a tactical advantage.”

Blaine has heard it all before. Of course, London isn’t happy with so many British soldiers’ deaths on the battlefields. General Haig seems hell-bent on scoring a victory at Ancre.

General Haig concludes his talk. “Your commanding officers have the detailed plans and will brief you tonight. Are there any questions?”

Even though the room is silent, Blaine knows that everyone is asking themselves the exact same question… Will I survive the Battle of Ancre?

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Blaine wakes up at 05:00 hours. It’s still pitch-black outside and well below freezing, but this is the day that his units are expected to go over the top of the trench at 06:30 hours. After washing his face with cold water in a metal bowl, Blaine takes out his razor and sandalwood shaving cream. If he’s going to die in this battle, at least his family will know that he maintained the expected standards.

The smell of the sandalwood shaving cream takes Blaine back to a faraway time - a time when his only problem was hiding the stiffies caused by Kurt carefully shaving him. If only he could turn back the clocks and relive the experience. And of course, show Kurt how much he truly loves him… over and over again.

Before putting on his trench coat, Blaine shoves his hand in his uniform trousers pocket to make sure Kurt’s good luck horseshoe charm is still there. Since Kurt gave him the charm on his 18th birthday, it’s been in his pocket every day. He’s had good luck so far and only hopes it will continue during the Battle of Ancre.

Blaine carefully makes his way through the trenches to wake up his troop’s lieutenants. There’s a thick fog, and he doesn’t want to accidentally step on soldiers, who are sleeping on wooden pallets on the trench’s ground. The thin layer of ice cracks as he makes his way along the trench, and rats scurry from the sound.

Blaine’s lieutenants soon report that their units are ready to fight. He goes to Major Ashmore’s dugout to wait for the order to go over the top. The other captains make their way to the dugout to eat breakfast. Blaine’s stomach is churning so badly that he settles for just a cup of tea and dry bread.

“What did the RFC report after their pilots’ reconnaissance mission?” Blaine asks.

Major Ashmore shakes his head. “The fog was too dense for them to fly last night. We’ll have to rely on the photographs they took the night before.”

“Oh,” Blaine replies, knowing that a lot can change in 24 hours, especially with the German positions.

“It gets worse,” Major Ashmore adds. “Only one of the three tanks attached to our brigade will be here at 09:00 hours. One tank has broken down, and the other is stuck in mud in a local village. The tank crew actually sent a messenger pigeon for help.”
Blaine wonders if these are bad omens that foreshadow the day.

A soldier suddenly rushes into the dugout with a slip of paper. Major Ashmore quickly reads the message. “It’s time. We’ll start with Captain Rigg’s troop. Captain Anderson, your troop will be next. I’ll give the sign for when you should deploy your units.”

Blaine quickly returns to his troop and updates his lieutenants on the plan. They spend the next hour waiting outside in the damp trench for the order to attack. The incredible noise of artillery and machine gun fire, both enemy and friendly, is incessant, and it is mixed with the shouting of orders, whistles, and the cries of wounded men. Blaine listens carefully - each type of weapon has a distinctive sound - to figure out what they’ll be up against when they go over the top.

Despite his warm trench coat and boots, Blaine shivers in the exposed trench. He takes off his gloves to breath some hot air onto his hands, and he twists the promise ring on his finger before he puts his gloves back on. Before going to battle, he needs to hold onto his loving memories of Kurt and the promises they’ve made to each other.

Major Ashmore walks quickly over to Blaine. “It’s time for your troop to go over the top. There’s already been a lot of casualties, and the medics are working to clear them out.”

Blaine blows his whistle, and shouts, “Advance!” Blaine climbs out of the trench with the soldiers, carrying his machine gun, and wearing a haversack filled with other heavy equipment. He immediately finds himself amid enormous explosions and ferocious gunfire. There are so many soldiers lying in no man’s land. The RAMC medics and stretcher-bearers are working hard to carry or escort the wounded soldiers back to the trenches, while the dead are left to be buried when there’s a suitable break in the fighting.

As he moves through the enemy's field of fire, Blaine and his soldiers keep low to the ground for safety. He sees four RFC planes flying overhead and prays that Kurt isn’t among them.

*BOOM*

A German bomb explodes, and Blaine is tossed onto the wet muddy ground. He can feel the earth tremble and hear bullets fly over his head. When he looks up, he’s horrified to see a large medic thrown far to the ground nearby. The medic is screaming, but there’s no one around to give him attention. Blaine crawls toward him and sees his blood-soaked face. Blaine can tell that the medic is still conscious by the terrified look in his eyes.

“Relax your body. I’m going to drag you back to safety,” Blaine says.

The medic is far taller and at least double his weight, but Blaine finds the strength to drag the man to the trench. He slides several times in the slippery mud, but he’s determined to save the medic’s life. When Blaine finally manages to get himself and the medic to the trench wall, he shouts, “Somebody help me! It’s Captain Anderson of the Royal Army, and I need help to get a wounded medic back inside the trench!”

Two soldiers peek over the top of the trench to confirm Blaine’s information. When they see the wounded medic, they climb out of the trench to help Blaine pull him and the medic to safety. Once they’ve made it back inside the trench, Blaine notices that the medic is trembling. In spite of the cold, there are beads of sweat forming on the medic’s forehead. Blaine quickly undoes the medic’s coat buttons to see if there are any gunshot wounds. Although there is no blood, lice are crawling and jumping all over his uniform.

“Someone get two stretcher-bearers! This man needs immediate attention.”
Once the medic is taken away to the nearest bearer post, Blaine returns his focus on what is happening around him. He’s covered in thick mud from head to toe. He’s freezing. He’s tired. He would rather be anywhere else than a hellhole in the middle of the Battle of the Somme.

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Blaine enters the empty bistro and sits down at a table by the fireplace. He still feels a chill in his bones and orders a hot toddy. After five days on the front line, his troop is now on local rest leave. The final days of the Battle of the Somme were the most gruesome fighting he’s seen in this war. A quarter of his soldiers have been wounded or killed on the battlefield. His leave will be filled with writing sympathy letters to their families, a job he hates to do.

Blaine hears the rumbling of aircraft rotary engines in the sky, and he wonders if Kurt is flying over him. Blaine is frustrated that they might be so close, but yet they can’t see each other. He’s found out from his sources that Kurt’s squadron is fighting in the Battle of the Somme, but doesn’t know where they are based. When they’re both on home leave next month, they’ll need to figure out other ways to stay connected during this war. Perhaps he could hide a note at bistros where local rest is taken?

Blaine decides to pass the evening with a game of Solitaire. He takes a deck of cards out of his jacket pocket and starts to lay them out into seven piles.

“If it isn’t shrimpy Anderson in the flesh.”

Blaine turns around and sees Captain Jeff Sterling smiling at him.

“It’s Captain Anderson to you, Moneybags,” Blaine retorts with a wink and rises from his chair to embrace his mate from his summer days at Sandhurst Military Academy.

Blaine buys his friend a beer, and they settle down at a table to compare war stories. Blaine is surprised to find out that Captain Sterling’s troop is positioned only a mile away from his on the front line.

“I take it you were over the top in the first offensive?” Captain Sterling asks.

Blaine nods. “We’ve just arrived from the front line for rest. The action was the worst I’ve seen in two years of war. I lost 20 percent of my men in those five days.”

Captain Sterling takes a sip of his beer. “I know what you mean. If it weren’t for the RFC flying overhead and attacking the Fritzes’ planes, we would’ve experienced worse.”

Blaine replies, “The RFC aces are like local legends. Each time they take off in their planes, they risk their lives.”

Captain Sterling thinks for a moment. “My personal favorite is the Flying Porcelain, the newest flying ace. He’s so awesome.”

Blaine chuckles. “Do you know that the Flying Porcelain is a Westerville man?”

“Surely, you’re joking?”

“No, I’m not joking. His father is the abbey’s butler, and the Flying Porcelain was our second footman before the war. He’s the best sort of chap, and I would trust him with my life.” Blaine mentally adds, and I trust him with my heart.
Captain Sterling orders another round of drinks, then returns to their conversation. “It’s a small world. So then, you must know what happened to the Flying Porcelain.”

Blaine’s body stiffens in his seat. “What do you mean?”

“I heard the Fritzes shot down his plane last week.”

The words cut Blaine like a sharp sword swiftly stabbing his heart. “I-Is the Flying Porcelain alive?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I’m asking you, silly.”

Blaine stands up and tries to stop his body from trembling. “Excuse me, but I need to go and find out what has happened to Kurt.”

Captain Sterling waves his hand dismissively. “Don’t bother until the morning. Every soldier and officer on leave are visiting the local whore houses. Speaking of which, why aren’t you there, shrimpy?”

Blaine isn’t going to divulge the real reason that he doesn’t visit whore houses. “And risk getting venereal disease? No, thank you very much.”

“Me, too. Who wants to play hide the weenie with some old ugly dollymop when the only things you’ll get are an empty wallet and VD.”

After saying a quick goodbye to Captain Sterling, Blaine races to the nearby hotel where he and the other officers are staying. He repeatedly slams the bell at the reception until an old man appears, obviously awoken from his sleep.

“Capitaine, is there a fire in the hotel?”

“No, Monsieur, but I must urgently speak to an officer. Can you tell me who’s in?”

The old man turns and inspects the keys hanging on a board. “Nobody is in. May I suggest you try Madame Dupont’s?”

Blaine has no intention of going to Madame Dupont’s and interrupting the officers in the throes of pleasure. “Is there a telephone in the village I could use?”

The old man shakes his head. “All the telephone lines have been down since the beginning of July. Monsieur Lefevre across the street keeps homing pigeons. I’m sure that at the right price, he’ll release a pigeon with a message for you.”

Blaine seriously considers it for a moment or two and then discounts the option. By the time the pigeon has flown to Westerville and back, he’ll be back in the trenches. Blaine takes a piece of paper and hastily scribbles a note.

He slides the note towards the old man, with a few franc coins. “Could you please ensure that Major Ashmore receives this as soon as he returns?”

The old man immediately snatches the coins. “Oui, Capitaine.”

Blaine climbs the stairs to his hotel room and immediately collapses on his bed. His worst nightmare is coming true. He clutches the pillow tightly and sinks his head into it.

The best-case scenario would be that Kurt has survived the crash.
Is he wounded? Is he suffering? What are the long-term effects? How is he coping? Does he need me by his side?

Blaine’s thoughts reluctantly turn to the worst-case scenario, despite how difficult it is. Most RFC pilots don’t survive plane crashes.

Was it quick and painless? Did they find his body? What were Kurt’s last thoughts?

No matter how many times he goes through the various scenarios, one question won’t go away.

How can I survive without Kurt?

Blaine knows exactly how his life will be - after all, it’s all been laid out for him. He’ll return from the war and attend the next London season, filled with ridiculous balls and young ladies. His family will advise him about whom he should pursue. After a wedding and a one-week honeymoon in Paris, they’ll be expected to produce a baby within the first year.

But what about what he wants? What about what he needs? The only thing that has kept this future palatable is the thought that Kurt would be in it. And what if Kurt is dead? There is nobody that could possibly fill that large dark abyss that his death would leave behind. Although his life is more complicated with Kurt, without him life would be empty… meaningless… loveless… unbearable.

His life would be nothing at all.

Blaine lets his walls tumble down, and he breaks down entirely. The tears burst forth like water from a dam. His body shakes with each sob, and his hands clutch the pillow tighter. The pain is so raw that his chest feels split open, exposing an untreatable wound. When there are no more tears, he cries some more.

In the wee hours of the morning, Blaine falls into a fitful sleep.

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When Blaine enters Major Ashmore’s dugout in the sixth trench from the front line, he’s greeted with a sympathetic smile.

“I’m afraid there’s still no news about Second Lieutenant Kurt Hummel.”

“But it’s been four days! Surely this blasted army can find the whereabouts of a RFC flying ace!”

“I know you’re concerned, Captain Anderson, but that’s no reason to be insolent with your commanding officer. We have something known as a battle going on, and everyone is focused on that,” the major reprimands.

“I’m sorry, sir. I know you’re trying your best. I’m worried...”

Major Ashmore interrupts, “I know that you are worried about your Westerville man. It’s rather admirable.”

Major Ashmore shuffles some papers until he finds the one he wants. “I was, however, able to find out about that medic that you saved on the battlefield. His name is Sergeant David Karofsky. He’s from Essex and has been in the RAMC since before the war. His commanding officer has written that he’s the very best of medics, and his skills have saved many lads.”
The name Karofsky rings a bell, but Blaine can’t remember when he’s heard it before. “How is Sergeant Karofsky faring?”

“He’s in a bad way. He’s got trench fever, but now that it’s been diagnosed, he’s receiving the proper medication.”

“I’m so relieved,” Blaine replies.

“That’s not all. He has a nasty injury on his shoulder, but that will heal with time. He also has a loss of hearing in his right ear from the bomb explosion. It’s too early to say whether the hearing loss is temporary or permanent. But rest assured, he’s receiving the best treatment. He’ll be shipped back to Blighty as soon as his fever comes down. Sergeant Karofsky will receive an honorable discharge.”

“I know exactly where Sergeant Karofsky should be sent to recover.”

“I see that glint in your eye, Captain Anderson, but he can’t be sent to Westerville Abbey. He’s not an officer.”

Blaine clenches his fists. “We’ll see about that. This sergeant has saved many lives, including Captain Duval’s. My father, who is the Earl of Westerville and a member of the House of Lords, has some influence on these matters. I shall send him a telegram at once.”

Their conversation is interrupted when they hear knocking on the dugout’s makeshift door.

“Enter,” Major Ashmore commands.

Private Larson enters the dugout and gives a hand salute to his commanding officers. “The post just arrived and there’s a letter for Captain Anderson. It’s stamped ‘urgent’ and was sent by special delivery. Captain Anderson, I assumed that you would want the letter at once.”

Blaine takes the letter from Private Larson and recognizes his grandmama’s scrawly handwriting addressing the envelope. He looks at Major Ashmore, and says, “It was sent from Westerville two days ago.”

“Captain Anderson, why don’t you return to your dugout and take the rest of the day off? I’ll get one of your lieutenants to take over your duties.”

“Thank you, sir!” Blaine replies. He gives the major a hand salute before making a bee-line to his dugout.

Once there, Blaine sits on his cot and turns the envelope in his hands. Of course, the family would decide that his grandmama would be the best person to give him the news of Kurt’s death. Although he can’t bear the thought of his worst imaginings being confirmed, his curiosity gets the best of him. With trembling fingers, he rips open the envelope, and starts to read the letter.

20th November 1916

My dearest Blaine,

You’ve probably heard the news that Kurt’s plane was gunned down. Kurt is alive and at Westerville Abbey.

Blaine stops reading. Tears pour down his face when he realizes that Kurt isn’t dead, but very much alive and back home. He looks up at the ceiling and thanks the heavens. Blaine takes his
hankie out of his pocket to wipe his eyes before he continues to read his grandmama’s letter.

Kurt’s aircraft was shot down during the Battle of the Somme. That battle sounds simply ghastly with all the killings. Luckily, Kurt had something called a parachute, and he jumped out of the plane. Imagine that! Falling out of the sky like a pheasant during a shooting party at a country estate. He landed near a Canadian infantry unit, and they carried him five miles to the closest field hospital. Kurt has broken both legs and one arm, but they were set immediately.

The War Office sent a telegram to Hummel, informing him of Kurt’s injuries and that he’d be sent to Brighton for his recovery. What good is it to have the abbey in such an upheaval with all the wounded officers, when we’re not taking care of one of our own? No, it wouldn’t do at all. Your father called up the War Office and had the orders changed so that Kurt could recover at Westerville Abbey’s hospital ward. Kurt has not only received an honorable discharge, but it’s a foregone conclusion that he’ll receive the Distinguished Flying Medal as well.

Did you know that Kurt is quite the celebrity in Great Britain as a flying ace? Why, there was even a feature article about him in the Sunday Telegraph just two weeks ago (I cut it out for you to read on your home leave). Villagers are flocking to Westerville Abbey to catch a glimpse of Kurt and leave presents of food and whatnot. Hummel is quite beside himself trying to keep everything running smoothly as normal, in spite of the increased activity.

It’s less than a month until your home leave, and I’m looking forward to seeing you once again. I’ve already asked Spratt to clean up Dower House before your return. Hopefully, Kurt will be released from the hospital ward by then. I thought the arrangement worked quite well last year. Judging by how relaxed and happy you were at the end of your home leave, you did as well.

Stay safe, and God bless you.

Your ever-loving Grandmama

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All is quiet on the western front tonight, and Blaine decides to use the time to write Kurt a letter. He takes out Kurt’s photograph from the travel wallet, and starts to sing a popular ditty to himself.

Dear face that holds so sweet a smile for me
Were you not mine, how dark this world would be
I know no light above that could replace
Love's radiant sunshine in your lovely face.

Blaine writes from his heart and discloses how he had felt when he had thought Kurt was dead - the despair and the feeling of hopelessness. He writes about their possible future plans for when the war is over. But most of all, he writes about his endless love.

Give me a smile, the love-light in your eyes
Life could not hold a sweeter paradise
Give me the right to love you all the while
My world forever, the sunshine of your smile.

Blaine hears a knock on the door, and Private Larson rushes in. “Sorry to interrupt you, Captain Anderson, but Major Ashmore needs to see you right away. With everything so quiet, he has orders for a nighttime mission.”

“I’ll be there in a minute,” Blaine replies.
Blane folds the letter and places it in an envelope. He licks it closed, then addresses it to his grandmama and leaves it on his table for tomorrow morning’s post. When he arrives at Major Ashmore’s dugout, he discovers that his lieutenants are there as well.

“We need to send out patrols to no man’s land tonight while there is a new moon and no observed activity from the German trenches. In addition to gathering as much information as possible about the enemy position, your soldiers will need to cut their telephone cables and weaken barbed wire defenses.”

“Yes, sir!”

“I expect the first unit to go over the top at 23:00 hours. Captain Anderson, please report back to me at once when you return.”

“Yes, sir!”

Blaine organizes his units on a rota, so that each one will be in no man’s land for one hour. With so many objectives for the reconnaissance mission, Blaine knows that he’ll be in no man’s land for most of the night.

Blaine returns to his dugout to put on the thick woolen socks that Kurt had knitted for him and dresses as warmly as he can for this bitterly cold November night.

When Blaine and the first unit go over the top, he feels like he is stepping onto a dystopian wasteland. The artillery has destroyed the countryside, reducing trees and buildings to desolate rubble and churning up endless mud in some areas. The unit quietly creeps to various points near the German trench to listen for noise and movements. Once they’ve discovered where many of the Germans are, they creep back to their own trench.

The second unit goes over the top with large wire-cutters to cut a path in the enemy’s barbed wires. Blaine feels something metal poke his back. When he turns around...

Blaine is facing the barrel of a German rifle.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, dear. While one man is safe, the other is not. I’m not going to mention what is up next.

The song Blaine sings to himself while writing to Kurt is “The Sunshine of Your Smile” performed by John McCormack (1916).

A lot has been written about the 141-day Battle of the Somme, one of the bloodiest military battles in history. By the end of the campaign, the Allies and Central Powers lost more than 1.5 million men. With both sides holding steadily in their established trenches, it is often thought of as a battle of attrition. The first episode of Downton Abbey Series 2 opens with a scene from this battle.

Trivia: ‘Sexual adventure’ proved to be a popular relief from the stress of the front for millions of men dislocated from home and distant from traditional social structures. British military authorities permitted their soldiers to visit the maisons tolérées in
France. There were 416,891 cases of VD among British and Dominion troops (representing roughly 5% of the men who enlisted during the war).

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I also thank Dblmalfuction, who performed a detailed final review, although all mistakes are mine.

I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.
A Local Hero

Chapter Notes

This chapter covers shell shock (now known as PTSD) and related symptoms. If you have any concerns, please send me a message on I’m Tumblr or email me at VoyageAsia4@gmail.com. No anons please - I will only answer privately so as not to spoil things for other readers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

December 1916
Kurt

When the morning sun shines through the window and reaches his face, Kurt wakes up and slowly looks around. It takes him a minute to remember that he’s at Westerville Abbey’s hospital ward and not the RFC barracks in France. The doctors must have reduced the strength of his pain medication, for Kurt is feeling brighter and more aware than he has since jumping out of his aeroplane before it crashed.

Not for the first time, Kurt thanks the heavens that his parachute opened when he jumped. His two broken legs and broken arm are proof that landing in a tree was indeed troublesome. Still, Kurt is grateful that he’s still alive. However, he has a lot of questions about his medical condition that need answers. When he sees the aged doctor enter the ward, he snaps his fingers and shouts, “Dr Roberts!”

Dr Roberts approaches the bed. “Good morning, Kurt. I’m glad to see that you’re awake. How do you feel?”

“I feel like a truck has run me over, but that’s not what I wanted to talk to you about. I need to know more about my condition. For example, when the casts will be removed?”
Dr Roberts replies, “We’ll take the cast off your arm in a month’s time and see how it’s healed. It’ll take longer for the legs - probably three months.”

With his one working arm, Kurt leans over to the bedside table and grabs the glass of water. After taking a few sips, he shifts in the bed, trying to get more comfortable, but it’s rather awkward when both legs and one arm are suspended in traction.

“Will I regain full use of my legs and arm?”

Dr Roberts consults the medical charts on his clipboard. “We’ll have to see. You have several things going for you. When the Canadians first found you, they created splints to secure your broken bones before carrying you to the RAMC station. Not only did this help keep the bones in place, but it kept everything clean. I can’t tell you how many limbs have had to be amputated because mud infected the wound. The doctors at the field hospital set the bones quickly using a technique called...”

Kurt taps his fingers on his leg cast. He’s anxious to know what his future will hold, and couldn’t care less details about the RAMC field treatment and protocol. When he can take no more of Dr Roberts’s long-windedness, he interrupts, “Does that mean I’ll be able to walk again?”

“Kurt, I can’t give you a definitive answer.”

“Dr Roberts, I know that, but what is your opinion?”

“Based on my experience, I would say you have every chance you’ll walk again. The field doctors thought the breaks were clean. At Westerville Abbey, you’ll have the very best care. Sergeant Smythe has had surprising success with other officers with worse leg injuries than yours.”

Kurt looks around and finds Sebastian holding crutches for an officer, who is getting out of bed. Never in his wildest dreams did he think that Sebastian would end up being key to his full recovery.

The doctor continues, “That doesn’t mean that your legs will have the same strength as before. I believe that the RFC is sending an officer to the abbey soon to discuss your future options.”

Kurt nods and knows that the conversation with the RFC might as well happen sooner rather than later. If he doesn’t make a full recovery, then he’ll automatically receive a medical discharge. However, the more realistic situation is that he’ll regain the use of his limbs again, but he won’t be as strong as he was before the incident. With the help of the abbey’s medical staff, he’ll need to make a judgement call whether he’s fit enough to return to the RFC.

He’s in two minds about what he wants to do. He loves to fly aeroplanes. Sure, it takes a lot of hard work and discipline to learn the techniques, physics, and routines. But at the same time, flying is all about feeling. To rise off the surface of the earth, controlling the aircraft with your own two hands. To ascend, to descend and to roll. To carve the edge of a cloud with the tip of the wing. It’s that amazing feeling of being free of all the confining conventions found on the ground below.

On the other hand, being a pilot during wartime is no easy matter. It means flying in less than ideal weather and under the cloak of darkness, and dodging the gunfire from German aeroplanes. And soon, it might mean dropping bombs on unsuspecting people. But mostly, it’s not knowing whether he’ll survive the flight.

Yes, it’ll be an interesting conversation with the RFC officer.
Two days later…

Now that Kurt is awake more often than not, he finds boredom settling in. There is very little he can do with his legs and one arm in traction. Both officers and staff at the abbey come and sit by his bedside, lapping up every detail as he regales them with tales of his flying missions. Frankly, it’s exhausting to speak so much.

What surprises him most is the number of cards, letters, and gifts that are delivered to him daily. They are sent by all manner of people. Men in the trenches write letters thanking him for flying and finding out valuable information about the enemy. The sound of the aeroplane engines give them hope. Women in Great Britain wish him a speedy recovery and send him tea cakes and gifts. Boys from all corners of the British Empire ask what it’s like to be a RFC pilot, for they wish to be one someday. He gives the tea cakes and trinkets to convalescing officers and the abbey’s staff. What is left over is sent to the Women’s Institute to distribute as they see fit.

His favorite part of the day is when Lady Quinn visits with young Masters Michael Devon and Richard Phillip. She fell pregnant once again after Lord Cooper’s home leave last Christmas and gave birth to her second son at the end of September. Kurt reads them a story before naptime, and Master Michael helps to turn the pages. The time he spends with the young lads makes him feel closer to Blaine, who was a most attentive and loving uncle during his home leave last December.

Once the dinner plates are cleared, Miss Berry makes her regular nightly appearance in the abbey’s hospital ward. Kurt would never admit it to anyone, but he always looks forward to Miss Berry’s vocal performances. It breaks up the tedium of being surrounded by wounded men, and her very sweet voice goes a long way to soothe the pain in his limbs.

Miss Berry goes to a convalescing officer, whose eyes are wrapped in bandages, and whispers in his ear. He nods, and she leads him to the piano in the far corner. Once the introduction has been played, Miss Berry starts to sing.

To Belgium and to Flanders, to Germany to here  
I fought for King and country I love dear
It was Christmas in the trenches where the frost so bitter hung  
The frozen fields of France were still, no Christmas song was sung
Our families back in England were toasting us that day  
Their brave and glorious lads so far away

If Kurt closes his eyes, he can imagine that it’s Blaine accompanying Miss Berry on the piano. He can clearly remember many an evening when Blaine played the piano and joined Miss Berry in the chorus. And during the love ballads, Blaine looked fixedly at him while singing. Oh, how he wishes that Blaine was here to sing and comfort him.

Once Miss Berry has finished singing the ballad about the 1914 Christmas truce, Kurt thumps his good arm against the bedrail as a means of clapping loudly. It’s only now that he realizes how important she is for the officers’ morale. As their stay in the hospital ward is filled with pain and uncertainty about the future, her vocal performances are often the highlight of their days.

Kurt calculates that it will be only ten more days until Blaine is home on leave. He’s frustrated that he’ll be stuck convalescing in the abbey’s hospital ward, and won’t be able to stay with Blaine at Dower House. He makes a mental note to ask the Dowager Countess for advice. She always has the most creative, yet sensible, ideas.

Kurt reaches for his kit box on the night table and takes out the letter he received earlier in the day to reread.
My dearest K,

Thank the heavens you’re alive and safe in Westerville! I heard the news of your plane crash when I was on local leave. For four long days, I had no way of knowing what happened to you, and I feared the absolute worst. I wasn’t fit for anything, and I can’t even begin to find the words to describe how I felt. My heart was shattered into sharp pieces that could never be put back together. It was as if I was detached from my anchor and drifting aimlessly.

Fortunately, Grandmama sent a special delivery letter as soon as you arrived at Westerville Abbey. My heart has become one again and is now overflowing with happiness. I love you so much.

K, I can’t live without you. Promise me that we are going to live to a fabulous old age and do fabulous things. As a war hero, new doors and opportunities will open to you. We’ll join the same gentlemen’s club and play cribbage most evenings. You’ll be a much better player, but on special occasions, you’ll let me win. We’ll travel the world... and sometimes you’ll fly me in an aeroplane (it’s something I really want to experience). We’ll go on hunting expeditions and spend long nights alone in secluded private lodges. When I get home for Christmas, let’s think of all the things we want to do with our long and fabulous lives.

My darling K, I never ever want to be scared like that again! You’ve done your part for the war effort. I hope that during the remaining days of the war, you will be safe.

I must go now, my love. Since everything is quiet this evening, Major Ashmore is planning a reconnaissance mission. I hope it’s a short one - it’s cold and windy outside. However, my love for you will keep me warm, knowing that you are alive and safe.

I love you fearlessly and forever,

B

xoxoxo

The lights dim through the ward, giving the five-minute warning that they’ll be switched off for bedtime. Kurt places the letter inside the envelope and stores it in his kit box. On his first day back at Westerville, the Dowager Countess had visited as soon as he awoke, telling him that she sent a letter to Blaine, bringing him up to date with Kurt’s recent accident and his safe return home.

Kurt wishes that Blaine hadn’t gone through those four days thinking he was dead. He knows that his heart would shatter as well if he ever received news like that. Kurt is not a religious man, but he would get on his knees and pray every night if it meant that Blaine would be safe in France. They deserve to be together for an eternity. Kurt drifts off to sleep thinking of all the things they will do together in their fabulous lives.

In the middle of the night, Kurt is woken up by screams. He opens his eyes and finds that the source of the commotion is Sergeant Karofsky. Kurt notices that he’s shivering and sweating in bed. He watches the Sergeant crawl underneath his bed and curl his body into a ball, sobbing uncontrollably.

The ward’s door opens, and Kurt sees a robe-clad Sebastian quietly enter the ward. He gets down on his hands and knees and slowly lies down next to Sergeant Karofsky. Sebastian is speaking softly. Kurt can’t make out the words but can tell that Sebastian’s tone of voice is calm and soothing. Kurt is surprised to see Sebastian take the Sergeant in his arms and rub his back.

Kurt can’t help but continue staring at the pair underneath the bed. One officer is in a distressed
state, and the other is trying to soothe the worries away. Sebastian stares back at him, while kissing Karofsky’s head, rocking him to soothe the pain. Kurt wonders what is happening to Sergeant Karofsky, but eventually he’s able to close his eyes and find sleep again.

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The next morning, Kurt is awakened by Sebastian gently shaking him.

“What time is it?” Kurt asks.

“Six o’clock. I know it’s early, but I think we should talk. I’ve brought us some tea.”

Kurt sits up in bed, and Sebastian sets down a tray holding a cup of tea. After a sip, Kurt asks, “Did you get any sleep last night?”

Sebastian shakes his head. “Once I got Sergeant Karofsky back into bed, he soon fell asleep. I stayed by his bedside in case he had more nightmares. I don’t want him kicked off the ward for being disruptive. He needs to be somewhere he feels safe.”

“What’s wrong with Sergeant Karofsky? Hasn’t his wound healed?”

“Sergeant Karofsky had a lot of medical problems when he arrived at the abbey. He had trench fever and a shoulder wound. These problems were easy to fix. He also lost the hearing in his right ear from a bomb explosion. We don’t know for certain whether it’s temporary or permanent, but as time goes by, it doesn’t look like the Sergeant will regain his hearing.”

Kurt interjects, “But those medical problems don’t describe the nightmare and behavior last night.”

Sebastian takes a sip of tea. “Sergeant Karofsky also suffers from tremors, confusion, nightmares, and hypersensitivity to noise. The RAMC see the symptoms in combat so often that we informally call it *shell shock*. That condition is more difficult to cure.”

“How do you get it?” Kurt asks.

“No one knows for sure. It seems to affect all sorts of soldiers and officers, whether they’re in the trenches or not. Some officers think it’s simply cowardice or malingering, but that isn’t true. Sergeant Karofsky was my commanding officer during my last months on the front. There was no medic braver than him. I lost count of the risks to his life he took and how many soldiers he saved. I wouldn’t be alive today if the Sergeant hadn’t gone into the river and dragged me out, and he doesn’t even know how to swim.”

Sebastian takes a sip of tea and then continues, “Weak or strong, courageous or cowardly, everyone has a breaking point. At some stage, war frightens everyone witless. Going over the top into no man's land - that’s a fear I never wish to experience again. You feel naked and alone in the universe. It’s as if every sniper in the German army is aiming their machine gun at you, ready to blow your head off. It’s enough to drive a man mad. Everyone experiences at least one desperate moment. Fortunately for me, Sergeant Karofsky was there to stop me from doing something stupid.”

“Will Sergeant Karofsky have to return to the front?” Kurt asks.

Sebastian shakes his head. “His hearing loss is probably permanent, and that alone provides him with an honorable medical discharge. I’m hoping that he recovers enough to be able to work here at the abbey, where I can keep an eye on him.”
“That’s very kind of you, Sebastian. But can I ask why you are going out of your way to help the Sergeant?”

Sebastian pauses for a minute before declaring, “Because I love him.”

Kurt quirks an eyebrow, surprised by Sebastian’s words.

“It’s not just because he saved my life. It’s more than that. Karofsky really understands me, and in spite of my flaws, he still makes me feel special… Like who I am and how I feel are important.”

“And is Sergeant Karofsky… umm… interested in men as well?”


Kurt blushes at Sebastian’s comments, not wanting any further details.

Sebastian smirks, “I might not be all doe-eyed like you and Mr Blaine, but that doesn’t make my love for Karofsky any less powerful. We all have different ways of expressing it.”

Kurt ponders Sebastian’s words. His knowledge of romance is based upon reading his auntie’s novels and what he experiences with Blaine. It’s only now that he can appreciate that there are other ways two men can demonstrate their love for each other. Karofsky is very fortunate to have Sebastian to help him through his rough times. Kurt only hopes that they can one day find the happiness that both men deserve.

“Do you want to know something rather interesting?”

Kurt nods.

“When Sergeant Karofsky first arrived at the abbey, he asked to see photographs of the Westerville men I had spoken of at the front. His eyes went wide when he saw the photograph of Mr Blaine. Apparently, Mr Blaine was the one who saved Sergeant Karofsky’s life. He dragged the Sergeant from no-man’s land back to the trenches and made sure he received immediate medical attention.”

Kurt thinks that the world just got a little bit smaller, but his heart bursts with pride for Blaine. He now has something in common with Sebastian - they are both in love with heroes.

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Colonel Smith-Barry shakes Kurt’s hand. “I think we’re in agreement on the best way forward, Captain Hummel.”

“Yes, sir,” Kurt replies with a hand salute.

The conversation went even better than Kurt could have imagined. He has been promoted to captain, skipping over the first lieutenant grade. The RFC has also given him an honorable discharge. Once Kurt is fully recovered from his injuries, he will have the possibility to rejoin the RFC as an instructor where he once trained himself at Brooklands in Surrey.

Colonel Smith-Barry grabs the attention of a nearby nurse. “I think it’s time we take Captain Hummel outside so that he can show off his new medal.”

“I’ll need the help of Sergeants Smythe and Karofsky,” Kurt insists.

The nurse quickly finds the two medics. Sebastian removes the wires from the traction while
Sergeant Karofsky gently lowers the casted limbs down. Sebastian positions the wheelchair close by, and Sergeant Karofsky lifts him from the bed. Once Kurt is settled, Sergeant Karofsky wraps a thick woolen blanket around his legs, and Sebastian throws his RFC military coat over his shoulders and places the cap on top of his head.

Sebastian gives a hand salute and says, “They’ll expect to see you in uniform in spite of your injuries, Captain Hummel.”

Sergeant Karofsky steers the wheelchair outside the front entrance, while Sebastian opens doors and clears the way. When the main door opens, Kurt is shocked at how many people are gathered on the front lawn to see him, in spite of the cold winter’s day. There’s everyone from the village, the Anderson family, and the abbey’s staff.

The Earl, wearing his military uniform from the Boer War, steps forward and gives Kurt a hand salute. “Congratulations, Captain Hummel. We all want to see it.”

Kurt returns the hand salute before reaching inside the blanket to take an object from his lap. He opens a box and holds up the Victoria Cross medal for everyone to see. Kurt is surprised by the flash of cameras and realizes that the press is also in attendance.

Colonel Smith-Barry steps forward. “Today, I’ve had the great honor to give the Victoria Cross to Captain Kurt Hummel. As you are aware, this military decoration is awarded for valor in the face of the enemy. No one could be braver than Flying Porcelain on his reconnaissance missions.”

The Colonel pauses to the sound of applause. Kurt takes the opportunity to glance at Sergeant Karofsky, who is standing next to him. There are many unsung heroes in the great war.

Colonel Smith-Barry continues, “Kurt Hummel has been promoted to captain based upon his field performance. It is with deep regret that I inform you his injuries are such that he has received an honorable medical discharge. However, if this war continues after he’s fully recovered, there is a training position available to him.”

Kurt waves at the crowd and shivers when a cold wind whips through him.

Sebastian pushes forward and announces, “Captain Hummel needs to return to the warmth of the hospital ward. We can’t have him freeze to death on the day he receives the Victoria Cross.”

As Kurt is wheeled back inside, he wishes that Blaine were here to celebrate with him. It’s only a week until Blaine returns, but it seems like an eternity.

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“It’s time for Captain Hummel to have some rest. You can meet with him later,” Sebastian announces, clearing the crowd of well-wishers surrounding his bed. Kurt is relieved, as he doesn’t feel very comfortable with all the attention. It seems as if everyone at the abbey wants a glimpse of the Victoria Cross medal.

His father has been standing in the background, waiting for an opportunity to speak. Sebastian gives the butler a quick nod before he leaves the abbey’s hospital ward.

Mr Hummel sits down on the bedside chair. “I wish your mother could see you now… A national hero. I’m so proud of you, Son.”

Kurt smiles lovingly back at his father. “I hope so. I want you to be.”
“The order of things is changing right before our eyes. Once the war is over, there will be so many opportunities for you, now that you’re both Great Britain’s hero and a legend.” Mr Hummel lets out a deep sigh. “I’m afraid it’s the end of an era.”

Kurt agrees with his father. He can’t see how the class structure, which has been firmly embedded in Great Britain for centuries, can continue after the war. Most young men are fighting for their country, experiencing different ways of doing things. And many women are working in factories and on the land. He doesn’t think that people will want to return to domestic service, with long hours and little pay.

He knows that his father will continue as Westerville Abbey’s butler until he retires at an old age. He and Mrs Hummel will lament the slipping of standards and reminisce about the good old days when there were footmen, valets, maids, and hall boys. Kurt, on the other hand, doesn’t plan to return to domestic service. After the war, there will be opportunities for him in the new order of things. However, no matter which version of the future holds true, the one constant is Blaine by his side.

~~~

Kurt is surprised to see his father enter the hospital ward at midday. He’s usually very busy organizing the luncheon for the Andersons and ensuring that everyone is working to his high standards. He first approaches Sebastian, who is sitting with Sergeant Karofsky. After a quick conversation, they arrive at his bedside. Sergeant Karofsky follows with a wheelchair.

Mr Hummel says, “We’re expected in the main entrance hall in five minutes. The Earl has a very important announcement.”

“Does that include me?” Kurt asks.

Mr Hummel nods. “The Earl said he wants all the Westerville men to be there, so that includes both you and Sebastian.”

Sebastian and Sergeant Karofsky help Kurt from the bed into the wheelchair. After thanking the Sergeant, Sebastian wheels Kurt into the main entrance hall. Kurt admires the great Christmas tree decorated with lights and baubles. Both the Anderson family members and the abbey’s staff are present.

“Do you think there has been a truce?” Kurt whispers.

Sebastian replies, “I very much doubt it. Even though the Battle of the Somme is now over, I wouldn’t exactly call it a victory.”

After a few minutes, the Earl arrives. Kurt thinks he’s aged since he saw last him earlier in the day. Instead of standing proud as usual, his shoulders are hunched and he has a frown on his face. Kurt can tell that whatever the Earl will say, it’s not going to be good news.

“Thank you everyone for gathering here so quickly. I only want to say this once. The War Office called me this morning, and I have some rather horrible news. Two days ago, Blaine was sent to no man’s land on a nighttime mission. There was a brief skirmish when the Germans threw hand grenades, and the British retreated. Blaine didn’t make it back to the trench with his troop. The next morning, soldiers went to find him…”

The Earl takes a handkerchief from his pocket and wipes his eyes. “The only thing they found was Blaine’s military identity tag in no man’s land. He has been reported as missing in action,
presumed dead.”

Chapter End Notes

I certainly do like writing cliffhangers at the end of chapters! No hints for what is up next.

Song Rachel song is ‘Christmas in the Trenches’ by John Mccutcheon. Although this song was written in 1984, the ballad tells the story of the 1914 Christmas Truce between the British and German soldiers on the Western Front during WW1. I heard it on the radio on Christmas Eve (when I was drafting this story), and knew I had to incorporate it somewhere into the story.

Trivia: Shell shock is a type of post-traumatic stress disorder, which is often considered the signature injury of World War One. At the Battle of the Somme, covered in the previous two chapters, as many as 40% of casualties were shell-shocked. By 1917, 1 in 7 men, or 80,000 British soldiers, were discharged from service for emotional disorders related to the war. From 1914-1916, doctors believed that being in close range to the big guns pounding out the artillery was somehow disrupting neuronal connections, so nerves were actually affected. It wasn’t until 1917 (this chapter is set in December 1916) that the medical profession started to view shell shock as a psychological problem and shifted their method of treatment accordingly.

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I also thank Dblmalfuction, who performed a detailed final review, although all mistakes are mine.
Three months have passed since the previous chapter.

March 1917

Kurt

“What do you think?” Kurt asks, turning his portrait artwork around so that the officer can see it.

“Why, it’s marvelous!” Major Williams replies. “Can I keep it? I’ll send it to Edith and the young ones to remind them what I look like.”

Kurt smiles, nodding in agreement.

They soon have the attention of the other injured officers on the ward. “Can you do a sketch of me next?” Lieutenant Johnson asks.

“I promised that I would sketch Sergeant Karofsky next, but I’ll put you on the list.”

After four months in the abbey’s hospital ward, boredom has truly set in. Kurt’s casts were removed last month, and Dr Roberts feels that his bones have healed nicely. Kurt has physical therapy for two hours each day, and he can appreciate how good Sebastian is at his job. The sessions leave Kurt sore and exhausted, restricting the rest of his day to bedrest. He has too much time to think of the war, his future… and Blaine.

In spite of the Earl’s daily phone calls to the War Office, and visits to important government officials when he’s in London at the House of Lords, there is still no news of Blaine. The RAMC have no record of Blaine as a patient, and he isn’t listed as a prisoner of war. Kurt firmly believes
that Blaine is still alive. He’s seen firsthand how chaotic things are on the front. Surely, Blaine is safe somewhere in Belgium or France. It doesn’t explain why Blaine hasn’t written to him or his family, but he tucks that thought away, because it’s too hard to think about.

Last month, Mercedes had bought him some charcoal pencils and paper so that he could work on his very own fashion designs. At first, he was excited to do something different, but he found designing ball gowns and men’s evening suits rather frivolous in these wartimes. He has since turned his attention to sketching portraits of other convalescing officers. They are so appreciative of his efforts, and they send the portraits home to their family or sweethearts.

Kurt is surprised when the Dowager Countess enters the ward. Spratt is trailing behind her, struggling to carry a long slender parcel and a rather large box. She makes a bee-line to his bed and sits down on the nearby chair.

“Good afternoon, My Lady. What brings you here?”

“I have some things for you. Now, open them up!”

Sprat sets down the parcels by his side. The long slender parcel contains several high-quality sketch pads, and the box contains watercolor paints, brushes and an easel. Kurt’s eyes widen at the wonderful colors, and his fingertips touch the tips of the paint brushes.

The Dowager Countess looks at Kurt with a smile. “I’ve seen you work diligently with those charcoal pencils, and I thought you might enjoy experimenting with color.”

“I can’t accept your present, My Lady. It’s far too generous.”

“Poppycock! You can repay me one day by painting portraits of my great-grandsons… and Blaine when he returns to Westerville.”

“Then I accept the sketch pads and watercolors. Thank you, My Lady.”

Kurt smiles at the Dowager Countess’ reference to Blaine. In spite of their class differences, they are alike in many ways. They are both 100 percent convinced that Blaine will return to Westerville one day.

~~~

Three months later… June 1917

“I don’t want you to push yourself too soon. Are you sure you’re ready?” Wesley asks.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” Kurt replies, petting the side of Firebird’s body. “I’m just riding to the lake. I want to see it once again before I leave for the RFC training base in Surrey tomorrow.”

“You have so many bags! I’m going to ride out to the lake with you. At least then, I’ll know that you’re safe.”

Once Wesley has packed Kurt’s items in the saddle bags, the men mount their horses and set off across the Westerville estate. It’s a warm summer’s day and they can see wheat and corn growing tall in the fields. Kurt hopes that the crop yield is sufficient to help feed the soldiers.

“Is there any news of Mr Blaine?” Wesley asks.

Kurt shakes his head. “Nothing, but I haven’t given up hope yet. Blaine must be alive… I can feel
When they get to the lakeside, Kurt carefully dismounts Firebird. Although he’s walking again, he doesn’t have the muscle strength that he once had.

“Why so much stuff?” Wesley asks, unpacking the saddlebags.

“I want to paint today. The bags are packed with my easel, watercolors and sketchpad. I love this new British summer time that Parliament introduced last year. The day seems so much longer with the extra hour of daylight at night.”

“But won’t you get hungry?” Wesley asks, unfolding the portable chair and easel.

Kurt chuckles. “Mrs Sylvester packed two meals for me so that I can work through lunch and dinner.”

“I’ll return at 8 PM to help you bring everything back to the abbey,” Wesley says, and waves goodbye as he rides away from the lakeside.

Kurt picks up the watercolors and paint brush before sitting down. He knows every pathway and the landscape like the back of his hand, but he’s now looking at things through an artist’s eyes, and the scene is ablaze with colors. The path towards the lake is abloom with purple heather. Kurt spots the ducks swimming with their young ones near the shores of the lake. In the far distance, the gorse bushes are flourishing with yellow flowers on the undulating green hillside.

As the sun moves across the sky, Kurt starts a new painting to capture the newly formed shadows across the countryside. While he illustrates the colors and the mood of the landscape, he sings softly to himself.

*Let me call you sweetheart*
*I'm in love with you*
*Let me hear you whisper*
*That you love me too*

This has always been his and Blaine’s special place - somewhere they could pass the time together and be their true selves. While he was in the RFC, Kurt would dream of the lakeside and the good times they’ve had. As Kurt sits by the lake, he feels complete, except for one simple matter.

*Oh, Blaine, where have you gone?*

~~~

**Six months later… December 1917**

Kurt has the attention of all the pilots in the classroom.

“Now that you’ve successfully completed your training, you’ll be sent to the front in the new year. Based upon my experience, the most important thing is to trust your instincts. You are the one flying the plane. You are the one who can see the enemy planes. Ultimately, you are the one to decide the aeroplane’s next maneuver and whether to fire the machine gun or drop bombs. And you need to make the decision in a matter of seconds. I have every confidence that each and every one of you are equipped with the skills to be fine pilots, as long as you trust your instincts. Stay safe and Godspeed.”

The newly-licensed pilots clap loudly at the end of their last training session. Kurt waves his hand
to get their attention again. Once the pilots have quietened down, he holds up a large photo.

“This is Captain Blaine Anderson of the 9th Queen's Royal Lancers. He went missing in action a year ago during the Battle of the Somme. Like myself, he’s a Westerville man. He’s a brave soldier, who has put his men’s lives ahead of his own. His family and friends… we are still looking for him.”

Kurt slowly walks in front of the pilots and continues, “Please take a close look at Captain Anderson’s face. If you see him while you’re on the continent, let your commanding officer and me know. It’s very important that he is reunited with his family.”

“We’ll keep an eye out for Captain Anderson, sir,” a pilot responds.

Before leaving, each pilot shakes Kurt’s hand, thanking him for his expert instruction, and ensuring him that they’ll be on the lookout for Captain Anderson.

Kurt returns to his desk and gathers his papers, surprised at how quickly the past six months have passed, working as a training officer at the Brooklands RFC base. He rather enjoys teaching - to encourage and inspire his students to be the best they can be. He’s also contributing to the war effort in a meaningful way. It gives a sense of purpose to his life.

Kurt has shown Blaine’s photo to every pilot that has set foot on the RFC training base over the past six months. He knows that it’s a long shot, but he’s not giving up hope that someone might spot and recognize Blaine. Lord Anderson is using his connections to keep Blaine in the forefront of everyone’s minds in the governmental departments. At the front, Captains Duval and Sterling and their troops are still hunting for Blaine. Kurt is doing what he can through the RFC. Kurt keeps his fingers crossed that someone will find Blaine soon.

Kurt remains hopeful that Blaine is alive. He’s got to be.

~~~

Kurt grabs his bags and steps out of the RFC truck at the end of Westerville Abbey’s drive. After working nonstop for the past six months, he’s finally home on leave for Christmas. The frozen ground crunches as he walks up the drive. No matter how many times he makes this journey on foot, the grandeur of Westerville Abbey takes his breath away. He makes his way to the back of the abbey and enters by the servants’ door. The first person he sees is Mr Evans, who is placing an empty bottle in a crate.

“Welcome home, Kurt!”

“You, too, Mr Evans. When did you arrive?”

“Lord Cooper and I returned yesterday.”

“Any news of Mr Blaine?” Kurt asks. There’s always the possibility that he’s been found since he left the Brooklands a few hours ago.

Mr Evans shakes his head. “Still no news of Mr Blaine. Your timing is excellent because everyone’s in the servants’ hall.”

Kurt hangs up his coat and uses the lavatory to wash up. As he enters the servants’ hall, his stomach rumbles when he smells a delicious meal. Mrs Sylvester is dishing up rabbit stew and roasted root vegetables.
“Well, well, look what the cat dragged in,” Mrs Sylvester exclaims when she sees Kurt. “Just in time for dinner.”

The butler immediately stands up and walks over to give his son a large hug. “Welcome home, Kurt. It’s good to have you back again.”

“It’s good to be home, Father.”

By the time his father releases him, Mrs Hummel and Mercedes are waiting their turns for a hug. Kurt is embarrassed when his stomach rumbles loudly.

Mrs Sylvester interrupts, “Let Porcelain sit down and eat! There will be time for hugs later.”

Kurt sits down next to Mercedes, and Mrs Sylvester immediately sets down a full plate in front of him. He tucks into the delicious hot meal, which is much better than anything served at the RFC’s canteen.

“With the rising food prices, it’s a miracle that I can feed everyone,” Mrs Sylvester huffs.

Sebastian looks up from his meal. “Be glad that we’re not at Anderson House. I’ve read that in London, food is hard to come by. There are long queues at the butcher’s, baker’s, greengrocer’s, and every other shop that sells food.”

Mr Hummel adds, “His Lordship said that food ration books will be introduced next month. We can’t have another crop failure this year.”

Mrs Hummel sets down her cutlery and turns to Kurt. “Speaking of which, would you have time during your home leave to inspect the Westerville fields with me? Last summer, we had a very poor wheat crop, in spite of all our hard work. Perhaps you could make suggestions on how to improve the yield?”

“Certainly, Mrs Hummel. I’d be more than happy to help in any way I can,” Kurt replies.

Mercedes yawns and rubs her eyes. “Lady Quinn’s new baby is certainly keeping me busy at night. He’s a real screamer. I have to remind myself that it’s the only way he can let me know that something’s wrong.”

Last December, when Lord Cooper was home on leave, Lady Quinn fell pregnant once again. In September, she gave birth to her third son. Lord Cooper insisted the baby be named after his brother.

“I’ll stay at the abbey tonight and look after Master Blaine,” Mrs Hummel offers. “I know that Miss Berry still keeps you rushed off your feet during the day.”

Kurt eats the rest of his meal in silence, listening to Mr Evans tell tales of his time spent in Mesopotamia. Kurt’s work with the RFC is focused on the western front, so he finds the stories of the Ottoman Empire rather interesting, although he could do without the impersonations of the locals. Mr Evans is interrupted by the ringing of bells on the board.

Mr Hummel looks at the clock on the wall. “The family is dressing for dinner. It’s time to get going.”

Mr Evans responds, “Don’t worry about the dishes. I’ll bring them into the kitchen.”

All the staff exit the servants’ hall, leaving Sebastian and Kurt alone.
“How are you doing, Sebastian?”

“I’m fine. I still suffer from headaches, which affects my sleeping. I get a bout of dizziness from time to time. But I’m a whole lot better than most officers currently in the abbey’s ward.”

“And how is Sergeant Karofsky?” Kurt asks.

“He’s at the Seale Hayne military hospital, near Newton Abbot, right here in Devon. Major Arthur Hurst’s pioneering methods to treat shell shock are both humane and sympathetic.”

“What will happen to him after the treatment?”

Sebastian smiles. “He’ll return to Westerville Abbey as a medic, of course. I’m expecting him back tomorrow.”

Kurt can see the warmth and love in Sebastian’s eyes when he speaks of Sergeant Karofsky. “I really hope that the therapy works out. No one deserves to go through that special type of hell, particularly Sergeant Karofsky.”

Mr Hummel enters the servants’ hall and hands Kurt an envelope. “I forgot to give you this letter earlier, which arrived in today’s post. Please excuse me, I have to serve the pre-dinner drinks.”

Kurt looks at the envelope and notices that it’s been sent by Major Duval. He’s pleased that Blaine’s friend and commanding officer has received a promotion. After his stay at the abbey’s hospital ward two years ago, Duval returned to the front once his shoulder had completely healed.

Kurt goes to the kitchen to fill a hot-water bottle, collects his bags and walks up the two flights of stairs to his old bedroom. He tucks the hot-water bottle between the sheets, before he washes and changes into his nightclothes. Once he’s climbed into bed, he opens Major Duval’s letter and reads.

Dear K,

I hope you don’t mind that I call you ‘K’ as well? After months of Blaine talking about ‘K’, it’s how I think of you.

You’ve probably noticed by the envelope that I’ve been promoted to major. After conscription started two years ago, new battalions had to be created to accommodate the soldiers. As luck has it, I’m still in the same battalion that I joined many years ago.

I wish I had some good news about Blaine, but I don’t. I’ve personally interviewed everyone I can find who was at the Battle of the Somme on the fateful night that Blaine went MIA. So many soldiers were killed in the no-man’s zone, and a dozen or so were captured by the Germans. However, no one knows what happened to Blaine.

There is still no sign of Blaine. Captain Sterling and our other mates from Sandhurst are also looking for him. Trust me, we ask everyone we come in contact with if they’ve seen him. The photographs of Blaine that you sent me have helped us a lot. Some remember Blaine, but their answers are always the same. No one has seen any trace of him since the Battle of the Somme. However, I won’t stop looking for my close friend until he’s found, dead or alive.

As the battalion’s second-in-command, I don’t get home leave for Christmas. I’ll be on the front with the Yanks, who are also here over the holidays. K, I think you’d like the Yanks. They are friendly, although it takes a while to get used to their accents and slang. They’re generous to a fault. They must get paid more than we do, because they have loads of fags, chocolate, comic
books, and all the things we dream about.

At night when I hear the RFC planes overhead, I think of you and your efforts to train the new pilots. Soldiers still talk about the Flying Porcelain and his heroic flights. When I tell people I know you, they are so impressed. You’d be amazed at how many people buy me drinks to hear about the real Flying Porcelain. Don’t worry, I keep your secrets safe while extolling your virtues.

I’ll let you know of my next home leave in advance. It would be great to meet up and chew the fat.

Warmest regards,

N

Kurt sets down the letter on the night table and gets comfortable in bed. He tries to not lose hope that Blaine is still alive, but it’s really, really hard. In spite of everyone looking for Blaine, it seems as if he’s disappeared into thin air. Or worse.

Kurt doesn’t allow himself to imagine life without Blaine. To think it might jinx his genuine belief that he’s still alive. However, it’s the first time that Kurt hasn’t slept in a barracks in six months, and he can’t fight off the tears any longer. He sobs into his pillow, desperately hoping that Blaine is warm and safe somewhere. Kurt lets his tears flow freely as he hopes that one day Blaine will return into his arms, so that they can spend their lives together doing fabulous things, like Blaine has written about.

When there are no more tears, Kurt drifts off into a fitful sleep, hoping that tomorrow will be the day that there will be good news.

~~~

Two days later…

Immediately after breakfast, Kurt takes the public bus to Exeter to do some shopping. He heads to Marks and Spencers to buy Christmas presents for his family and friends. Ever since Blaine purchased flannel shirts for him all those years ago, his father has been looking at them longingly. Now that his father is living at Hummel Cottage and has downtime away from the abbey, Kurt has decided to buy him a flannel shirt of his own for Christmas.

He stops at the display of underpants and smiles, knowing that he’s wearing Blaine’s boxer briefs underneath his uniform. They are showing the signs of extensive wear, but it’s one way that he still feels connected to Blaine. He’ll continue to wear them until they are in shreds. When Blaine comes back, they’ll buy new pairs and laugh at Kurt wearing those tatty boxer briefs for all those years.

Kurt consults the pocket watch, which Blaine gave him, and goes to the bus station to wait for his friends. At precisely 2:45 PM, the bus pulls into the station. Mr Evans, Mercedes, Sebastian, and Sergeant Karofsky are the first ones off the bus.

Mercedes gives him a quick hug. “We’re so lucky to all get the same afternoon off. Mrs Hummel was so nice to allow it, once she found out that the entire Anderson family will be spending the day with the Wildes.”

“The film starts in fifteen minutes; I don’t want to be late for the newsreel,” Kurt replies.

They briskly walk to the Empire Electric Theatre and purchase their tickets. They are fortunate to find five seats together in the center of the cinema. Kurt sits in the middle, between Mercedes and Sebastian. When the cinema darkens, Sergeant Karofsky’s body tenses, but he relaxes when
Sebastian holds his hand and strokes over it with this thumb. Kurt looks at Mr Evans and Mercedes, who are also looking very cozy together. Sadness fills his heart, because he won’t experience that feeling again - not until Blaine is home.

The audience quietens when the curtains open and the screen lights up with a photograph and War Office Official Topical Budget boldly written across. The five-minute newsreel first shows the aftermath of the communist revolution in Russia. Kurt perks up when they feature British soldiers returning home on leave. There’s footage of soldiers in the trenches, and those boarding a homebound ship. Kurt’s eyes dart from one soldier to another, hoping to get a glimpse of Blaine. When the last story of the newly-established Women's Royal Naval Service appears on the screen, Kurt slumps in his seat. He soon feels a hand press into his thigh.

“I’m sorry, boo. I hate to see you so disappointed after the newsreels,” Mercedes says softly.

“I know it’s a long shot, but I can’t help hoping to see Mr Blaine on the screen,” Kurt replies.

Mercedes adds, “Cleopatra is about to start. The film will take your mind off things.”

Mercedes is right. For two hours, Kurt is transported to ancient Egypt and the scheming ways of Cleopatra. Before he realizes it, the film is over and the cinema’s lights turn back on. When the opening notes begin to play on the piano, Kurt stands up with the other attendees to sing God Save the King.

~~~

Everyone rises from their seat when Mr Hummel enters the servants’ hall. “His Lordship wishes to speak to everyone. Please make your way to the entrance hall. We best not keep him waiting. Kurt, could you quickly get Sebastian from the hospital ward? All the Westerville men are required.”

As Kurt rushes towards the hospital ward, he wonders what the Earl has to announce. Is there new information about Blaine? He quickly whispers to Sebastian, and they both join the others in the entrance hall. The Christmas tree is set up and shining brightly with baubles and lights. The family is on one side of the Earl and the servants on the other.

The Earl clears his throat and pauses. Kurt can see that he’s trying to swallow down his emotions.

“Exactly one year ago, I received a telephone call from the War Office to inform me that Blaine was missing in action, presumed dead. Today, I also received a telephone call from the War Office. I’m afraid that they have no new information. As is customary, since Blaine hasn’t been found within one year, he’s been declared Killed in Action.”

The room is silent as each person digests the news that Blaine has been declared dead. The only sound heard in the entrance hall is the Countess quietly sobbing into her handkerchief.

The Earl continues, “We shall go into official mourning for at least one year. Once the war is over, we’ll hold a memorial service for Blaine.”

The Dowager Countess suddenly pounds her cane on the floor twice, and the loud sound echoes throughout the main entrance.

“I refuse to believe that Blaine is dead! Unless his body is found, or the prime minister announces that the very last soldier has stepped foot on British soil, I will never give up hope!”

With pride and stubbornness written all over her face, the Dowager Countess makes her way to the staircase. Kurt sees her hand trembling and immediately rushes over to help her up the stairs. When
they arrive at her bedroom, Kurt helps her sit down on a chair and stokes the fire to warm up the room. When Kurt places a cashmere blanket over her lap, the Dowager Countess finally speaks.

“I can understand why the family will go into mourning, I truly do. It’s what is expected of us. But Blaine is such a vibrant and resourceful young man. It can’t be possible that he’s dead. I haven’t given up hope. It’s what gives me strength and keeps me alive.”

“I haven’t given up hope that Blaine is alive either, My Lady.”

“I think I shall spend the rest of the day in my room. Please ask Hummel to arrange for a dinner tray to be brought to me later.”

“Yes, My Lady.”

Kurt leaves the Dowager Countess’ bedroom and returns to the servants’ hall. Everyone is quiet in their own thoughts as they drink their cups of tea. The silence is broken when Sebastian and Sergeant Karofsky enter the room with two large boxes.

Mrs Hummel stands up and opens the first box. “I have new uniforms for the ladies.” The housekeeper distributes the all-black dresses and aprons to the female staff.

Mr Hummel announces, “I’ve already tied pieces of black crepe to the front door. All men, including the staff, will wear black armbands. They should be worn at all times, except when on military duty.”

The butler distributes an armband to every man around the table. Kurt’s fingers play with the black material, and he realizes that he’ll be wearing a reminder that Blaine is missing every waking moment of each day. Kurt thinks back to the Dowager Countess’ words, and despite the Earl’s announcement, he hasn’t given up hope that Blaine is still alive.

*To live without hope is to cease to live.*

Chapter End Notes

The last line of the chapter is a quote by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, a famous 18th century Russian author.

The song that Kurt sings to himself at the lakeside is Let Me Call You Sweetheart. Although this famous song was performed by Bing Crosby in 1934, it was actually written in 1910 and was a huge hit for the Peerless Quartet in 1911. Kurt heard this song in the RFC barracks in France as well.

Trivia: Daylight-saving time was introduced as a temporary measure during World War I, as a way of conserving energy and providing more usable hours of daylight. Britain passed the British Summer Time Act in 1916, a few weeks after Germany implemented something too. It has nothing to do with farmers and cows!

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I also thank Dblmalfunctin, who performed a detailed final review, although all mistakes are mine.

I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.
Next up: The story skips ahead one year to the end of the war.

Many thanks to Datshitrandom for creating this wonderful manip of the photo of Blaine. Please go here to give the artist some love.
November 1918
Kurt

For the first time in years, Kurt dresses in his footman’s outfit. His father has a nasty toothache and left early in the morning for Exeter to visit a dentist. He has promised his father he’d look after the Andersons during their luncheon. He reluctantly wraps the black armband around the jacket’s upper sleeve. He hates the visual reminder that Blaine is still missing in action.

Earlier in the week, Kurt left Brooklands, Surrey for the very last time. Once the ceasefire was signed, there was no more the need to train so many RFC pilots.

Kurt looks at the platters that are set out on the kitchen table to carry upstairs. There’s pea soup, potted cheese, beetroot salad, potato pancakes and tinned fruit.

“This doesn’t look appetizing,” Kurt says, looking at a platter of stewed rhubarb.

Mrs Sylvester snaps, “I do what I can with the food rations we have. Be thankful that we live in the countryside, and I preserved fruits and vegetables last autumn. Tonight, they’ll get a special treat of pork sausages… if Mr Hummel can find them in Exeter.”

Kurt takes the meager offerings upstairs and sets them out on a buffet table in the library. Soon after, the Earl and the other Andersons arrive.

“Kurt, what on earth are you doing here?” the Dowager Countess asks.
“Mr Hummel has an urgent dental appointment in Exeter, My Lady. The only way I could get him to leave was to assure him that I would personally supervise the luncheon.”

The family have to help themselves to the luncheon offerings - most staff are in the fields, ploughing and drilling wheat. Since 1916, the wheat yield has been lower than usual, and everyone wants to ensure that the winter crop survives.

Miss Berry sits down and frowns at her plate. “I don’t see why we need to be on food rations when we produce food right here on the Westerville estate. Besides, the ceasefire agreement was signed almost two weeks ago.”

“At my age, one must ration everything, including one's excitement,” the Dowager Countess declares.

The Countess turns to Miss Berry. “Everyone is on food rations. Why, even King George and Queen Mary have ration books. Our ships are filled with soldiers returning from war, and not food supplies. Rationing is more important than ever.”

The Countess looks at her husband. “Speaking of returning soldiers, do you have any news?”

“Cooper and Evans will be arriving in Exeter in three days’ time. Their ship has already left Baghdad.”

“What marvelous news!” Lady Quinn exclaims. “The children are so looking forward to seeing their father again.”

Each year that Lord Cooper was home on leave, Quinn fell pregnant. After producing three sons, she gave birth to her first daughter, Elizabeth Violet, in September.

“Let’s make a day of it and have everyone at the abbey go to the train station to greet them,” the Countess suggests.

The Earl nods in agreement.

“And Blaine? Any news of Blaine?” the Dowager Countess asks.

The Earl shakes his head. “He’s still listed as killed in action and buried in an unknown grave.”

The Dowager Countess tuts loudly. “I’ve said it time and time again, but I’ll only believe it when Blaine’s body is found, or the prime minister announces that the very last soldier has returned to British soil. In the meantime, I will never give up hope for our Blaine.”

The Earl gives her a reassuring smile. “Mama, we all hope that Blaine is alive and well. The War Office still sends me the lists of returning soldiers each day, and I pore over them, looking for Blaine’s name.”

It is all that Kurt can do to keep a neutral expression on his face for the rest of the meal. Inside, his heart is crumbling. He doesn’t want to imagine life without Blaine by his side. After all this time, and like the Dowager Countess, he’s still hopeful that Blaine is alive.

Once the family has finished eating, they each go their separate ways. Kurt is surprised when Sergeant Karofsky enters the library and starts collecting the plates and silverware from the table.

“Umm… I usually help Mr Hummel out before and after mealtimes. It saves him going up and down the stairs so many times. Besides, I like the exercise.”
“Thank you, Sergeant Karofsky. My father isn’t as sprightly as he once was, especially after his heart attack. It’s kind of you to help him that way.”

“I rather enjoy it. Afterwards, your father always asks me to join the rest of the staff for their meal.”

Kurt’s stomach starts rumbling at the thought of his own luncheon. “Yes, of course. Please join us today as well. We all welcome your company.”

Once the library has been cleared of the luncheon dishes, Kurt and Sergeant Karofsky join the rest of the staff in the servants’ hall. The Sergeant quickly takes the empty seat next to Sebastian. Kurt finds it curious that while Sebastian was so quick to leave domestic service, he voluntarily fraternizes with the staff at every opportunity. Why, he even sleeps in his father’s old room in the servants’ quarters.

Kurt looks at what’s on offer for luncheon. The same meal as provided upstairs is set out on the table. The Earl has insisted that everyone at the abbey share the food rations equally. The staff are more than happy with this arrangement, for working in the fields and dairy farms burns a lot of energy.

Sergeant Karofsky asks, “Could someone pass me the beetroot salad? I’m famished.”

Kurt passes the serving bowl, and is taken aback to find Sergeant Karofsky frozen in place, with a glazed look in his eyes. Kurt feels unsettled as the conversation continues to flow around the Sergeant, as if nothing has happened to him.

Mr Hudson bounds into the servants’ hall and takes off his uniform jacket. He now works for the Ministry of Food, investigating those suspected of being involved in the black market. Fortunately, people in Westerville and its surroundings are mainly honest. It’s in the cities, where people have limited means of growing their own food, that the black market thrives.

“How is the wheat crop looking?” Kurt asks.

Mrs Hummel shrugs. “It’s hard to tell this early. I’m hoping now that the ceasefire has been signed, we’ll have a bumper crop for our returning soldiers.”

Kurt glances at Sergeant Karofsky, who is still gazing straight ahead with empty eyes. He notices that Sebastian is gently stroking the Sergeant’s back.

“Did the Earl mention anything at lunch about when the Westerville men will return?” Mercedes asks.

Kurt replies, “Lord Cooper and Mr Evans have already set sail from Baghdad. We’ll all be going to Exeter to meet them off the train in three days’ time.”

Mercedes closes her eyes and looks upwards, as if thanking the heavens.

“How is the wheat crop looking?” Kurt asks.

Mrs Hummel shrugs. “It’s hard to tell this early. I’m hoping now that the ceasefire has been signed, we’ll have a bumper crop for our returning soldiers.”

Kurt glances at Sergeant Karofsky, who is still gazing straight ahead with empty eyes. He notices that Sebastian is gently stroking the Sergeant’s back.

“Did the Earl mention anything at lunch about when the Westerville men will return?” Mercedes asks.

Kurt replies, “Lord Cooper and Mr Evans have already set sail from Baghdad. We’ll all be going to Exeter to meet them off the train in three days’ time.”

Mercedes closes her eyes and looks upwards, as if thanking the heavens.

“Kurt, did they mention Mr Blaine upstairs?” Mr Hudson asks.

Kurt looks down at his plate. “The Earl is still actively looking for him.”

Mercedes squeezes Kurt’s shoulder. “Let’s all say a special prayer for Mr Blaine tonight.”

Kurt hears Sergeant Karofsky shift in his chair. Once the Sergeant has regained his bearings, he rejoin the conversation. “If you ask me, Captain Anderson is a true hero. And I’m not just saying
that because he saved my life. Did you know that he made the effort to visit me in the field hospital during his local rest leave? He’s one of the few officers that really cares about his men.”

The Sergeant takes a sip of tea. “Oh, my tea’s gone cold. How did that happen?”

Sebastian pours some tea from the pot into a fresh cup and slides it towards Sergeant Karofsky. “I think you have my tea by mistake. I prefer my tea cold.”

Mrs Hummel asks, “Do you know when the Westerville Abbey hospital ward will close down and the abbey will return to normal?”

Sebastian replies, “Now that the war is over, it’s highly unlikely that we’ll receive any new convalescing officers. The RAMC are thinking of closing down the hospital ward very soon.”

“What will you do then?” Kurt asks.

“Mr Hummel and I have agreed that I’ll stay on at Westerville Abbey as the valet, acting as the first footman during meals.”

The Sergeant adds, “I’m no longer needed in the RAMC, and Mr Hummel has also offered me a job at the abbey. I’ll be a groundskeeper… at least until I find out if there is a medic position available at the Westerville Village Hospital, once everything settles down.”

“So, you’re planning to stay locally?” Mercedes asks.

Sergeant Karofsky nods. “I think that Westerville is a good fit for me. I’m very happy here.”

This news doesn’t surprise Kurt in the least. He’s seen firsthand how Sergeant Karofsky depends on Sebastian, and it’s probably better that he stays in Westerville, at least for the foreseeable future.

The Sergeant takes a sip of his hot tea. “Now that the war is over and I’ll be working at the abbey, it seems silly for everyone to continue to call me Sergeant Karofsky. I’d prefer it if you called me Dave.”

During the rest of the mealtime, Kurt is quiet, thinking about what might have happened to Blaine. For the past two years, he hasn’t allowed himself to believe that Blaine is dead. He has thought up a variety of scenarios of what has actually happened. His favorite one is that a French farmer found him in the forest and took him home to treat his wounds. When Blaine regained consciousness, he proved to suffer from amnesia. Now that the ceasefire has been signed, the farmer will bring Blaine to the nearest military post to be repatriated.

Kurt firmly sides with the Dowager Countess in this matter. Until Blaine’s corpse is found or the last British soldier returns home, he holds hope that Blaine is still alive.

To accept Blaine’s death is not an option.

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There are thousands of people waiting in the cold for the train to arrive, but it’s late. Kurt lowers his head into his scarf and shifts his weight to keep warm.

A young lad approaches him. “Are you really the Flying Porcelain?”

Kurt nods. It’s hard to avoid the attention when he’s wearing his uniform, including the Victoria Cross, and his pilot coat.
“You’re my favorite hero. I want to be a RFC pilot like you when I grow up.”

Kurt chuckles. “I sincerely hope that this Great War will end all wars.”

A crowd of young boys encircle Kurt, thrusting paper and pens at him.

When they start pushing one another out of the way, Mr Hummel intervenes. “Stand in a queue! The Flying Porcelain will give everyone an autograph but only if you’re queuing nicely.”

Kurt mouths a thank you to his father before signing autographs. Just as he’s finished talking to the last lad, Kurt hears the sound of a very high-pitched whistle in the distance. When the steam train reaches the platform, Kurt can make out soldiers hanging out the windows, waving their hats. The train’s brakes hiss and screech as it slows down to a stop.

The Andersons and the abbey’s staff fan out on the platform in order to find the Westerville men quickly. Kurt carefully looks at each soldier’s face, hoping that one of them will be Blaine.

“Over here!” Mr Hudson shouts, jumping up and down and waving his arms.

Kurt sees Lord Cooper and Mr Evans step down from the train. Lady Quinn dashes into Lord Cooper’s arms. “Welcome home, my love!”

Mercedes shyly approaches Mr Evans. “The lord has answered my prayers, now that you’re home in one piece.”

Mr Evans picks her up and whoops loudly.

When they leave the station, there are cheering crowds, waving Union Jack flags, to welcome the returning soldiers home. The Devonshire Regimental Band begins to play a familiar song.

*Pack up your troubles in your old kit-bag,*
*And smile, smile, smile,*
*While you’ve a lucifer to light your fag,*
*Smile, boys, that’s the style.*
*What’s the use of worrying?*
*It never was worthwhile, so*
*Pack up your troubles in your old kit-bag,*
*And smile, smile, smile.*

Quinn drives the Anderson family home, while the servants take the public bus. Once everyone has arrived back, Kurt joins the staff in the kitchen for the final preparations of the evening meal. For the past few days, everyone at Westerville Abbey has skimped on food so that the rations can be used for the welcome home dinner.

Kurt and Dave take the platters filled with roast beef, roasted root vegetables, Yorkshire puddings, and gravy to the library. When Kurt is on his last trip downstairs, he notices Lord Cooper descending the main staircase, looking pale and shaken.

“Is there something wrong, My Lord?” Kurt asks.

Lord Cooper stops at the bottom of the stairs. “I wasn’t expecting to see my grandmama look so frail.”

“Her Ladyship has taken the news about Mr Blaine rather badly. She spends most of her days in her room, staring out of the window. Even the scent of a scandal in the village won’t get her out of
the abbey. But I’m sure that seeing you home again will do her a world of good.”

“I certainly hope so,” Lord Cooper remarks, before heading to the library.

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Once the dinner upstairs is finished, the abbey’s staff have their own celebratory meal. Mr Evans is the focus of attention, and he entertains everyone with experiences he had when he was in the Ottoman Empire. Mercedes is by his side, and not once do her eyes leave him.

“And let me tell you, Lord Cooper wasn’t at all happy when he had to leave the Baghdad Country Club to collect me from a nearby speakeasy. But who could blame me for getting blotto after months without even a drop of whiskey.”

Mr Hummel clears his throat. “It’s time to finish the chores for the day and let Mr Evans get some sleep. There will be plenty of time for more tales tomorrow.”

The servants leave the hall to go upstairs, and Sebastian and Dave take the plates to the kitchen. Kurt smiles at Mr Evans and pours him another cup of tea.

“It’s probably one of the few times you won’t have to attend to duties, Mr Evans.”

“How about you, Kurt? Do you have any plans now that the war is over?”

“I’ve just finished my stint as a training officer for the RFC. They wish for me to sign on again in the new year, but I’m not sure what I want to do. My decision would be easier if we had some definitive news of Mr Blaine.”

Mr Evans lets out a deep sigh. “Of all the people in the world, Mr Blaine was the last person I expected to die during the war. He had so much training and knew how to handle himself in the battlefield. It’s a bloody miracle that people like you and I survived.”

“I certainly haven’t given up hope that Mr Blaine is alive.”

“Of course not, Kurt. I didn’t mean to imply that.”

Kurt takes a sip of tea. “The war has changed me in ways I wasn’t expecting. I sometimes feel guilty surviving the war when others more capable and brave did not. Who knows how the grim reaper decides whom to take and whom to leave to get on with their lives. There seems to be no rhyme or reason to it.”

Mr Evans takes a sip of tea. “The good Lord has plans for us all.”

“Do you think you’ll keep up with your buddies in the army?” Kurt asks.

“Of course I will. I already miss them. We have had to protect one another from danger, share our sleep and food. We’ve seen thousands of dead and dying. We’ve had romping good times and horrid bad ones together. But now we must part and start a new life. Let’s hope we’ve lived through it all for a good purpose.”

“Will your new life center around Westerville Abbey?”

Mr Evans replies, “I’ve lived at Westerville Abbey since I was six. I can’t imagine the Andersons not being part of my life. Before the war, the plan was to move to Anderson House in Belgravia, and become the permanent butler. I’d still like to do that.”
Mr Evans pauses and fidgets in his seat before he continues, “There was also talk about Mercedes joining the permanent staff at Anderson House. Do you think she still wants the position? Do you think that she still wants me, too?”

Kurt places his hand on top of Mr Evan’s and gives it a gentle squeeze. “I know that Mercedes still wants that future that you’ve been discussing during your home leaves.”

Mr Evans smiles broadly. “I best go upstairs, take a bath and get some sleep. I want to be well rested for the conversations I’ll have with His Lordship and Mercedes tomorrow. I trust we’re still roommates upstairs?”

“Now that Mr and Mrs Hummel live in their own cottage, the sleeping arrangements upstairs are rather relaxed. I now sleep in Sebastian’s old room… by myself.”

“Where does Sebastian sleep?” Mr Evans asks.

“In the butler’s bedroom, and he doesn’t spend the nights alone either. The door between the female and male sleeping quarters is left unlocked.”

Kurt chuckles when Mr Evans leaps out of his chair and races out of the servants’ hall.

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Kurt is reading the newspaper and drinking a cup of a tea in the servants’ hall when Mercedes rushes in. “Have you seen Miss Berry?”

Kurt shakes his head. “I haven’t seen Mr Hudson either. Do you think they decided to spend the night together in the garage?”

“Beats me. Do you mind checking? She was supposed to be on duty in the ward thirty minutes ago. If I were you, I’d give Sebastian a wide berth - with one staff member missing, he isn’t very happy at the moment.”

Kurt quickly goes to the garage and enters Mr Hudson’s room. He’s shocked that it’s been totally cleared out of clothing and possessions. He spots two envelopes on the bed - one is addressed to him, and the other to Mrs Hummel. Kurt rips open his envelope and reads.

Dear Kurt,

By the time you read this letter, Rachel and I will be halfway to Gretna Green. Rachel has researched it, and we can get married there pretty easily. I wish that you could be my best man at the wedding, but Rachel says that it has to be a secret. I couldn’t tell anyone before we left or else the Earl and the Countess wouldn’t let the marriage happen.

The elopement is all Rachel’s idea. Now that the war is over, she wants to return home to New York City. She really wants to be a star in this place called Broadway. She’s already booked us a passage on a ship that sets sail the day after tomorrow. She says that our marriage will cause problems with people in England, because she’s rich and I’m not. But everything is different in America.

Kurt, I love Rachel. She’s the gal for me. You know that expression, “Blow in my ear, and I’ll follow you anywhere”? It’s really true! Now that my mother is happily married to your father, I feel as if I can follow Rachel to America without worrying about my mother in her old age. I hope that you, as my brother, will also take care of her.
The one thing I’ve learnt from you is that true love is something very special. There are so many missed chances for happiness. So, I’ve decided to take a risk and follow my heart. I really hope that you find someone in your life to love like you loved Blaine.

Your brother,

Finn

PS - Rachel has left a letter and some important-looking documents in the study for the Earl. Make sure that he reads them!

Chapter End Notes

The song played at the Exeter train station is “Pack Up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit Bag” by George and Felix Powell (1915). According to my research, it was a firm favorite with both soldiers and their families back at home. The song went on to enjoy success in Hollywood films, Broadway musicals, and even made an appearance in the UK top ten chart as recently as 2010.

Datshitrandom has created a wonderful manip of the photo of Blaine that Kurt shows everyone in the previous chapter. You can either view it in the previous chapter or go here. Please go check it out and give the artist some love.

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I also thank Dblmalfunction, who performed a detailed final review, although all mistakes are mine.

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Next up: Kurt makes a decision about his future.
May 1919
Kurt

Kurt stands to attention with the other soldiers and from Devonshire who’ve served during the Great War. Once Lieutenant General Sir George Mackworth Bullock of the Devonshire Regiment has finished his speech, his second-in-command appears with quite a large box.

“We’re here today at the Topsham Barracks to award those people in the county who fought in the Great War. As is customary, we’ll start with the most decorated soldier. Captain Kurt Hummel, VC.”

Kurt walks to the platform with pride. The lieutenant general pins the 1914-15 Star, the British War Medal and the Victory Medal on his uniform jacket. They pose for the official photographer, then Kurt quickly takes his seat. The remaining soldiers are called up alphabetically for their three medals. Most every soldier receives them, and they are fondly referred to as Pip, Squeak, and Wilfred. Kurt brushes his fingers along his Victoria Cross, which distinguishes him from the others.

The Lieutenant General continues, “These medals are also awarded to brave soldiers who’ve died during the Great War. Devonshire lost many brave men. Again, I’ll start with the most decorated soldier, Captain Blaine Anderson. He has also been awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for Gallantry during the Battle of the Somme.”

The Earl, who’s wearing his military uniform from the Boer War, stands up and walks to the platform. He gives a hand salute to the Lieutenant General before taking the four medals. With a heavy heart, the Earl returns to his seat.
“Other soldiers receiving posthumous medals are Lance Corporal William Adams, Private Joseph Armstrong...”

At the end of the ceremony, the regimental band plays "The Last Post" to commemorate those who have been killed in war. Kurt reaches into his trousers’ pocket for a hankie and dabs his eyes. For two and a half years, he’s been hoping that Blaine would be found alive. For two and a half years, he’s pored over newspapers and newsreels for any sign of Blaine. For two and a half years, he’s felt in his heart that Blaine is still alive.

Listening to band play “The Last Post” is the moment that Kurt realizes that no more soldiers will be returning. It seems that Blaine really did die during the Battle of the Somme.

Kurt bows his head, his heart crushed into pieces.

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When everyone returns to Westerville Abbey, the mood is very somber. After serving afternoon tea upstairs, the staff gather in the servants’ hall.

Unexpectedly, the Earl enters the hall, and everyone rises from their chairs. Kurt’s eyes focus on the Earl’s black armband.

“Everyone, please sit. I’m afraid I have bad news, as if today’s service wasn’t enough. I met with the Lieutenant General before the service. The Spanish flu pandemic is getting worse. Already, 100,000 Brits have died from this flu. The government has announced that it expects a second wave, as people gather to celebrate the end of the war. The Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital is so full that it’s having to turn away patients. Tomorrow, Exeter will shut down theatres, dance halls, churches, and other public gathering places. We’ll have to close down the Westerville Village Hall and Church as well.”

“In contrast with other flus, young adults between 20 and 30 years old are particularly affected. Once the disease strikes, it progresses quickly, leaving very few survivors. We must all be extra vigilant. If you experience a sore throat, headaches or a loss of appetite, you must stop work immediately and report it to Sebastian or Dr Roberts.”

“Yes, My Lord,” the servants reply in unison.

“We won’t be receiving any guests inside the abbey until further notice. Guests of convalescing officers will have to meet their loved ones in the unused barn. Delivery men should leave their wares outside the back door.”

“I’ll bring the deliveries inside,” Dave Karofsky offers.

“Thank you, Dave. Evans and Mercedes, you’ll remain at Westerville Abbey for the foreseeable future. There are more flu cases in London than in Devonshire.”

“Yes, My Lord,” Mr Evans and Mercedes reply.

“The War Office has informed me that the last soldier has returned to British soil. Once the Spanish flu has passed, I’ll set the date for Blaine’s memorial service. In the meantime, we will still be in mourning.”

When the Earl leaves, the staff gather their tea cups to bring them to the kitchen, and return to their usual activities. Kurt walks over to his father and whispers, “I need to speak to you.”
The butler nods. “Let’s go to my office, where we’ll have some privacy.”

After they enter the butler’s office, Mr Hummel stands in front of Kurt and inspects his new medals. “I wish your mother had been with me today to see you receive the medals. You’ve done the Hummels proud.”

“Thank you, Father. I also wish Mum was there.”

“Today was also a reminder that so many brave men died during the Great War. No household in Great Britain has gone without a loved one’s death. It was difficult to listen to Mr Blaine’s name called out this afternoon and see the Earl accept the medals on his behalf. I can’t even imagine what you’re feeling right now.”

Kurt replies, “It hit me at the service that Blaine really is dead. For the past two years, I kept hoping that he’d return to Westerville Abbey. If there was a body…”

When Kurt breaks out in uncontrollable sobs, his father guides him to the sofa, and holds him tightly in his arms.

“W..without Blaine, I have nothing,” Kurt chokes out.

Mr Hummel rubs his son’s back, trying to soothe him. Once Kurt has cried himself out, the butler hands him a handkerchief.

“I felt the same way when your mum died. If it wasn’t for you, I don’t know how I would have gotten on with my life. But somehow you do. Each day, the hurt becomes less painful, but the love never stops.”

“I’ll never love anybody like I love Blaine.”

The butler replies, “Of course you won’t, but there are different types of love. I love Carole, but in a different way than I love your mum.”

Kurt pulls away from his father, and drops his head on the back of the sofa. “I’m not sure what to do with my life. Westerville Abbey is such a painful reminder of Blaine. Besides, I can’t imagine returning to domestic service… Not after being celebrated as a flying ace.”

“I can understand how you could feel that way, son. It pains me to say this, but it’s probably best for you to start a new life away from Westerville Abbey. The Great War has changed so many things. The VC after your name will open plenty of doors for you.”

“I’ve been thinking that too, but with the Spanish flu killing so many people, it’s not the best time to strike out on my own. London seems like a death trap at the moment.”

“Who says you have to limit your sights to London? Perhaps you should consider going to America, like Finn did.”

“There’s Spanish flu there as well. Even their first lady, Rose Cleveland, died from it days after the amnesty.”

Mr Hummel replies, “That’s true, but the Yanks have the expertise and money to find a cure. Besides, there are vast open spaces in America. Miss Berry and Finn could help you settle in and find a job. As much as I’d hate to lose you, I want you to be safe and happy.”

“I’ll think about it,” Kurt agrees. “Is it okay if I don’t help out today? I can’t see myself being of
any use to anybody."

"Take all the time that you need, Kurt. You’re not officially a staff member. I’m always here if you want to discuss anything further."

Kurt smiles weakly. "I know, Father, and that means so much to me."

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Kurt hears a knock on the door, and Mrs Hummel enters with a breakfast tray. "Good morning, Kurt. Did you sleep well?"

"Not really."

Mrs Hummel sets down the tray and opens the curtains to allow the bright sunshine in from the small window. "It looks like it’s going to be a beautiful day."

From Kurt’s position in bed, he can see the watercolor of Blaine’s special place by the lake hanging on the wall. It once gave him comfort during his long lonely nights, but now it’s just a bittersweet memory.

Mrs Hummel pulls up a nearby chair to sit down next to Kurt’s bed. "You haven’t left this room for three days, and your meal trays are returned with barely a morsel eaten. We’re all worried about you. Mrs Sylvester has given you the last sausage, and insists that I stay to make sure you eat it."

"You’re taking orders from Mrs Sylvester now?"

Mrs Hummel giggles, "She’s as stubborn as a mule, but on this occasion, I agree with her. Now, let me pour you a cup of tea while you get stuck into breakfast."

"Well, that pork sausage smells good… and I haven’t eaten one in ages."

"My Christopher was killed in action during the Boer War. I was absolutely heartbroken and didn’t know how I could carry on. Finn was so very young and dependent upon me. For the first month, my mum stayed with me to look after Finn. Like you, I isolated myself in my bedroom, crying for days. I didn’t know how I would ever get over Christopher’s death. One day, my mother insisted I join her and Finn on an outing to the nearby park. Watching Finn on the swing set made me realize that I was missing out on life.

"It wasn’t easy, but somehow I found the will to get up the next morning and start looking for a job. His Lordship was in the same regiment as Christopher during the Boer War. Somehow, he had heard of my plight and offered me a position at the abbey. His Lordship also allowed me to bring Finn with me. As they say, the rest is history."

Kurt lets out a deep sigh. "I know that I should get up and start figuring out what to do with my life, but it all feels overwhelming."

"Why don’t you start by getting out of bed. Yesterday, I saw Wesley and he’s very busy clearing out the unused barn so that the convalescing soldiers can meet with their family and friends when they visit. He’s worried that the horses aren’t getting enough exercise."

Mrs Hummel stands up and takes the breakfast tray from Kurt’s lap. "Mrs Sylvester will be happy that you’ve eaten every last bit.” She gives him a peck on his cheek before leaving.
The morning sun shines brightly through the windows. His aunt always said that a hot day in May is the good Lord’s gift, and it shouldn’t be wasted indoors. Maybe he should help out Wesley today.

He quickly dresses and heads to the kitchen. “Mrs Sylvester, thank you so much for the sausage. It was delicious.”

“You’re welcome, Porcelain. Good to see you up and about again. Will you be joining us for lunch?”

“I’m not sure. I plan to help Wesley with exercising the horses today. I’ll definitely be back for dinner.”

“In that case, I’ll pack you a lunch. It will only take me a tick.”

While Mrs Sylvester is busy packing a lunch, Kurt leaves a note in the butler’s office to let his father know where he’ll be today. He collects the food provisions and heads to the stables.

He finds Wesley with Daisy, a three-year old mare.

“Good morning, Wesley. I didn’t realize that Daisy was pregnant.”

“Last summer, I bred Firebird and Daisy. I think the foal will arrive in late July. It seems only right that even though Mr Blaine isn’t with us, his horse’s lineage is upheld.”

“I think that Blaine would have liked that very much. Is it okay if I take Firebird out for a ride?”

“Most definitely. I haven’t had a chance to exercise him for a couple of days now. It would be really helpful if you did.”

Kurt saddles Firebird and places provisions in the side bag. He mounts the horse and sets off, racing through the fields that are green with wheat. He hopes that this year’s crop is better than it was in the past two years, otherwise rationing won’t end anytime soon.

Kurt stops Firebird when they approach a field of red poppies. He dismounts the horse and walks closer to the flowers. They remind him of the poem that a Canadian has written during the war.

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.
Kurt has often read the famous poem to convalescing officers at the abbey’s ward. However, with the announcement that the last soldier has returned home, it takes on a new personal meaning. He picks a poppy and places it in the buttonhole of his jacket. He hopes that beautiful red poppies are growing over Blaine’s grave.

He continues his ride until Firebird slows down to a gentle trot. Kurt leads them to the lake and stops at the large oak tree. After dismounting, Kurt takes an old turnip from the saddlebag, feeding it to Firebird.

“Sorry about the offering, but there isn’t a spare carrot or apple to feed you,” Kurt coos, scratching behind the horse’s ears.

Once he’s finished tending to Firebird, he retrieves the old woolen blanket, a metal flask filled with hot tea, an enamel mug, and a small food parcel from the saddlebag. Kurt lays out the woolen blanket by the old oak tree, sits down, and pours himself a cup of hot tea. He opens the food parcel and starts eating the cheese and pickle sandwich. Unfortunately, food rationing doesn’t allow for any special treats to be included.

A sun ray reflects off his promise ring. He vows to wear the ring until his death, and hopes that in another lifetime, they will find each other and fall in love all over again.

When Kurt closes his eyes, he’s transported back in time to when Blaine sat by his side. Their first and last kisses took place in this very spot. The first kiss was so unexpected but sweet and gentle. The last kiss they shared, at the end of their last home leave, was so very different - passionate, demanding, and all-embracing. The world always melted away when they kissed. When their lips were locked together, there was no right or wrong, no duties, and no social classes - just two people in love and caught up in a special moment.

Kurt opens his eyes and takes a sip of tea. He realizes that no matter which path he takes in life, this deep sense of loss will always be with him. But rather than living in the past, he needs to think about his future. All his life, decisions have been dictated by others, whether it was to become a footman, or to train as a teacher and set sail for India. Becoming a RFC pilot was the first decision he has made on his own, and he likes being in control of his destiny. It makes him feel like his own man.

He’s already turned down his Lordship’s offer of working on the Westerville estate. There are too many memories of Blaine in every part of the abbey. He dismisses the RFC’s offer to continue as a training officer. He’s experienced enough of military maneuvers and war to last him a lifetime, thank you very much.

He could revisit an old passion, and become a tailor’s apprentice. And who knows, one day he could open his own tailor shop and make custom suits for the well-heeled. Blaine was always such a dapper dresser, and it would be a simple way to combine a passion and the memory of his love.

But where?

If he goes to Exeter or even London, there’s a strong possibility that he would contract the Spanish flu. Unlike other influenzas, this one targets healthy young adults, which he is. The more he thinks about it, the more his father’s advice about America makes sense.

Kurt thinks back to that day in Southampton when Blaine took him to Woolworths. He had bought the plate with the Woolworth’s Building in New York City painted on it. He had told Blaine that one day, he was going to see the building with his own eyes. Since that day, it’s been a memento of his special time in Southampton with Blaine and a reminder that he should always dream big.
Ever since his father remarried, Mr Hudson has considered him a brother. Surely, he and Miss Berry would help him settle in. They could advise him of the best tailoring sections of New York City and all manner of things. They could introduce him to their friends. He could meet all kinds of people, and make his own friends. He wouldn’t be alone.

With a new-found energy, Kurt gathers up his belongings, mounts Firebird, and rides him back to the stables. Now that he’s made a decision, he needs to inform his father.

Chapter End Notes

Trivia: In 1915, entire villages were destroyed in Western Europe. After a long and gloomy winter, red poppies began to appear across the battlefields. John McCrae wrote the poem, ‘In Flanders Fields’ about these poppy fields. In 1921, The British Royal Legion sold nine million red silk poppies to raise money to help war veterans. Each November on Remembrance Day, red poppy wreaths are laid at war memorials and small red poppies are worn on clothing to commemorate their servicemen killed in all conflicts. Many other countries have similar customs. Although this chapter takes place 18 months before the tradition started, I thought it was appropriate to make some sort of reference to red poppies.

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen, I also thank Dblmalfunction, who performed a detailed final review, although all mistakes are mine.

I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: Kurt goes to Southampton.
May 1919
Kurt

“Are you sure?” the butler asks. “It was only yesterday that you were acting like a hermit in your room.”

Kurt reaches across the desk and places his hand over his father’s. “I know that moving to America sounds like a rash decision. But Blaine has been dead for two and half years, and I’ve come to accept it. And like you said, now that the war is over, there are new opportunities for me. I now have the courage to go chasing them.”

Mr Hummel lets out a deep sigh. “I know I was the one to suggest that you go to America, but it’ll take some time to get used to the idea that you’ll be so far away.”

“I won’t be leaving anytime soon. I still have to save money for the ship’s fare. Besides, I want to stay at Westerville Abbey until Blaine’s memorial service.”

“That could be a while, Kurt. You’ve heard His Lordship - there won’t be a service until the Spanish flu epidemic has passed. Do you know how much the ship passage will cost?”

“I’m going to inquire at a travel office the next time I’m in Exeter.”

“I’m willing to give you my savings, if that’s what you need.”

Kurt shakes his head. “You’ll need your money for when you and Mrs Hummel retire. Can I work as a footman or valet at the abbey until I’ve saved up enough money?”

“Certainly, son. I’ll let His Lordship know your plans.”
One week later

Kurt knocks on the Dowager Countess’ bedroom door, before entering with her morning tea. He finds the room in a complete disarray, with the old lady handing dresses from her wardrobe to Mercedes, who’s packing them into trunks.

“Ah, Kurt. I’m so glad you’re here. Mercedes, you’re excused for now. I’ll ring the bell when I’m ready to continue packing.”

“Yes, My Lady,” Mercedes replies and leaves the bedroom.

“Are you going somewhere, My Lady?” Kurt asks.

“I’m moving back to Dower House. I’d been planning to gift the house to Blaine when he returned from war. It’s a place that he could have called his own that could never have been taken away from him - a safe and private place for the two of you. But the war has changed things. I don’t have much time left in this life, and there is plenty I still need to do. For example, I’m attending Westerville Hospital’s Board of Governors meeting tomorrow.”

Kurt is glad that the Dowager Countess has decided to get on with her life, and not stay in her bedroom and mourn over Blaine for any longer. “I’m sure they’ll be glad to see you again, My Lady.”

“I’m not sure glad is the word I would use to describe their reaction when I will walk into the meeting. Now, do sit down. You’ve already told me about your decision to move to America, so why are you still at Westerville Abbey?”

Kurt sits on a chair and pours the Dowager Countess a cup of tea. “I’m working at the abbey to save money for the ship fare to America. My father has already offered his savings, but I can’t possibly accept his money. I already have half the fare saved with my earnings from the RFC. Besides, I want to stay at the abbey to attend Blaine’s memorial service.”

“You shouldn’t bother staying for Blaine’s memorial service. It’ll be a huge event for the village, and most of the estates in Devonshire and the west country. The family and other great families will sit in the front pews, and the staff will be assigned to the back. You’ll be expected to work at the reception afterwards, being pleasant and serving tea and biscuits. You’ll be rushed off your feet during the entire day. Is that how you wish to spend your time mourning Blaine?”

“I guess not, My Lady.”

“We both have wonderful memories of Blaine in our hearts. That’s far more important than a formal memorial service.”

The Dowager Countess rises and walks towards her desk. She opens a drawer and takes out an envelope, addressed to Kurt. When she hands it to him, Kurt opens it to discover a second-class ticket to New York City leaving in two weeks’ time, plus five ten pound notes.

“I can’t accept this, My Lady,” Kurt protests.

“Why ever not? It would take a very long time for you to save for the passage.”

“That’s true. I guess I’m surprised that you would lend me such a large sum of money when I’ve no way of knowing when I can pay it back.”

The Dowager Countess shakes her head. “It’s a gift. In Blaine’s short adult life, you gave him such
love and happiness… the type that very few find in their lifetimes. Ever since Blaine’s fateful death two and a half years ago, you’ve changed - as if your heart is no longer whole. We both grieve for Blaine but in different ways. It’s time we get on with our lives. I shall resume my good works and continue setting standards for the family. Kurt, you’re still young and have a lifetime ahead of you. I wish to give you the start you need to live it. I won’t take no as an answer.”

Kurt’s eyes become watery at such an unbelievable gift… all because of his love for Blaine. “This is very generous of you, My Lady.”

“I’ve already informed my son and his wife of my gift. Now, let’s go downstairs together and give the good news to your father,” the Dowager Countess suggests.

For the first time in ages, Kurt walks with a spring in his step. He’s so excited that he accidently trips, knocking over a vase that shatters into pieces when it hits the floor.

“My Lady, I’m so very sorry about the vase.”

“Oh, don’t be. It was a wedding present from a frightful aunt. I’ve hated it for half a century.”

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Two weeks later…

Kurt looks at his overstuffed suitcases but decides that everything is essential. He’ll most definitely need his warm pilot coat for the snowy New York City winters. Of course, his medals are packed. They are his pride and joy. He brushes his fingertips over the front of his trousers and feels the slight bulge made by Blaine’s pocket watch. He opens his travel wallet to ensure that he has his passport, money, and the ship ticket.

Lastly, he grabs his photograph wallet and pulls out the pictures. There are photographs of him proudly showing off his Victoria Cross medal to the press, and receiving his three additional medals earlier this month in Exeter. He smiles when he sees the portrait of Mrs Hummel and his father. On their day off, they had traveled to Exeter and had their photographs taken. Kurt double-checks that the picture of Blaine is there as well. Since August 1914, he has carried it everywhere. It’s the only photograph he has of Blaine, and even though it’s slightly creased, it’s one of his most cherished possessions.

Kurt checks the time and realizes that he’s a little late for morning tea in the servants’ hall, where he will need to start saying his goodbyes. After lunch, his father and Mrs Hummel will be taking him to Southampton, where he will board the ship for America the following day.

When he enters the servants’ hall, it’s fully packed with smiling faces. Mrs Sylvester follows him in, carrying a Victoria sponge cake, its layers filled with cream and strawberries. No sooner are they all sitting down than the bell for the Dowager Countess’ bedroom is ringing.

“Excuse me, everyone, I’ll go see what the old lady wants,” Mrs Hummel says.

“What are you looking forward to most?” Mercedes asks Kurt.

Kurt thinks for a moment, and then replies, “A new beginning. I’ll be able to do anything I want, without people thinking of me as merely a farm boy or a footman. They say that America is the land of opportunity, and I plan to take advantage of that.”

“I hope you won’t forget us, boo,” Mercedes sighs.
“I’ll never forget any of you! I’ll come back to Westerville Abbey for visits.”

“They all say that, but no one ever comes back. We haven’t heard a peep from Brittany and Miss Lopez since they left for the munitions factory in the middle of the night,” Sebastian remarks.

“Don’t forget that my father and stepmother work here, and they’ll retire to Hummel Cottage. I most certainly will return to Westerville Abbey to visit them.”

“And here we were thinking we were rid of you,” Sebastian snarks.

There is no heat to Sebastian’s words, though. When Kurt looks over at him, he sees a large grin. Kurt continues, “I’ll even go to London to visit Mercedes and Mr Evans.”

“That’s if we ever get there,” Mr Evans laments.

“The Spanish flu won’t last forever. I’m sure that you and Mercedes will be firmly established at Anderson House on my next trip back to Blighty.”

Mrs Sylvester passes cake slices around the table. “Quit your yacking and eat! I’ve used our entire week’s sugar and butter rations on this cake.”

Kurt carefully prepares a forkful of cake, making sure that it has the right combination of sponge cake, cream and strawberry. He takes a bite and lets out a soft moan. It’s been at least a year since he’s eaten something so extravagantly delicious.

Mrs Hummel returns to the servants’ hall. “Kurt, the Dowager Countess wants a word with you, when it’s convenient.”

Kurt polishes off his piece of cake and leaves the servants’ hall for the last time. He has made unexpected friends at the abbey, and he’s sad to leave them. He makes a quick detour to his bedroom to pick up a gift, before going to visit the old Countess.

The Dowager Countess smiles when Kurt enters her bedroom. “Thank you for coming. I’m not one for dragged-out goodbyes. Are you ready to leave this afternoon?”

“My bags are all packed, My Lady. Mr and Mrs Hummel will be driving me to Southampton, where we’ll spend the night. The ship sets sail tomorrow. But, there’s still one important thing I have left to do.”

Kurt heads to the door and retrieves the canvas that he has previous left just outside in the corridor. He returns and shows the painting to the Dowager Countess. “Blaine had this special place on the estate. It’s by the lake and has an exceptional view of the Westerville estate. He would go there to read, sing, or daydream. It was a place where Blaine didn’t worry about conventions, expectations, and other demands. He shared this spot with me, and we would pass our free time there. Two summers ago, when I was on home leave, I wanted to capture the image so that I’d remember it. The special place is now etched into my heart. I’d like to give you the painting.”

Kurt hands the canvas to the Dowager Countess, who insurest it for a few minutes. “Why, it’s marvelous, Kurt. You’ve got a very good eye for color. And you’ve even painted Firebird into the scene. Now, could you please take down the painting over the fireplace. I’d like your painting hanging there instead.”

Kurt carefully takes down the painting by Constable, which he knows is priceless, and replaces it with his own landscape painting.
“When I look at the painting, I shall be reminded of both you and Blaine, and of a happier time at Westerville Abbey.”

Kurt kneels next to the Dowager Countess’ chair. “I don’t think I can ever thank you enough for everything. Many people would have turned away when they found out that their grandson was in love with a man… and a footman, no less. But you accepted it, keeping Blaine’s best interests at heart.”

“Blaine is my family, and I love him,” the Dowager Countess states, as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

“Yes, but it’s more than that. You’ve always had the most marvelous plans. For example, you arranged for me to get a teaching certificate so that I could join Blaine in India. But your best plan by far was allowing Blaine and me to stay at Dower House during our home leave at Christmas in 1915.”

“It’s hard to believe that it’s been three and a half years since we last saw Blaine.”

Kurt continues, “I treasure the memories we made during that home leave. Believe me, they’ve helped me through some pretty tough times at the front. Thank you for that precious gift - for having given us the opportunity to spend quality time together. You’ll probably laugh, but I’ll miss you when I’m in America.”

“I shall miss you, too. You are a fine young man, Kurt Hummel, VC. It’s been an honor to know you,” the Dowager Countess replies. She takes out her hankie and dabs her eyes. “Now, you best be off to say goodbye to the rest of the household, instead of keeping an old lady company.”

Kurt stands up and gives her a kiss on the cheek before he leaves her bedroom.

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“Sebastian and Dave have already loaded the suitcases in the car. I think we’re ready to leave,” the butler says.

“Where is everybody?” Kurt asks.

“They’re all in the main entrance hall, waiting for us.”

Sure enough, when they enter the main hall, all the Andersons, except the Dowager Countess, and the staff are lined up.

The Earl immediately steps forward and shakes his hand. “Kurt, we all wish you the best in America. It’s been an honor to have you both work and stay at the abbey. I’ve booked and paid for a respectable B&B in Southampton for you and your parents to stay in tonight.”

The Earl hands Kurt an envelope. “Here’s the B&B confirmation. You will always be welcome back at Westerville, whether to work or simply visit. You’re a Westerville man, now and always. Godspeed.”

“Thank you, My Lord.”

The next in line is the Countess, who also hands him an envelope. “I’ve already written to Rachel with your arrival details. In case there is some confusion, this envelope has my brother Hiram’s address and a letter of introduction.”
“Thank you, My Lady. That is very thoughtful of you.”

Lord Cooper shakes his hand. “When you see Cousin Rachel, tell her that I was most disappointed that she eloped before I was repatriated back to Westerville. Tell her that I suspect that she was concerned that my singing was better than hers and she wanted to avoid a musical duel.”

Kurt chuckles. “I will tell her, My Lord.”

Three-year-old Master Michael gives Kurt a hand salute. “I’m going to grow up to be a pilot, just like you, Flying Porcelain.”

Kurt gives the lad a pat on the back. “I think this was the war to end all wars, but I’ve read that only last month, Vickers Vimy had their first commercial flight in Kent. Who knows, people could travel by aeroplanes one day soon.”

Two-year-old Master Richard comes forward. “Bye-bye, Captain Hummel. I’ll sing you a special song when you next visit.”

Kurt chuckles, “You’re just like your father, young man.”

Kurt smiles at Lady Quinn, who is holding nine-month-old Lady Elizabeth. Their eighteen-month-old toddler is hiding behind her. “You have a wonderful family, My Lady. Take the time to let them flourish, and they’ll find their talents and passions in life.”

“Wise words, Kurt. I wish you the very best in America,” Lady Quinn replies.

He shakes hands with the staff members, giving a special hug to Mercedes. When Kurt is in front of Sebastian, he whispers, “The Great War has affected people in the most unpredictable ways. Who knew that you would become both a skilled and compassionate medic? It’s changed you for the better. Make sure you take care of Dave - he needs you.”

Sebastian whispers in his ear, “Sometimes, I wish that I had the courage to start a new life, but I need Dave, too. Besides, the sex is fantastic. You have no idea.”

Kurt blushes at Sebastian’s last words. When he exits the abbey, all the grounds staff are lined up waiting to say goodbye. Kurt shakes each of their hands, but stops in front of Wesley. “You must write to me when Daisy has given birth.”

“Of course I will. You’ll need to think of a name for the new foal. Perhaps from an opera that is popular in New York City?”

“I’ll let you know what I have come up with for a name. Take care of Firebird. He’s a very special horse.”

Wesley nods, and Kurt knows that Firebird is in very capable hands. At the end of the line, he sees Dave, with a large grin on his face.

“You really are making a go at your new job at the abbey. You look happy,” Kurt remarks.

“That’s because I am. The fresh air and manual labor really help clear my mind. I’m so exhausted at night that I sleep like a baby.”

Kurt leans in and whispers into Dave’s ear, “Sebastian likes everyone to think that he’s strong and nothing fazes him. But if you look close enough, you’ll find in him the same insecurities we all have. He needs you just as much as you need him.”
Dave whispers his reply, “I figured that out when I met Seb at the front. Don’t worry, I’ll take good care of him.”

By the time Kurt makes his way to the car, Mrs Hummel is already in the driver’s seat, adjusting the side mirrors. She had driven tractors in her Women’s Institute role on the Westerville estate. Once her son returned home, he taught her how to drive a car. Kurt slides into the car’s backseat, and his father sits in the front passenger seat, next to his wife.

When the car pulls away from the front entrance, everyone waves goodbye. The apple trees along the long drive are in blossom with delicate pink and white flowers, and Kurt feels like a prince straight from a Brothers Grimm’s fairy tale. He’s experienced so many things since he had walked up this drive in early 1914 to become the second footman. The abbey is where he has learned what being a man really means - to work hard, keep connected with his family, serve his country…. And fall in love.

Kurt looks out the window at the Westerville fields. He shall miss the natural beauty of Devonshire’s countryside. When the car approaches a field that is a crowd of red poppies, he shouts, “Mrs Hummel, please pull over!”

When the car stops, Kurt gets out of the car and walks to the edge of the field. The soft breeze ruffles the petals as if they are waving him goodbye. Bright and bold, their beauty reminds him of Blaine. He has seen similar poppy fields in the French battlefields, and they serve as a reminder that life does go on. He picks a red poppy and pokes the stem through the buttonhole of his jacket. It might die by the end of the day, but Blaine’s memory will live on in Kurt, always.

When he returns to the car, his father turns around and asks, “Are you all right, son?”

“Yes, I think I am. We can go on now.”

Mrs Hummel starts the car again and they resume driving to Southampton. After a few minutes of silence, she says, “I’m quite excited about tonight. I’ve never stayed overnight at a B&B or any place like that before. Do you think it’ll be safe and clean?”

Her husband reassures her, “His Lordship wouldn’t book us a room in a place that isn’t up to high standards. Carole… you should have turned right here instead of going straight!”

“Oh, the sign was so small, I couldn’t read the towns’ names. I’ll turn the car around.”

When Mrs Hummel makes a sharp U-turn, Kurt and his father firmly hold onto the hand straps hanging on the side. Kurt can hardly suppress his laughter. It seems like Mr Hudson has inherited his sense of direction from his mother.

When they get closer to Southampton, Kurt opens the envelope that the Earl gave him before he left Westerville Abbey. In addition to the B&B confirmation, there are several five pound notes, and a letter of recommendation written on thick stationery with the Westerville arms embossed at the top. Kurt is certain that this will impress any future employer in New York City. It feels good to know that the Andersons are supporting his move to America in any way they can. He truly feels like a Westerville man.

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When they sit down for breakfast, Kurt rolls his eyes as his father straightens the cutlery and moves the glasses one inch to the right. Old habits die hard. A waiter soon arrives and sets out their breakfast before them. Due to food rationing, they each only get one egg, a roasted tomato and a
single slice of toast.

Mrs Hummel takes a sip of tea. “The bed was so comfortable last night, and the ocean breeze through the window was pleasant. I slept like a baby. Perhaps we should retire to the seaside.”

“I think that Hummel Cottage is the perfect place for our retirement. You won’t get me moving away from Westerville.”

“Of course it is, my dear. But wouldn’t it be grand if we holidayed along the coast? Torquay… or perhaps even Brighton?”

His father harrumphs, then quickly changes the topic of conversation. “What time do you need to be at the ship?”

“It sets sail at 3 PM, so I’ll board after lunch. You don’t have to stay that long. As a matter of fact, I’d like a few hours by myself to revisit the places I saw with Blaine, when we met Miss Berry’s ship.”

“I would like to get back to Westerville by lunchtime. Lord knows what tomfoolery the staff are up to with us gone,” his father replies.

An hour after breakfast, they meet at the B&B’s reception area. Arrangements are made for Kurt’s suitcases to be delivered to the ship. Kurt picks up his father and Mrs Hummel’s overnight bags and takes them to the car.

Mrs Hummel holds Kurt tight. “I will miss you so very much. Please give a big hug to Finn for me, when you see him. Could you tell him that I wish he would write more frequently?”

“I certainly will.”

Kurt really doesn’t want to say goodbye to his father, especially after they’ve reconnected when he joined the abbey’s staff. “I don’t need to move to America to start a new life. I could find a job in Exeter or London, once the Spanish flu has passed.”

“Son, think of it as an adventure. Most things in life worth having are not going to just fall in your lap. You need to take a chance.” His father looks at him for a moment. “Are you scared?”

“Terrified.”

“New York City is going to be a breeze after what you’ve been through - the war, losing your mother, and then Blaine. These experiences have made you the strong man that you are today. You know what the difference is between New York City and Westerville?”

“The accents?”

“New York City is filled with people like you. People who are there to seek their fortune. Kurt, you’re ahead of the game. You’re smart, ambitious, and hardworking. You’re also a flying legend. Not everyone has a VC after their name. If you’re not scared, it means you’re not sticking your head out far enough.”

“You truly are the world’s greatest father.”

His father embraces him tightly. “Thank you, Son. As soon as you find a place to live, write to me so that I know you’re safe.”
Mrs Hummel gives him one more quick hug and a peck on the cheek before she enters the car. His father stands before him with tears welling in his eyes. Just before Kurt changes his mind and is about to enter the car to return with them to the abbey, his father hugs him and whispers, “Godspeed”. When Mrs Hummel starts the car, his father pulls away and slides into the front seat.

Kurt really tries to keep it together as the car slowly leaves the curb and makes its way along the street, disappearing from sight. He really does try, but that doesn’t stop his tears from flowing in middle of Southampton on a busy day.

“Are you all right?” a kind elderly lady asks as she passes by.

Kurt wipes the tears away with his handkerchief. “Yes, I think I am. Thank you for asking.”

He hops onto a tram to go to Southampton’s High Street for some last-minute purchases. He buys chamomile oil and sandalwood soap at G Baldwin & Co, marmite at Sawyer’s Grocer, and a flannel shirt at Woolworths. His last stop is at Blackwell Bookshop to buy some reading material for the long ship journey. He can’t resist buying My Man Jeeves by P. G Wodehouse. Blaine used to devour these books about Bertie, the young, idle upper-class dandy, and his valet, Jeeves.

Kurt strolls along Southampton’s seaside promenade and stops at The Fisherman’s Catch shop. He sits on the exact same bench that he once sat with Blaine while awaiting Miss Berry’s arrival. He opens the paper parcel filled with fish and chips, and decides that they are still as tasty as when Blaine had bought them for their lunch so many years ago.

If Kurt could have his dreams come true, he would be spending the rest of his life with Blaine. Blaine will always be his one true love, the one who holds the key to his heart. However, the Dowager Countess is right. He still has a lifetime ahead of him, and he needs to start living it.

Once he’s finished with his lunch, Kurt walks over to the ship, and hands over his ticket and passport for inspection.

He’s ready to start his new life in New York City.

Chapter End Notes

The digital artwork at the beginning of the chapter is “Wild Pony by Beautiful Wimbleball Lake Somerset England UK English Countryside Scene Illustration” by Michael Charles.

Trivia: 1918 and 1919 were marked in Britain and elsewhere around the world with one of history’s most virulent and deadly flu pandemics. By the time the Spanish flu had run its course, it had taken the lives of at least 50 million people - around three percent of the world’s population - many more than had been killed by fighting in World War I. In Downton Abbey, Lady Lavinia Swire died of Spanish flu.

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I also thank Dblmalfuction, who performed a detailed final review, although all mistakes are mine.

I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.
Sorry, but no hints at what’s ahead.
Return to Westerville

Chapter Notes

This chapter is set one month later, and it contains references to something war related. Like previous chapters, it doesn’t go into gruesome details. I don’t want to spoil it, so I’ve written the subject matter in the notes at the end of the chapter. If there is anything war related that triggers you, please check them out. You’ve been warned! Otherwise, sit back and enjoy the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

June 1919
Westerville

Dave barges into the dining room during the Anderson’s luncheon, breathless from running.

“This better be very important,” Hummel grumbles.

“I do beg your pardon. There’s a RAMC truck coming up the drive. I need Sebastian.”

“It’s Mr Smythe to you. He’s His Lordship’s valet now,” Hummel insists.

“Smythe, were we expecting the RAMC?” the Earl asks.

“Certainly not, my lord,” Smythe replies. “The last patient left two weeks ago, and the downstairs rooms are already converted back to how they were before the war. I’ve finished all the paperwork. The abbey’s hospital ward is now officially closed.”
“Smythe, you best find out what’s happening. Remember my rule about no outsiders entering the abbey. I won’t risk anyone contracting the Spanish flu,” the Earl reminds him.

Sebastian and Dave leave the dining room and open the main door just as the RAMC truck pulls to a stop. An RAMC private steps out, holding a clipboard.

“Are you Sergeant Smythe?”

Sebastian nods.

“I have someone in the truck for you.”

“We’re not taking any new patients here. You’ll have to take the officer to Exeter.”

The private consults his clipboard. “We have orders to take Private Brian West to Exeter, but as soon as we entered Devonshire, he’s been demanding to be brought here.”

“Well, we can’t accept the private. The hospital ward is closed down,” Sebastian replies.

“He won’t stop shouting that he must go to Westerville Abbey. Since it’s on the way to Exeter, I decided we should stop here. It might even shut him up,” the Private chuckles.

Sebastian goes to the back of the truck and opens the doors. There’s a soldier lying down on a portable gurney. He looks tiny, but fierce. His body is shaking and he’s shouting, “Westerville Abbey! Westerville Abbey!” over and over again. His head has been completely shaven, but when the soldier turns on his back, Sebastian gasps.

“Dave, I’m going to get His Lordship. Could you sign the papers and take the soldier inside?”

“But the Earl clearly stated that no one …”

“That’s an order!” Sebastian shouts, as he hurries toward the abbey. Before entering, he pulls off the black crepe from the door knocker.

Dave signs the paperwork, wondering what on earth Sebastian is up to. The Earl clearly said that no one was to come inside, but Sebastian has given him a direct order. Once Dave has looked inside the truck, he knows exactly what to do. He climbs into the truck and scoops the soldier into his arms. When he’s walking up the abbey’s main steps, he says, “You’re safe now. Welcome home, Captain Anderson.”

Dave enters the abbey, with Blaine in his arms. The family and staff, who have already gathered in the entrance hall, gasp and squeal when they see Blaine. Sebastian quickly wheels in a leftover hospital-ward bed, and Dave carefully sets down a weak and semi-conscious Blaine.

The Countess rushes to her son’s side and peppers kisses all over his face. “Oh, Blaine… my baby… you’re alive! Thank you, Lord, for answering my prayers.”

The Earl stands by his wife, trying to hold in his tears of joy. “I’ve never been so happy to see someone in my entire life!”

Cooper and Quinn are quick to dash to the bedside to satisfy themselves that it really is Blaine. Mr and Mrs Hummel are right behind them to get a glimpse as well. Mr Hummel holds his wife as she cries joyous tears.

“Out of the way! I want to see for myself!”
The onlookers move to create a path for the Dowager Countess. She approaches the bed and places her face inches away from Blaine’s. “I’ve never given up hope that you are alive… not for a single moment.”

When the old Countess starts trembling, Cooper is immediately by her side and assists her to the closest chair.

The Earl orders, “Dave, take the bed to the parlor. We’ll settle Blaine there. Hummel, call Dr Roberts and tell him to come to the abbey at once. I want him to give Blaine a thorough medical examination. Smythe, go get the paperwork from the RAMC. We need to find out what has really happened to Blaine.”

Dave slowly steers the bed along the hall towards the parlor. The staff are lined up and there is a mixture of cheers and tears. Once Blaine’s bed has been settled into the parlor, the Andersons sit in chairs surrounding the bed and watch Blaine sleep. Every few minutes, the Countess places her hand near Blaine’s nose and mouth to verify that he’s breathing and truly alive.

Everyone’s prayers have been answered, and it’s the most blessed day at Westerville Abbey.

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Warmth, comfort, safety.

These are Blaine’s first thoughts when he wakes up. When he opens his eyes, he first sees old Dr Roberts writing notes on his clipboard. His family and the abbey’s staff are gathered around him, all dressed in black. His eyes dart around the room, trying to find Kurt, but his vision is soon blocked.

“Mama?”

Pamela leans in from her seat at his bedside and smothers him with kisses. “We are so happy to see you! The War Office informed us that you were killed in action.”

“I’m very much alive, thank you very much. You can all wear your normal clothing and take off those armbands.”

Hummel approaches the bed with a glass of water. “Where’s Kurt?” Blaine asks, with desperation in his voice.

The room is silent for a moment or two. Mr Hummel finally replies, “Kurt isn’t at Westerville Abbey anymore.”

“What happened to Kurt? The last I knew, he was convalescing at the abbey after his plane crashed. Don’t tell me he caught the Spanish flu!”

The Dowager Countess reaches over and places her hand on his shoulder. “No, Kurt is very much alive. He left Westerville Abbey a few weeks ago. He’s gone to America. He’s always wanted to see New York City.”

“America?” Blaine is surprised at the news. “When does he return?”

The Countess replies, “Kurt is making a new life for himself in America. I’m sure that Sebastian can take care of you until we find another footman.”

Blaine tries to keep his composure, but he’s panicking inside. Through all the tough times he’s
experienced over the past few years, the one thing that had kept him going was knowing that Kurt would be waiting for him back home. He needs to talk to his grandmama and Mr Hummel in private as soon as possible, to find out more about Kurt. Why would Kurt leave Westerville Abbey?

The Earl enters the parlor. “I’ve just gotten off the phone with Churchill, who’s now in charge of the War Office. Apparently, there isn’t a soldier by the name of Brian West listed in the Royal Army. However, there was a Private Brian West being held at a Manschaftslager POW camp in Münster, Germany.”

“That’s me,” Blaine replies.

The Dowager Countess breaks down in tears. “You’ve been a prisoner of war for all these years!”

The Earl sits by his mother’s side to comfort her.

“Why on earth did you tell them your name was Brian West?” Cooper asks.

Blaine explains, “During the Battle of the Somme, my troop was sent on a nighttime reconnaissance mission to identify the German positions - it was too foggy that night for the RFC to fly. It was a quiet night on the front, and we were cutting their telephone wires and barbed wire. The next thing I knew, a German soldier captured me. I was marched into a truck, where a dozen of my soldiers were already seated.”

Blaine closes his eyes, remembering the scared faces of his soldiers, looking at him for guidance.

“But that doesn’t explain why your name suddenly changed to Brian West,” the Earl counters.

Blaine opens his eyes once again. “I’d been briefed earlier about what to expect if the Germans captured us. They had two types of POW camps - those for soldiers and those for officers. Living conditions for officers were usually less harsh than those endured by soldiers. When I saw that the others captured that night were privates in my troop, I knew what I had to do. My men needed me more than ever before. I tore the captain insignia off my jacket and threw it out of the truck, along with my military identity tag. I told the Germans that I was Private Brian West.”

Blaine coughs and reaches for a glass of water.

Dr Roberts intervenes, “Blaine needs his rest. I’ll give him some medicine to help him sleep. Make sure that someone watches over him and that he eats regularly. Blaine is very malnourished. He could do with gaining at least thirty pounds.”

Mrs Sylvester pipes in, “I know exactly how to fatten Mr Blaine up. Food rationing be damned. He’s rather partial to my fruitcakes.”

The Countess admonishes, “Now, now Mrs Sylvester. There’s no reason for blasphemy. I’m sure everyone will forgo their butter and sugar rations for Blaine.”

“Of course we will,” Quinn agrees.

The Earl interrupts, “Let’s leave Blaine to sleep. I don’t want him left alone for a single second. We’ll all take turns watching over him, both day and night.”

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Blaine wakes up early the next morning to see a large medic by his side, dozing in a chair.
“If I remember correctly, you’re Sergeant Karofsky.”

Dave wakes up quickly and sits up straight. “Yes, Sir.”

“I’m glad to see you again, but how did you end up at staying at Westerville Abbey after the war?”

Dave sticks a thermometer in Blaine’s mouth. “It’s a very long story. After you saved me from no man’s land, I was sent back to Blighty. I had surgery on my shoulder, and I was then sent to Westerville Abbey to convalesce. Although I was given an honorable medical discharge from the RAMC, I decided to stay on at the abbey to help the other wounded officers. Once the amnesty treaty was signed, your father offered me a position as a groundskeeper.”

Blaine smiles at the news. “It seems as if our lives are intertwined.”

Dave notes Blaine’s body temperature in the medical records, and presses his fingers against Blaine’s wrist to time his pulse. “You are part of the reason I decided to stay. You saved my life, Captain Anderson. It seems only right to serve your family as well.”

“That’s quite a noble idea, Sergeant Karofsky, but consider the debt erased. You don’t need to stay here at Westerville Abbey on account of me.”

Dave ducks his head. “But I do need to stay. I would never have been able to fully recover if it wasn’t for Sebastian. I owe him my life.”

“Sebastian?” Blaine asks in a skeptical tone.

“Sebastian was in my RAMC unit at the front for a while. We have a good understanding of each other. When I arrived at Westerville Abbey, he helped me to get over my other problems - the nightmares, the anxiety, and the fear. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for Sebastian. He’s like my family now.”

Blaine digests the information about this new version of Sebastian. He has an inkling that there is something that Sergeant Karofsky isn’t telling him about their friendship.

“Now that the war is over, and I’m working at the abbey, you should call me Dave.”

“As long as you stop calling me Captain Anderson and Sir.”

Dave chuckles. “All right, Mr Blaine. I think I hear your family coming down the stairs. Do you think I can transfer you into a wheelchair so that you can have breakfast in the dining room? Everyone wants to see you again.”

“I’m famished,” Blaine replies with a nod. He can’t remember the last time he had a proper meal.

Dave lifts Blaine, sets him into the wheelchair, and guides it to the dining room.

“Good morning, Blaine,” the Countess greets and indicates to Dave that he should wheel Blaine to the empty spot between her and the Dowager Countess. “I trust you slept well?”

“Yes, Mama. It’s so good to be home again.”

Blaine sees two young boys on either side of Quinn. “And who do we have here?”

Cooper replies, “You’ve met Michael when he was a wee baby. He’s now three and a half years old.”
“Three and three quarters,” Michael reminds his father.

“Of course, your birthday is in a few months’ time.” Cooper then points to the younger boy. “Richard was born in 1916, a few months before you were... captured. He’s now two and a half years old.”

“Mama wrote a letter to me when Richard was born.” Blaine turns his head towards the two young boys. “How do you do? I’m your Uncle Blaine. I’m really not as scary as I must look right now. Once I get better, I’ll show you my favorite spots at Westerville Abbey. I also can tell you a story or two about your father.”

“You wouldn’t!” Cooper cries out.

Quinn laughs, “Believe it or not, Blaine, we have two more children, who are currently in the nursery. I’ll bring them down to meet their uncle before bedtime.”

“I look forward to that very much. You seem to have quite the family now.”

Blaine notices that the family have bowls of porridge in front of them, which is very unusual. When he reaches for the serving bowl, Hummel says, “We have a special breakfast for you, Mr Blaine.”

Sebastian arrives with a large plate, covered with a silver dome. When he sets it down in front of him and lifts off the cover, Blaine is surprised to see two eggs, bacon, sausages, mushrooms, roasted tomatoes, and fried bread.

“I can’t eat all of this!” Blaine exclaims. While he was in the POW camp, his food rations for a week was far less than this and certainly not as appetizing.

“I can help you eat it, Uncle Blaine! I haven’t had bacon in ages,” Michael exclaims.

“Uncle Blaine is a war hero. You can’t eat the food that he needs to get better!” Quinn scolds.

Blaine places a rasher of bacon on both Michael’s and Richard’s plates. “That’s all right, Quinn. I’m really looking forward to eating an English sausage, but the boys can have my bacon. They need to grow big and strong, too.”

Blaine tucks into his breakfast, feeling guilty that the others are merely eating porridge. It doesn’t help that everyone is staring at him while he eats. “Do I have something on my face?”

Cooper chortles, “Only the beginnings of a beard that makes you look like a grizzly bear.”

Michael and Richard burst out in a giggling fit. “A friendly grizzly bear, Uncle Blaine!”

“I plan to give you a bath and shave after breakfast, if that’s okay with you?” Sebastian asks.

Blaine rubs his hand against one cheek, realizing that he hasn’t had a shave in a long time. He’s surprised that Sebastian has politely asked for his permission to bathe and shave him. He can remember the times when Sebastian would leer at him, making him feel uncomfortable. He can also remember the times when Kurt would bathe and shave him, making him feel something else altogether.

The Earl sets down his cup of tea. “Now, one thing we’re all curious about is why it took so long for you to come home. Surely, the International Red Cross could have identified you earlier.”
“My POW camp was one of the last to be liberated. When we were released, there was a complete breakdown of trains in Germany. We had to make our own way home as best we could. We weren’t in the best condition, and there were soldiers on stretchers that we had to carry. Then a few soldiers contracted Spanish flu, and we had to stop for a while.”

“I can’t imagine surviving a German POW camp, only to die from the Spanish flu while making my way back home,” Cooper remarks.

Blaine closes his eyes, remembering how he had to bury the dead, including some of the privates in his troop. When he feels more composed, he opens his eyes and continues, “It took us a very long time to make our way across the border into Holland. Once we arrived at the Dutch reception camps, we were turned away – they were overflowing with too many soldiers. We made our way to France, but they couldn’t accept any more soldiers either. Eventually, we were sent to Denmark.”

“Denmark!” the Countess exclaims.

The Earl says, “I’ve vaguely remember hearing about this. Due to the congestion in the POW reception camps in France, Belgium, and Holland, there was some sort of Danish scheme in the works. The last I heard, the Danish shipping companies agreed to make their ships available to repatriate soldiers. I hadn’t realized that something came of the plan.”

Blaine continues, “By the time we reached Copenhagen, we were all so poorly and malnourished. It took some time for us to become… well enough… to make the journey back to Britain.”

The Earl interrupts, “I don’t think the details are for mixed company, and certainly not the breakfast table.”

Blaine agrees. There are even some things about his experiences that he doesn’t wish to tell the Westerville men.

“I tried to tell the Danes who I really was, but they didn’t understand. Most people didn’t speak English, and I certainly don’t speak Danish. According to their records, I was Private Brian West, end of story. There was a delay because they didn’t know where to send me. I firmly told them I wanted to return to Westerville Abbey. In the end, they decided to send me nearby to Exeter.”

The Countess coos, “Never mind, my child. The most important thing is that you are home in one piece. Between Dr Roberts, Sebastian, and Mrs Sylvester, we’ll soon have you back in tip-top shape.”

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Blaine reads of Princess Patricia’s marriage to Commander Ramsay in the newspaper. The country is fascinated by all details of the first royal wedding at Westminster Abbey since the 14th century.

“It’s almost time for afternoon tea. Can I get you anything? Perhaps a cup of tea and a slice of fruitcake?” Sam asks.

Blaine looks at his childhood friend fondly. “I’m still full from such a large breakfast and lunch. Can you please tell Mrs Sylvester that I don’t need to gain all thirty pounds in one day.”

“You know how single-minded Mrs Sylvester can be. What would you like to do? I could get a deck of cards, or even my latest American comic books.”

“What I’d really like to do is go to the stables and see Firebird.”
Sam looks at him skeptically. “I’m not sure about that. Dr Roberts didn’t say anything about taking you outdoors.”

They’re interrupted when the Dowager Countess enters the parlor, with Spratt trailing behind her carrying a tray of afternoon tea for two.

The Dowager Countess exclaims, “I think it’s a marvelous idea to see Firebird again. You could do with some fresh air, but leave a long horse ride for another day, when it’s warmer.”

“Thank you, Grandmama. You always understand me.”

The Dowager Countess sits down next to Blaine. “Spratt, please arrange for someone to come immediately after tea to take Blaine to the stables.”

“Yes, My Lady,” the butler replies, and sets down the tea tray.

The Dowager Countess waves her hand as a sign of dismissal. “That will be all. I trust that both of you have duties you need seeing to?”

“You don’t want me to stay in case Mr Blaine needs something, My Lady?” Sam asks.

“I’m perfectly capable of ringing a bell if Blaine needs something, thank you very much. Please make sure we are not interrupted.”

“Yes, My Lady,” Sam replies, as he follows Spratt out of the parlor, closing the doors.

The Dowager Countess pours the tea and hands Blaine a cup and a slice of fruitcake. “We’re finally alone. I gather you’re surprised at the news that Kurt is in America.”

Tears well in Blaine’s eyes. “I always thought that Kurt would wait at Westerville Abbey for me to return.”

“Kurt did wait!” his grandmama exclaims. “Kurt waited at Westerville Abbey until it was reported that the last British soldier had returned home. The reception camps on the continent closed months ago. We certainly weren’t expecting British soldiers to sail from Denmark, of all places.”

The Dowager Countess sets down her teacup and sighs. “I shall always remember that day in December 1916, when your father announced that you were missing in action, presumed dead. Although they found your military identity tag in no man’s land, it was so hard to believe the news without your body. As time went by… Well, it was a very difficult time for the family. A year later, the Royal Army declared you killed in action, buried in an unknown grave. But we held on to a strand of hope that there was some sort of misunderstanding or organizational hiccup. Once the armistice was announced, your father spoke to everyone he could think of to find you, but there still was no sign of you.”

“It all came to a head last month. There was a ceremony at the Devonshire Regimental barracks in Exeter. Service medals were handed out to the soldiers. By the way, do you know that Kurt received the Victoria Cross?”

Blaine shakes his head. “I didn’t know, but Kurt certainly deserves it. The RFC pilots were some of the bravest men throughout the war.”

“You received the Distinguished Conduct Medal, posthumous. The moment your father went to the platform to collect your medals, your death seemed very real…. So final.”
Blaine squeezes his grandmother’s upper arm. It’s obvious that recalling the occasion is difficult for her. “I’m so sorry that I put you through that.”

“Blaine, it’s not your fault. It’s not anyone’s fault. After you went missing, Kurt continued with the RFC as a training officer. During his leaves, he returned faithfully to Westerville Abbey. During that time, we would meet and discuss you. His love for you never wavered. Not once. After the awards ceremony, Kurt was absolutely devastated. He locked himself up in his bedroom for days. It was obvious he was at a loose end and didn’t know what to do with his life. As much as he loved Westerville Abbey, the memories of the times spent with you here pained him.”

“One day, he informed me that when he’d saved enough money, he was planning on moving to America. Kurt told me that he wanted to become a tailor, and felt that New York City would offer him a fresh start. He said that he didn’t need to be at Westerville Abbey to keep memories of you. They are locked inside his heart.”

Blaine’s breath hitches when he hears what Kurt told his grandmother.

The Dowager Countess continues, “At the time, I thought it was a good idea that Kurt decided to have a fresh beginning. I know how much servants earn; it would have taken him years to save enough money for the fare. I bought his ship passage and gave him enough money to settle in New York City.”

“You’re the reason Kurt’s gone?” Blaine asks, his body trembling.

“I thought that you would have wanted me to take care of Kurt if something happened to you.”

“Well, yes… of course I do.”

“This was my way of taking care of Kurt. If I had known that you were still alive, I would have tied Kurt to the servant’s table, not allowing him to leave. But at the time, it seemed the best gift to give him was a new start in life.”

Blaine starts to cry. He can’t help it. These past years have been a nightmare, and now his love is somewhere across the Atlantic Ocean. His grandmother shifts the chair over and holds him gently. He cries because he wants to see Kurt so badly, to be held in his arms, and to hold him in return. He cries because he misses his love so much it hurts. He cries because they missed each other by only a matter of weeks. He cries because he’s not sure if he’ll ever see Kurt again.

He can hear his grandmother sniffle, and he realizes that she’s just as upset about the situation as he is. He cries until he has no more energy left, and then drifts off into a fitful sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Pre-reading warning: This chapter makes reference to prisoners of war. It doesn’t go into details of the living conditions or treatment in a German POW camp. If you have any concerns, please send me a message on Tumblr or email me at VoyageAsia4@gmail.com. No anons please - I will only answer privately so as not to spoil things for other readers.

Trivia: Just over seven million soldiers were taken prisoner of war from 1914–18. Germany held around 2.5 million of them, including 200,000 British military
personnel who were housed in POW camps dotted around Germany. A number of German officers were accused of mistreating Allied prisoners, and were put on trial in the Leipzig War Crimes Trials in 1921.

There really was a Danish scheme to repatriate British soldiers when WW1 was over. I read someone’s dissertation on-line about it, and I bet the researcher would be shocked to find out that their paper was read to write a fan fic!

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I also thank Dblmalfu, who performed a detailed final review, although all mistakes are mine.

I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: Blaine has a meaningful discussion with his father.
July 1919
Blaine

“Uncle Blaine! Uncle Blaine! Will you play tiddlywinks with us?” Michael shouts, bounding into the parlor with his younger brother, Richard. He lays out the flat felt mat, small discs or "winks", and the target pot.

Blaine opens his eyes and notices that it’s dark outside. His nephews are dressed in their pajamas and dressing gowns, so he must have slept through dinner. Blaine sits up to greet his nephews. “Well, hello there, Michael and Richard. What a lovely surprise!”

Cooper and Quinn trail behind their sons, and they each have a young child in their arms. Cooper smiles, “Uncle Blaine, I’d like to introduce you to the newest additions to our family. This one in my arms is Blaine Patrick. He was born in September 1917.”

“You named him after me?”

Cooper sets young Blaine down on his brother’s lap. “Of course I did. You had been Missing in Action for nine months when he was born, and I wanted your name to continue on. The princess that Quinn is holding is Elizabeth Violet. She’s almost five months old.”

“Quinn, you look amazing, in spite of having four young children.”
“Thank you, Blaine. Now that there are plenty of sons to continue the Westerville line, and I have the daughter that I’ve always longed for, we don’t plan on having any more children.”

“We’ll see about that,” Cooper says and winks. “Michael, Richard, and Blaine - give your uncle a kiss goodnight. It’s past your bedtime.”

“Aw, I wanted to play tiddlywinks with Uncle Blaine,” Michael pouts.

Blaine chuckles. “There’s plenty of time for that tomorrow. If you’re good, I’ll even teach you some new songs that I’ve learnt.”

“I love to sing!” Richard exclaims.

“Just like your papa,” Quinn says, smiling.

Once the boys have given Blaine kisses goodnight, Quinn leaves the parlor with the children.

“Would you like some port?” Cooper asks.

“Sure, I haven’t had port in years… Not since the last time I was home.”

Cooper pours the port wine into two small crystal-cut glasses and sits down next to Blaine.

“Cheers,” Cooper says, clinking their glasses together.

Blaine takes a tiny sip, enjoying the port wine’s rich and strong berry flavors. “This tastes so good.”

“I can’t tell you how happy I am that you’re home again. We all thought that you were dead.”

“I’m glad too, Cooper. The thought of Westerville Abbey, my family, and friends has kept me going through some pretty hard times. Speaking of friends, do you know what’s happened to Nick Duval and Jeff Sterling?”

“They are doing well. Both men are continuing in the Royal Army. Major Sterling’s battalion is in Cologne to implement the occupation of the Rhineland. Lieutenant-Colonel Duval is now back in England, waiting for his next orders.”

“I’m so relieved that they made it through the war.”

“Blaine, they never stopped looking for you on the front. I’m sure that if you telephone Duval, he’d race over to Westerville during his next leave.”

“Once I feel better, I’ll contact my old friends. Has anyone heard from Miss Christina Cohen-Chang? Is she still in Hong Kong?”

“She’s now living in Hangchow, China. She married Michael Chang, who owns a tea plantation. Mr Cohen-Chang is importing the green tea to other countries in Asia. It seems that the Brits don’t like green tea.”

“I enjoyed her companionship very much, and wish her future happiness.”

“Don’t worry, Blainey boy. You won’t be on the marriage market for long. There are plenty of widows from either the war or the Spanish flu. I understand that Lady Rebecca Jackson is looking for a new husband,” Cooper teases.
Blaine rolls his eyes at the ridiculous idea. “I thought she was married to Chandler Kiehlof Padstow?”

“Mr Kiehl joined the Royal Navy at the beginning of the war, and became the captain of the HMS Cornwallis. In 1917, the ship was hit by the Germans, and he was killed by a torpedo explosion.”

“That’s such a shame. So many good men have lost their lives. Now, tell me news about others. There seem to be a few changes at the abbey.”

“Did someone explain to you about Kurt’s departure?”

Blaine sets down his glass. “Yes, Grandmama did. I understand why he felt the need to leave.”

“We were all surprised by his decision. He’s quite the national hero. Michael boasts to anyone who’ll listen that he knows a real flying ace. I think he wants to grow up to be a pilot.”

Blaine replies, “I would be proud of any nephew that grows up to be the man that Kurt is.”

“Has anyone told you about Cousin Rachel?” Cooper asks.

“I’ve been meaning to ask about her. I assume that Cousin Rachel returned to New York City once the war was over?”

“Yes, she returned to New York City, but Cousin Rachel did it like she does everything… with a bang!” Cooper chortles.

“I’ve a feeling there’s a rather good story behind her departure. I think I’ll need some more port before you tell me.”

Cooper tops up their glasses. “Well, I’m sure you know that Cousin Rachel was completely besotted with Hudson, the chauffeur. She fooled no-one with the *Hudson has to sleep in Blaine’s bedroom so that I can perform my nursing duties at night* act. I’d say that Rachel was a naughty nurse, judging from the noises that came out of the bedroom.”

Blaine rolls his eyes. “This isn’t anything I don’t know already.”

“What you don’t know is that after the armistice was announced in November, Cousin Rachel and Hudson ran away in the middle of the night. They fled to Gretna Green and were married the next day.”

“You don’t say! What were Father’s and Mama’s reactions?” Blaine asks.

“I wasn’t here, but Quinn told me that they were very upset. She thought our parents were more worried about what Uncle Hiram would say than anything else. He was expecting her to marry a titled gentleman with an estate, not a chauffeur. After they married, Cousin Rachel and Hudson drove to Liverpool to catch the next ship sailing to New York City.”

“Has anyone heard from them since?” Blaine asks.

“Uncle Hiram wrote Mama once Cousin Rachel and Hudson arrived in New York City. He was so delighted to have his daughter back home safe and sound. Uncle Hiram rather likes Hudson. He’s impressed with his war effort and medals.”

“Cousin Rachel has always been single-minded about what she wants. It’s quite an admirable quality,” Blaine remarks.
“There’s more to the story about Cousin Rachel, but I’ll leave it for father to tell you.”

“Won’t you give me a hint, Cooper?”

“Nuh-uh. It’s so incredible that I think you’ll need to hear the full story all at once.”

Sebastian enters the parlor, and sets down a tray containing hot cocoa, a cheese sandwich and apple crumble. Cooper licks his lips. “You don’t know how lucky you are to get apple crumble. I can’t remember the last time I’ve had it. Mrs Sylvester says it uses too much sugar and butter from our ration books.”

“I’m not sure that lucky is how I would describe me needing to gain thirty pounds. You’re welcome to eat half… but only half, mind you. It smells heavenly.”

Cooper finishes his port wine and stands up. “No, even I couldn’t take food away from a former prisoner of war. I best be off to make sure the young ones are in bed sleeping, and not wide awake planning what they’re going to do with their Uncle Blaine tomorrow.”

“The boys are so delightful. I can’t wait to spend more time with them.”

“Don’t go telling them stories about me at the village hall dances,” Cooper warns.

Blaine chuckles, “The stories will be about what a wonderful brother you are. Good night, Cooper.”

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The following morning, Blaine wakes up early to the sound of Sebastian snoring. He is feeling better than he has in years. Rather than use the chamber pot underneath the bed, Blaine decides to get up and walk to the lavatory. Besides, there is somebody he really needs to talk to.

Although his body is stiff from being idle, Blaine manages to sneak out of the parlor, careful not to wake Sebastian up. Walking down the corridor, he’s quiet as a mouse. After spending a few minutes in the lavatory, his heart leaps when he exits and sees Sebastian standing on the other side of the door.

“What are you doing, Mr Blaine? You should be in bed!”

“I’m not a total invalid, Sebastian. Now, if you don’t mind, I really need to see Hummel.”

Sebastian hisses, “Don’t you know Hummel will fire me if he sees you out of bed alone? I’ll take you back to the parlor, and send the butler to you.”

After Blaine has waited in bed for a few minutes, Hummel arrives with a breakfast tray of tea, toast and a fresh fruit salad. “Good morning, Mr Blaine. How are you feeling?”

“I’m feeling so much better today. Do you have a few minutes to talk?”

The butler pours a cup of tea and then sits down near the bed. “I trust this is about Kurt?”

Blaine nods. “My grandmama told me about the circumstances leading up to Kurt leaving for America. Having given it a lot of thought, I can understand his decision, but that doesn’t mean I like it.”

“Mr Blaine, you can’t imagine how distraught Kurt was when we found out that you were missing in action, presumed dead. He never gave up hope that you were still alive until the government
declared that the last soldier had returned to British soil. It was only then that he accepted your
death. He was in a terrible state and wouldn’t leave his room for days. I’ve been there myself when
my late wife passed away, and it’s the most awful experience. To see Kurt going through it broke
my heart.”

Blaine takes a sip of tea, trying to keep himself together. He imagines how he might feel if their
roles had been reversed, and he was the one waiting at Westerville, with Kurt disappearing at the
front. Feelings of loss and despair overwhelm him, and a tear pours down his face.

Hummel hands him a handkerchief. “It was obvious that Kurt needed a fresh start, away from
Westerville Abbey. The order of things have changed since the start of the war. He’s too smart and
ambitious to be in service for the rest of his life. He couldn’t move to Exeter or London at the
height of the Spanish flu. I encouraged him to move to America. I thought that Miss Berry and Mr
Hudson could help him settle in. He never once took off that ring, not even when he left for
America.”

Blaine looks down at his hand, saddened that his finger is bare. “I never took my ring off either,
but when I was captured, the Germans pried it off my finger at gunpoint.” Blaine wipes a tear away
from his cheek. “Have you heard from Kurt since he left?”

“Just before you returned, Kurt sent me a telegram informing me that he’s arrived safely in
America. Miss Berry and Mr Hudson are currently traveling, but your uncle recommended a
boarding house. I have the address.”

Blaine’s heart races with the news that there is some way to contact Kurt. “Could you have
someone bring me a pen and some stationery after breakfast? I need to write to him at once.”

“The day after you arrived home, I sent Kurt a letter. I haven’t heard from him since, although it
will take a couple of weeks for him to receive the great news.”

“Do you think Kurt will return to Westerville?”

After a minute or two, Hummel finally speaks. “If he has the funds, I think Kurt will want to return
to Westerville. However, I’m not sure that it’s the best thing for him.”

“What do you mean? Of course it is!” Blaine cries out. He can’t understand what could possibly be
better for Kurt than to be reunited with him. Isn’t it obvious?

The butler continues, “You’ve been brought up to think it’s all within your grasp - that if you want
something enough, it will come to you. But we’re not like that. We don’t think our dreams are
bound to come true, because they almost never do. This is Kurt’s chance to dream big and make
something of himself.”

They are interrupted when the Earl enters the parlor. “Blaine! We were worried when you didn’t
make an appearance in the dining room, but I see now that you have a breakfast tray. Hummel,
could you let the family know that Blaine is fine? I’ll be with my son for the next hour. I’ll ring
the bell if we need anything.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

Hummel turns his attention to Blaine. “We can continue our conversation later. Hopefully, I’ve
given you something to think about.” He picks up the breakfast tray and leaves the parlor.

The Earl smiles at his son. “You are looking a lot better than you did a few days ago.”
“I’m feeling a whole lot better, Father. I’ve had plenty of sleep, food in my belly, and I’m with my family. I’ve even seen Firebird. Who could ask for anything more?”

The Earl sits down next to Blaine’s bed and hands him a book. “I have a small gift for you. When I was last in Exeter, I met this young lady from Torquay, who served in a Devonshire hospital during the Great War. Anyways, she told me she has written a book, as a result of a bet about the possibility of writing a detective story in which the reader would not be able to spot the criminal. She gave me an advanced copy, and once I started reading it, I couldn’t put it down. The ending is very clever, and I know that you’ll enjoy it.”

Blaine looks at the cover and reads “The Mysterious Affair at Styles” by Agatha Christie. “Thank you, Father. I haven’t read a novel in years.”

Blaine takes a sip of tea, and decides to find out more about the changes at the abbey from his father. “Last night, Cooper and I had a chat, and he told me that Cousin Rachel has eloped with Hudson to Gretna Green and gotten married, and that they set sail for America the following day. Is that really true?”

The Earl nods. “If you must know, we think Rachel and Hudson are very foolish. The month before they eloped, she had turned 21 years old, so there was nothing we could do. Your mother was beside herself, worried about how your Uncle Hiram would react. Of course, Hiram was thrilled to get his only daughter back. As it turns out, Rachel’s departure was a blessing in disguise.”

“Really? Why is that?” Blaine asks.

“As you are aware, Rachel has a substantial annual allowance. On her 21st birthday, she received a rather considerable dowry. Unbeknownst to us, she visited a solicitor in Exeter several times before she left with Hudson. She has left one half of her dowry in trust for the Westerville estate.”

“How exactly does the trust work?”

“As long as the estate is held by a descendant of the Anderson family and is kept whole, the income from the trust is available for its running costs. The principal money will be held in trust in safe investments, government bonds. However, a portion can be released each year for pre-approved upgrades or to pay death duties.”

“Is the trust legal in Britain?”

“I had my solicitors look over the trust documents, and they assure me that it’s unbreakable. If the Anderson family wish to sell the Westerville estate, there are various clauses that allow for that.”

“And how much do you think the annual income will be?”

The Earl grins broadly. “The trustees gave me some impressive income projections. There is more than enough to secure the future of the Westerville estate for generations to come.”

“That’s the best news I’ve heard since I’ve returned.”

The Earl continues, “I haven’t finished telling you the story. You see, Rachel has also set up a small trust for you. I’ve brought the legal document and accompanying letter for you to read.”

When his father hands him the papers, he immediately unseals the envelope, and reads the letter.

November 1918
Dear Cousin Blaine,

If you are reading this letter, it means that you weren’t killed in action two years ago. No matter what the War Office said, I’ve always held out hope that you survived the war.

You are now aware that I’ve married Finn, and we are starting our new lives in New York City. I’m absolutely determined to become a star on Broadway. I love Finn so much, and he supports my ambitions. It was an easy decision to make. No earl or baron could make me feel the way that Finn does.

After you were declared missing in action, presumed dead, I overheard a conversation between Uncle Michael and Cousin Cooper. They were trying to figure out how to keep the Westerville estate afloat. Previously, they had expected you to marry a lady with a substantial dowry, but they had no backup plan.

I’ve so many fond memories of my time in Westerville - horse riding with you, attending the London Season, and of course, spending time with Finn. I couldn’t leave Westerville Abbey in financial ruins, knowing that I have the means to make things right. No doubt, Uncle Michael has already told you about the trust. The Westerville estate will belong to the Andersons for many years to come.

Now that Cousins Cooper and Quinn have three sons, the Anderson line will continue for generations. With the trust set up, it seems to me that you don’t need to marry for money. I’ve set up a small trust for you, and the annual income should be adequate. You can use the principal to set yourself up, whether in a business, a career, or whatever you desire. And if you seek Kurt as your gentleman companion, so much the better.

Now write me at once and tell me where you’ve been hiding since December 1916!

Love,

Cousin Rachel

Blaine sets down the letter and reaches for his handkerchief to blow his nose. He wishes that Cousin Rachel was by his side, singing one of her songs. They would laugh and joke about all manner of things, and race on horses across the estate’s fields. Although they were together at Westerville Abbey for only a short while, he loves her like a sister. He decides to pick up the trust document and take a peek at the amount.

“Go to page seven. I’ve penciled into the margin what the annual income will be,” the Earl says.

Blaine’s jaw drops when he sees the amounts. It’s not a huge fortune, but it’s enough to allow him to lead a modest but comfortable life. Cousin Rachel’s generosity feels overwhelming. She loves him enough to make sure that he’s financially secure for the rest of his life.

His father places his hand on Blaine’s shoulder. “There are plenty of boys to continue the Anderson line, and the Westerville estate is financially secure for generations to come. Your Cousin Rachel has given you the means to spend your life the way you see fit, and to marry for love.”

Blaine feels a huge weight lifted from his shoulders. Although he’s never shirked his family duties, the underlying need to marry for money has always dragged him down. He’s battled with the internal conflict of doing what is expected of him, and doing what he wants.

“Do you have any idea what you might want to do?” the Earl asks.
Blaine knows that what he wants is for Kurt to return to Westerville so that they can plan their future together, but he’s not about to tell his father this.

The Earl stands up. “Never mind, Blaine. You have plenty of time to make plans. We first need to get you healthy and fit again.”

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Blaine writes to Kurt about what has happened since he was captured by the Germans in December 1916, leaving the grim details out. He explains to Kurt about the trusts that Rachel had set up before she left to marry Finn and move to America. Most importantly of all, he writes pages of his undying love for Kurt. His emotions pour out as he repeats every word of the promises he made years ago in the kitchen gardens. He begs Kurt to take the next ship back to England, willing to buy the ticket, so they can plan their fabulous future together.

When the letter is finished, he puts it in an envelope, and drips warm wax on it before pressing down with the Westerville seal.

He turns his attention to his grandmama’s butler, who is standing in the corner. “Spratt, could you make sure this is in tomorrow’s post?”

“Yes, Mr Blaine. I will see to it personally.”

Blaine watches Spratt leave the parlor, and Sebastian and Dave immediately enter. His father was serious when he ordered that he’s not to be left alone for a single second. Sebastian pulls up an extra chair so that both he and Dave can sit by his bedside.

“The both of you don’t have to babysit me tonight. I’m fine on my own,” Blaine says.

Dave replies, “There’s no way we’re going to leave you alone all night. I know from first-hand experience that you can feel bad things at night. I won’t leave you until I’m satisfied that you aren’t haunted by memories.”

Blaine sees the quiet determination in Dave’s eyes and knows exactly what he’s talking about. While he hasn’t experienced shell shock himself, he’s seen it amongst his soldiers. He has spent many a night helping soldiers to calm down. “I understand, but why the two of you?”

Sebastian replies, “Since we are both medics, your father decided that we would alternate nights. However, Dave and I discussed it and think it’s better if we both stay with you. This way, we can keep an eye on you and still spend some time together.”

The way Sebastian and Dave smile at each other is the only confirmation Blaine needs that these men are in love.

Sebastian pulls out a book. “Kurt used to read to the officers in the abbey’s ward at night. I know you love books, so I’ve brought with me The Tin Woodman of Oz.”

“I love the Oz Series!” Blaine exclaims.

Sebastian opens the book and begins to read, “The Tin Woodman sat on his glittering tin throne in the handsome tin hall of his splendid tin castle in the Winkie Country of the Land of Oz. Beside him, in a chair of woven straw, sat his best friend, the Scarecrow of Oz….”

Blaine closes his eyes as his mind conjures up the image of Kurt reading a book to the wounded officers. It certainly sounds like something Kurt would do. The only thing that would make his
homecoming perfect would be to have Kurt beside him in his bed.

Blaine’s last thought before drifting off to sleep is wondering how long it will take Kurt to return to Westerville Abbey, once he finds out that he’s alive.

Chapter End Notes

Trivia: Everything mentioned about Agatha Christie is absolutely true. She was from an upper middle-class family and raised in Devon. The house is now a museum. While serving in a Devon hospital during the Great War, she wrote her first Hercules Poirot mystery based upon a bet.

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I also thank Dblmalfuction, who performed a detailed final review, although all mistakes are mine.

Next up: Kurt arrives in New York City.
Chapter Notes

A warning that this chapter has one slight slur against Germans. It’s a quick comment, and the other person in the scene offers a different view. If you have any concerns, please send me a message on Tumblr or an email at VoyageAsia4@gmail.com. No anons please - I will only answer privately.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

June 1919
Kurt

Once the Ellis Island immigration official has stamped his passport, Kurt boards the crowded ferry, and immediately finds a spot on the outdoor deck. When the hot summer sun warms his face, he thinks about the contrast to a typical English day in June - wet and miserable. He takes one last look at the Statue of Liberty before the ferry begins the short journey to New York City. Kurt leans against the ferry’s guardrail as Manhattan comes into view. He’s never seen such tall buildings before. He can practically smell new opportunities and prosperity in the air.

When he disembarks the ferry at Battery Park, he looks high for Mr Hudson and looks low for Miss Berry, but he can’t see the couple anywhere. After thirty minutes, he gives up hope that they’ve come here to pick him up. He manages to find a vacant yellow taxicab, and slips in the back.

“Where you goin’?”

Kurt is surprised at the driver’s thick Irish brogue. He’s well aware that New York City is filled with immigrants, but didn’t expect to meet one so soon.
Kurt opens the envelope that the Countess gave him before he left Westerville Abbey. When he recites the address, the driver whistles low. “The Upper East Side? Your family is doin’ all right.”

Kurt has never seen so many vehicles on one street before. When the driver starts to weave through the heavy traffic congestion, he clutches the hanging hand strap for dear life. He startles at the sound of so many drivers blasting their horns, and he wonders if he’ll make it to Mr Berry’s in one piece.

Thirty minutes later, Kurt is relieved when the taxicab stops in front of an impressive three-story townhouse that is directly opposite Central Park. After paying the driver and collecting his suitcases, Kurt makes his way up the main steps to ring the bell.

A butler opens the door, and gives him a look-over before saying, “We’re not looking for any more staff right now.”

Kurt hears footsteps inside nearing the door, “Who’s at the door, Collins?”.

When Kurt can see the man, he knows it’s Mr Berry - the family resemblance is uncanny.

“I…I’m not here for a job. I’ve come to see Miss Berry… or Mrs Hudson, that is. I’m Kurt Hummel from Westerville, and the Countess has given me a letter of introduction.”

“Do come in. Any friend of my sister’s is a friend of mine.”

“Thank you.” Kurt is relieved that he’s found a friendly face in a new city. He leaves his suitcases by the door and follows Mr Berry to the front parlor.

“Collins, please tell LeRoy that we have company. And bring some coffee and sandwiches. This young man looks as if he’s half-starved.”

Kurt’s stomach grumbles at the thought of food. He hasn’t eaten anything since he left the ship for Ellis Island.

Once Collins has left the front parlor, Mr Berry reads his sister’s letter of introduction. “A Captain during the war… and recipient of the Victoria Cross medal… Westerville Abbey’s second footman.” Mr Berry looks up from the letter. “You must be friends with Finn. I’m sorry to tell you that he and my Rachel are not here.”

Kurt’s body sags at the news. All his plans are focused around Mr Hudson’s and Miss Berry’s help. “Do you know when they’ll return?”

“Rachel and Finn joined a traveling vaudeville troupe, and they are not expected back until the end of the year. If I’m not mistaken, they should be performing in St Louis this week.”

Kurt is shocked. “A vaudeville show? I didn’t know that Mr Hudson could sing and dance.”

They are interrupted when a tall lithe gentleman enters the room with a tray. “Finn has a decent singing voice, but I wouldn’t say that he knows how to dance. The troupe’s owner took him on anyways… he said that the show needed some comic relief.”

“LeRoy, I’d like to introduce you to Captain Kurt Hummel. He used to work at Westerville Abbey as a footman. Pamela has written that he was a flying ace during the war and is quite the local legend. He was even awarded the Victoria Cross medal.”

“How do you do, Kurt? You were brave to fly a plane. You wouldn’t catch me in one of those
contraptions.” LeRoy offers Kurt a sandwich before he takes a seat next to his companion. Blaine has told him the story of Mr Berry and LeRoy’s relationship. Judging by how comfortable they are in such close proximity, and the subtle loving looks, Kurt concludes that it’s true. He gets a warm feeling in his belly, knowing that two men in love can work out a discreet but satisfactory arrangement in America.

“We all had to do our part in the Great War,” Kurt says. He takes a bite of his sandwich and has to hold back a moan at the delicious flavors.

“What are your plans?” LeRoy asks, once Kurt has devoured his lunch.

“First, I’ll need to find a hotel or somewhere to stay. I have a little money, so I’ll explore New York City before I start looking for a job.”

Mr Berry rubs his chin, deep in thought. “I think a boarding house will be the best place for you to stay. In addition to the room, you’ll get breakfast and dinner. There are many to choose from with so many immigrants arriving. Now, I’ll have to think of a good one.”

LeRoy jumps from the sofa. “I know the very one. It’s very clean and reputable, and it’s in a good neighborhood. I’ll go telephone them to see if they have a vacancy.”

When LeRoy leaves the room, Mr Berry asks, “What type of work are you looking for? With your experience and English accent, I’m sure you could find a butler’s position.”

Kurt shakes his head. “I don’t want to go into domestic service. I’ve always enjoyed fashion, and know how to sew and mend things. I hope to become a tailor’s apprentice.”

“New York City is the place to be if you’re interested in the clothing industry. We have a garment district that produces most of this nation’s clothing, and they can’t keep up with the demand for ready-wear apparel. You should start there.”

Kurt is excited by the prospect of joining a growing industry and revels at the fact that it even has its own district in New York City.

“A lot of the places are owned by German Jews,” Mr Berry adds.

Kurt shudders. “I don’t think I could work for a German. I’ve thought of the Germans as the enemy for years. It wouldn’t feel right, especially since they took the life of Mr Blaine Anderson.”

“When my sister’s letter about Blaine’s death came, I was saddened. It’s very difficult to lose someone… I lost my wife when Rachel was born.” Mr Berry pauses and takes a sip of his coffee. Kurt can see a faraway look in his eyes, as if he’s recalling a difficult time.

“Kurt, I understand how you feel, but New York City is different than England. It’s called a melting pot because many different types of people blend together as one. Most of the German Jews here weren’t involved in the war. It would be like people not liking you because your king once taxed tea. Kurt Hummel sounds like a German name, too.”

Kurt understands what Mr Berry is saying, but he’s not sure that working for a German is the right thing for him.

“There are also Russians and other Eastern Europeans in the garment district. I’m sure that you’ll find a good job.”

LeRoy returns to the room. “Good news! I’ve spoken to Mrs Bruce at Ferguson House, and she has
a room available immediately. It’s about a 15-minute walk from here. Hiram, let’s help Kurt take his cases there and introduce him.”

The gentlemen lead Kurt along the streets until they reach Ferguson House. It’s a beautiful brownstone building, similar to Mr Berry’s, and only a couple blocks from Central Park.

LeRoy makes the introductions. “Mrs Bruce, this is Captain Kurt Hummel, VC. He’s just arrived from England.”

“VC you say? All war heroes are welcome here. Now, let me show you the room I have available,” Mrs Bruce replies.

As she leads them up the stairs, she says, “Meals are served in the dining room on the ground floor. Breakfast is at 7:00 AM, and dinner is at 6:00 PM. Don’t be late! The bath schedule is posted on the door. Curfew is at 11:00 PM and no visitors are allowed, unless prior arrangements are made. This is a reputable boarding house.”

Kurt enters the bedroom and gasps. It’s almost as large as Blaine’s bedroom at Westerville Abbey. It has a bed, a night table, a wardrobe, a bureau, a writing desk, and a comfortable-looking chair. Why it even has its own fireplace.

Once Mr Berry has set down the suitcase, he says, “LeRoy and I had best be off to let you settle in. Call on us again if you need anything.”

“I don’t know how to thank you. This room is perfect for my needs.”

“You can thank me when you become a famous tailor and make fabulous suits for me,” he replies and winks.

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Kurt’s stomach swoops as the high-speed electric elevator descends from the 57th floor to the lobby of the Woolworths Building. Earlier in the tour, he almost lost his nerve to step into the contraption, but he really wanted to see the view from the top. He’s just as nervous on the trip down, but at least the elevator operator seems undaunted and looks like he knows what he’s doing. When the elevator pings and the doors open, Kurt is relieved.

Now that the tour is over, Kurt goes to the gift shop to browse the souvenirs. He ultimately decides to buy nothing - the decorative plate that he has from Woolworths in Southampton is enough. For the umpteenth time this week, Kurt wishes that Blaine was with him to share these new experiences and to pass the long nights back at the boarding house. He tucks away those feelings quickly, because no wishful thinking will bring Blaine back to him.

He looks at the rack of postcards, and immediately feels guilty that he hasn’t written to his father yet. He feels selfish when he thinks that he has spent all his time sightseeing. Kurt immediately goes to the nearby Western Union office, and sends his father a telegram. Once he’s found a job and he’s established, he’ll write his father a long letter.

With the telegram taken care of, Kurt enters Central Park, his favorite place in New York City. Although he enjoys exploring the Big Apple, he still misses the countryside - the fresh clean air, the smell of grass and farm animals, and tending Westerville Abbey’s vegetable gardens. He takes out his handkerchief and wipes his brow. New York City is so much warmer in July than it is in Westerville. He likes the hotter climate, but he’ll have to buy lighter suits for the summer.

When he nears a cart, his stomach rumbles at the enticing aroma. He notices the vendor placing a
sausage on a bun; it looks as delicious as it smells. When it’s his turn, Kurt politely asks, “I’ll have a sausage, please.”

“It’s a hot dog. Do you want it with the works?”

Kurt merely nods, not understanding what exactly he’s agreeing to, but his eyes open wide when the vendor adds tomato ketchup, mustard, onions, and some sort of pickled relish. After paying, he sits down on a nearby bench and tastes his first bite of the hot dog in a bun. Kurt thinks he’s now found his new favorite food. It’s delicious, cheap, and convenient.

As he’s eating, Kurt looks over at Conservatory Lake, and watches the men with their sons sail their model yachts. His mind replaces the figures with himself and Blaine, showing his nephews how to race the boats. *Set the boat down slowly so the water doesn’t tip it over…* *Kurt, can you show me how to fly a kite?…* *Uncle Blaine, can we have ice-cream cones, pretty please?*

Kurt shakes his head to rid of himself of these thoughts. They only make him feel lonely. He’s got to get on with his new life the best way he can.

When Kurt returns to the boarding house, he pays his weekly rent. He’s mindful that the Dowager Countess’ money won’t last forever. He needs to find a job, and tomorrow will be a good day to visit the garment district.

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Kurt alights the trolley on 35th Street and Sixth Avenue. He clutches his bag, which contains the Earl’s letter of recommendation and samples of his sewing work. There’s a whirlwind of activity around him. There are men pushing wheeled racks of clothing to nearby trucks, and delivery men navigating the busy streets with carts of fabrics and notions. Kurt giggles when he sees a man carrying headless mannequins tucked underneath his arms. He can hear the distant whirl of thousands of sewing machines working behind the shop fronts.

There are many men on the streets - some are wearing a wide-brimmed black hat and sporting long flowing beards, while others are wearing skull caps. He then remembers that Mr Berry told him that many shops in the garment district are owned by German Jews. He identifies some German being spoken, but most people are conversing in a language he doesn’t recognize.

He walks down the street, wondering where to start. He never expected to see so many shops concentrated in one place. When he sees as sign for help wanted at Brodsky’s, he decides to start there. Kurt isn’t sure what the position entails, but he’s not picky about it, as long as it’s in fashion.

“Gut margn (*Good morning.*)”

“Do you speak English?” Kurt asks.

“Yes. How can I help you?” the owner replies.

“My name is Kurt Hummel. I saw the help wanted sign in your window, and I’d like to apply for the position.”

“Do you have any experience?”

Kurt hands the owner Lord Anderson’s letter and samples of his sewing. Brodsky merely grunts. “You don’t have much experience, but your handiwork is good. Follow me.”

Brodsky leads him up a narrow staircase, and Kurt’s jaw drops when they enter a dark and dingy
room. There are two dozen people - men, women and children - at work. Some are cutting fabrics and others are busy at sewing machines. Each person seems to have one specific job in producing the dresses. In a dank corner, he sees an old pot-bellied stove where meals are cooked. Two young girls are washing clothes in an old tub and hanging them up to dry.

“The pay is four dollars a week and you’ll work from dawn to dusk, longer if we have a big order. You’ll have the Sabbath off.”

Kurt can’t believe how low the wages are for such long hours. Surely, he can find something much better, like working for a gentlemen’s tailor. He politely replies, “Thank you, but this isn’t exactly the job I’m looking for.”

“Good luck, kid. They’re all like this.”

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Two weeks later…

“Would you like a biscuit as well?” Mrs Bruce politely asks.

Kurt shakes his head as he eats the creamed chicken and mushrooms with a baked potato. Why he would want a sugary treat while eating his main course is completely beyond him.

“She’s talking about a bread roll,” Mr Peterson, a fellow lodger, reminds him.

Kurt sinks into his chair, wondering why two different English-speaking countries use the same word to mean different things. He must remember to call a biscuit a cookie.

“Any luck today?” Mrs Bruce asks.

Kurt shakes his head.

“Never mind. I’m sure that something will turn up soon.”

When Mrs Bruce leaves for the kitchen, Mr Peterson, nudges him. “You need a distraction. We’re meeting some gals from Stewart’s House across the street at a nearby dancehall tonight. They’ll keep your mind off things. Come join us.”

Kurt replies, “Thank you, but I already have plans for the evening.”

Although Kurt has no plans whatsoever, the last thing he wants to do is to make pleasant conversation and dance with young ‘gals’. They’ll tell him they love his accent and make flirty remarks, and he would have to spend the evening kindly rebuking their advances.

“Aww, leave him alone,” another lodger replies. “Look at his ring. He’s already got a sweetheart.”

Kurt looks down at the ring Blaine gave him and is immediately transported back to the kitchen gardens all those years ago. He remembers the conviction and emotion in Blaine’s voice when he made those promises to him. Yes, he already does have a sweetheart, who holds the key to his heart.

After dinner, Kurt slowly climbs the stairs to his room… his sanctuary. He glances at the fireplace and wonders if it’ll ever get used. It’s another hot and balmy night. After taking off his shoes, he flops onto his bed to rest his sore feet. For the past two weeks, he’s scoured the garment district and has come to the conclusion that there is no dream job for him. Each place he goes has the same
low wages and poor working conditions. They are even worse than anything he has ever imagined in an English workhouse.

He fondly recalls the kind Mr Moore in the tailor’s shop in Exeter - the bolts of beautiful and luxurious wools and cottons. He reminisces about their conversation of the latest fashion trends and designs, the detailed measuring of Blaine, and the careful construction of his outfits. This is the sort of job he wants, not one of working in a crowded room doing one piece of the assembly, over and over again.

Kurt can’t take it anymore, and turns his face into the pillow as tears pour out. He misses Westerville Abbey so much. He misses spending time with his father and friends. He misses the respect that the Andersons and villagers give him as a flying legend. He misses the green pastures and beauty of the west country. He misses that feeling of being connected to Blaine at his home.

At the thought of Blaine, Kurt’s body racks with sobs. It’s not fair that Blaine died so young! Blaine was supposed to be by my side through thick and thin. He promised to love and cherish me, fearlessly and forever!

Kurt wants to go home.

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The next morning, Kurt wakes up early. He goes to the sink to wash his face and looks at himself in the mirror. His eyes are red and puffy from crying last night, and his hair is practically glued to his face.

He smiles when he remembers that it’s his day to take a bath. He puts on his dressing gown, grabs his toiletries and towel, and heads to the communal washroom. When he runs his bath, Kurt decides he deserves a special treat, and pours a few drops of chamomile oil in the water. When he sinks into the hot bath, Kurt lets out a deep contented sigh.

As much as he wants to return to Westerville Abbey, he doesn’t want to do it with his tail between his legs. He couldn’t bear to see the disappointment on his father’s face.

He recalls the words his father last said to him “Son, think of it as an adventure. Most things in life worth having are not going to just fall in your lap. You need to take a chance. If you’re not scared, it means you’re not sticking your head out far enough.”

Kurt knows his father is right. It’s only been three weeks since he’s arrived in the Big Apple, and he’s not a quitter. So, the idea of being a tailor hasn’t worked out, but he’s got plenty of other talents besides sewing. After all, he has a teaching certificate and he knows how to fly a plane. And if that doesn’t work out, he could always move upstate and use his farming expertise.

Kurt considers all the new opportunities that could be available to him if he abandons the idea of becoming a tailor. He doesn’t want to return to domestic service, but maybe he could use the skills he has learnt in a different way. He could find work in a hotel or perhaps, a club. He could make his way up the ladder to manage a business that would benefit from his knowledge on how to provide service to others.

When the water turns cold, he gets out the tub, and gets ready for a brand-new day. He returns to his room and wonders where he should start. He remembers that his weekly rent is due today. When he counts his remaining money, he realizes that he’ll need to economize if it’s to last until he finds the perfect job. He recently overheard two Irishmen talk about the cheap boarding houses in Bushwick, Brooklyn.
After informing Mrs Bruce about his departure, Kurt packs his suitcases. He looks in the mirror and is satisfied that his appearance is more than adequate for interviews with boarding house owners. When Kurt leaves the brownstone, he tips his hat at the postman walking up the entrance steps. As he walks down the street, Kurt has a bounce to his step.

Today is a new beginning, and surely, it will bring good news.

Chapter End Notes

Last Sunday, I posted a short multi-chapter story titled Happenchance for the 2018 Klaine Fic Exchange on Tumblr. It’s based upon a prompt provided by fhartz91.

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I also thank Dblmalfuntion, who performed a detailed final review, although all mistakes are mine.

I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: Back at Westerville Abbey, Blaine makes a decision.
Blaine has now been back at Westerville Abbey for three months.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

September 1919
Blaine

“Oh, this is delicious,” Pamela says after eating her first bite of poached salmon with cucumber and dill sauce.

Blaine doesn’t say anything, but inside he is preening at the compliment. After Cooper came back from a fishing trip along the Avon River with wild salmon earlier in the day, Blaine spent the afternoon creating a sauce that would enhance the salmon’s delicate flavors.

Quinn remarks, “Thank goodness the Spanish flu has finally come to an end. With social events and the London Season suspended since the war began, it’s been so quiet.”

“Nothing is quiet with three young terrors racing around the abbey, and Elizabeth has just started walking,” Cooper chortles.

Quinn gives him a pointed look. “It’s not the same, and you know it. At some point, we need to get on with our lives, and see other people.”

Pamela sets down her wine glass. “The Daily Telegraph reported that the Spanish flu pandemic has come to an end. Perhaps we should host a fox hunt next month, and invite our friends to stay the weekend. What do you think, Michael?”

“That sounds like a marvelous idea. Wesley tells me that the hounds are restless with the scent of foxes around them.”

When an apple tart is served, Blaine takes a bite, analyzing its texture and taste. Blaine is pleased with the pastry that he has made under Mrs Sylvester’s careful supervision. As the family eat their dessert course, there is talk about the fox hunt and other activities for the weekend. Blaine isn’t
sure how he feels about fox hunting any more. After serving time during the war, he’s lost his zeal for hunting down anything.

Once they have finished the meal, Pamela stands up. “Countess Anderson and Quinn, shall we retire to the parlor and discuss the fox hunt’s invitation list?”

Blaine immediately rises to help his grandmama out of her chair. Once the ladies have left, Hummel brings over the wooden box filled with cheroots and a tray with small glasses and port wine.

The Earl takes a sip of his port before speaking. “I think that Quinn is right. The war has been a terrible disruption to our lives. It’s time we think about the future.”

Cooper lights a cheroot and Blaine coughs when smoke is blown near his face. “The estate’s farmers are busy harvesting wheat, and it looks like a bumper crop. Do we know when the food rations will be lifted?”

“Last week, when I was at the House of Lords, there was talk of scrapping the ration cards in the new year. If the Ministry of Food can assure the House of Commons that the shops will have ample food supplies, it might even happen before Christmas.”

“Hallelujah!” Cooper exclaims. “I can’t wait until Mrs Sylvester cooks delicious food once again.”

The Earl shakes his head. “Surely, you can’t complain about tonight’s meal. I thought it was very tasty. What did you think, Blaine?”

Blaine wants to tell his father that he was the one who made the meal, but he refrains. His father doesn’t need to know that he’s at loose ends and has plenty of time to spend in the kitchen. “Yes, I enjoyed the salmon very much. Thank you for going fishing, Cooper.”

The Earl asks, “Now that you’re healthy again, have you given any thought as to what your future might hold? Before the war, there were plans of either the military or the Indian Civil Service.”

“There is no way that I’ll make the military a lifetime career. I’ve had enough of war, thank you very much. The Indian Civil Service has lost its appeal as well.”

What Blaine doesn’t tell his father is that he doesn’t want to make any plans until he’s heard from Kurt. He’s already been home for three months, and there’s been no word from Kurt. Not even Hummel has heard from his son. Blaine wrote to Cousin Rachel as well, but there’s been no letter from her either. Last month, he even begged his mother to write to Uncle Hiram to find out any news. It’s the waiting that is the hardest part. And with the waiting comes the indecision about his future.

“Blaine, did you hear me?” the Earl asks.

Blaine replies, “I’m sorry, Father. I was lost in thought.”

“You don’t have to join the Indian Civil Service if you don’t want to. With the trust fund Rachel has set up for you, there are plenty of other options in the colonies that wouldn’t require you to be responsible for maintaining law and order. For example, you could immigrate to New Zealand and establish a sheep farm.”

Cooper bursts into fits of laughter. “I’m sorry, but I can’t help thinking of that expression about New Zealand - the country where men are men and sheep are nervous.”
“Very funny, Cooper. No, I don’t feel like immigrating to New Zealand any time soon. I’ve only just returned home!”

The Earl sets down his glass. “Have you ever felt a calling to dedicate your life to God? Westerville’s vicar will be retiring in a couple of years.”

Cooper spews out his mouthful of port and laughs, “That’s perfect for Blainey. He’s never had a sweetheart and lives like a celibate monk.”

“Enough, Cooper,” the Earl reprimands his eldest son. “When Blaine attended the London Season in 1914, he put family duty first. He’s now in the enviable position to be free to love and marry the person he chooses.”

Blaine knows that his father wouldn’t feel this way if he knew that Kurt was Blaine’s one true love and the one he’d chosen. If his parents knew who his heart belonged to, he would be married off and sent to the colonies in record time.

“Son, there’s no rush. It’s an important decision and not to be taken lightly. If I can help in any way, let me know.”

Blaine feels relieved that he’s under no pressure to make a hasty choice. Before the war, decisions about his future were largely dictated by convention and his family. It’s nice to know that he can take his time to figure out in which direction he wants his career and future to go.

“Thank you, Father. I’ll be sure to keep you involved with any decision I make.”

The Earl sets down his glass, and stands up. “Now, if we’re finished here, let’s join the ladies in the drawing room.”

Cooper leaps from his chair. “I’ve got a song prepared. Blaine, do you know how to play *After You’ve Gone* on the piano?”

Blaine has heard the popular song many times and assures his brother that he can play the simple melody.

When they enter the parlor, the ladies are still deciding who to invite for the fox hunt weekend.

“How about Viscount Fink-Nottle and his wife?” the Dowager Countess asks.

“I thought you didn’t like them,” Pamela replies.

“So what? I have plenty of friends I don't like.”

Cooper coughs to get their attention. “Ladies, I’ve got a special treat in store for you tonight. Blaine and I are going to perform a duet.”

Blaine rolls his eyes and sits down on the piano bench. Cooper leads the song, and Blaine joins in the chorus...

_After you've gone and left me crying_
_After you've gone, there's no denying_
_You'll feel blue, you'll feel sad_
_You'll miss the only pal you've ever had_

The words resonate with Blaine. Yes, he’s feeling sad, he’s feeling blue, and there’s no denying
that he misses Kurt, the best pal he’s ever had.

_There’ll come a time, now don’t forget it_
_There’ll come a time when you regret it_
_Oh babe, think what you’re doing_
_You know my love for you will drive me to ruin_
_After you’ve gone, after you’ve gone away, away_

Immediately after the performance, Blaine makes his excuses and retires to his bedroom. After washing and changing into his nightclothes, he slips into bed. He’s grateful that there is a hot-water bottle warming the sheets on the cold autumn night. Tonight, like every other night, he can’t focus on anything besides his loneliness.

_Kurt, oh, Kurt, where are you? Why haven’t you answered my letters? Do you still love me? Have I lost you forever?_

And like every other night, his questions are left unanswered.

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When Blaine leaves Brufords Jewelers in Exeter, he looks down at his finger, which once again holds a simple silver band, engraved with a Victorian-style scroll pattern. As he walks toward the car, where he’s agreed to meet Quinn, he twists the ring around his finger. He hates that the Germans took the original ring away from him when he arrived at the POW camp - it had made him feel unsettled, almost as if he was untethered to Kurt. But now that he’s purchased a replacement ring, Blaine feels more connected. It’s a physical reminder of his love for Kurt, and of his commitment and faithfulness to their relationship. It feels comforting to wear a promise ring once again.

“Blaine, you walked right past me!”

Blaine turns around and sees Quinn leaning against the car, with a smile on her face. Once they set off to return to Westerville Abbey, Blaine asks, “Did you get everything you needed in Exeter?”

Quinn replies, “The hardest thing about having four children with birthdays over a ten-day period is making sure that the presents are equal… at least in their eyes.”

Blaine laughs, “Most of Great Britain must have young ones born nine months after home leave. Can I take Michael and Richard on a pony ride this week?”

“Aren’t they a bit young for horse riding?” Quinn asks.

“Wesley and I will just lead the ponies around the training pen. I promise they’ll be in safe hands.”

“In that case, you can. The boys will enjoy it. Blaine, you’re really a fantastic uncle. You manage to keep the three boys entertained all at once but also make time to spend with each one separately. And no one can get Elizabeth to sleep as quickly as you do when you sing her a lullaby. I think you’re a baby whisperer.”

They remain silent for the next fifteen minutes. Blaine looks out at the beautiful Devonshire countryside, but he can’t help but sneak looks at his new promise ring.

“Blaine, I see you’re wearing your ring again. Has your sweetheart been waiting for you?”

Blaine’s cheeks tinge pink. He ducks his head and replies, “Maybe. I hope so. I don’t know.”
“Well, whoever she is, she’s a very lucky lady.”

When the car arrives at Westerville Abbey, Blaine helps Quinn hide the presents in Hudson’s old bedroom. If they walk into the abbey with bags from the Exeter Pram and Toy Shop, there would most certainly be a big kerfuffle amongst the children.

Hummel greets them at the main entrance. “Good afternoon, Lady Quinn and Mr Blaine. No parcels I can help you with?”

Quinn whispers, “They’re hidden in the garage.”

Blaine can’t help but interrupt. “Has the afternoon post arrived?”

Hummel glances at Blaine’s hand before he replies, “It has arrived, but there are no letters for you… or me. However, the Countess received a letter from her brother in America. She’s in the drawing room.”

Blaine bounds into the drawing room to find his mother. “What does Uncle Hiram have to say in his letter?”

“Someone is anxious to hear news of Rachel. Now, sit down, and I’ll tell you.”

Blaine sits down next to his mother, and it takes all his self-control not to rip the letter out of her hands.

“When Rachel and Hudson arrived in New York City, they spent the first month sightseeing and meeting up with old friends. Rachel soon grew restless, and they both joined some sort of musical troupe, that is touring America for one year. Apparently, the show is quite popular, attracting great crowds wherever they perform. Hiram feels that this will give his Rachel the experience she needs before becoming a Broadway star.”

“And Kurt? Did Uncle Hiram mention Kurt?”

“When Kurt arrived in New York City, his first stop was Hiram’s townhouse. Your uncle made sure that he was settled in a reputable boarding house and gave him information about the garment district. Apparently, he told Kurt to contact him if he needed anything.”

“Has Uncle Hiram seen Kurt since?”

The Countess shakes her head. “Once Hiram received my letter, he went around to the boarding house to find news of Kurt. The owner said that he moved out in July and didn’t leave a forwarding address.”

“How can someone simply disappear into thin air?”

“Oh, Blaine, five million people live in New York City, with thousands of new immigrants arriving each day. Don’t worry about Kurt. I’m sure that once he’s established, he’ll write to his father.”

Blaine doesn’t want to wait until Kurt is established, for crying out loud. He wants to hear from Kurt now!

“Your grandmama is taking afternoon tea in the rose garden. She’s asked if you will join her.”

“Yes, of course.”
Blaine gives his mother a peck on the cheek before he goes up to his bedroom. He washes his hands and adds a little more pomade to his hair. After checking in the mirror to make sure that he looks presentable, he walks outside to the rose garden, where his grandmama is sitting in the pavilion.

The Dowager Countess examines her grandson closely as he sits down in a nearby chair. “I see that you’ve had a productive outing to Exeter.” When Blaine gives her a puzzled look, she merely adds, “The ring.”

Blaine looks down at the ring and blushes. It seems that everyone has noticed that he is wearing a ring again. “I… I… umm…”

“You don’t need to explain it to me, young man. I can’t recall a moment when Kurt wasn’t wearing the ring as well.”

“Do you think others know about our matching rings?”

The Dowager Countess shakes her head. “I can’t speak for the downstairs staff, but the family hasn’t a clue. They think you might have a sweetheart, but they are far too polite to ask.”

Spratt arrives with tea, cucumber sandwiches, and a plateful of scones, butter, and strawberry jam. Although Blaine has returned to his former health, Mrs Sylvester still indulges him with treats from the food rations. Once the refreshments have been served, Blaine lowers his head and chews his lower lip.

“Blaine, what’s bothering you? Would you prefer something different to eat? I could ask if Mrs Sylvester still has a jar of blackberry jam.”

Blaine looks up at his grandmama, remembering that she can read him like a book. “Mama received a letter from Uncle Hiram, and he has no news about Kurt. Apparently, he’s moved from the boarding house and didn’t leave a forwarding address.”

Blaine takes his time spreading the butter and strawberry jam on the scone so that he can collect his thoughts. “I’m really worried about Kurt. What if something really awful happened to him in New York City? It’s the only reason I can think of as to why he isn’t writing to me or his father.”

Blaine takes a sip of tea, and chokes out his deepest fear. “Or what if Kurt is having a fabulous life in New York City and doesn’t want me? What if I’ve lost him for good?”

The Dowager Countess’s blue eyes bore into him. “Blaine, what are you still doing here?”

“What do you mean, Grandmama?”

“What I know is that Kurt is a good man and is very much in love with you. Good men aren’t like buses - there won’t be another one along in an hour’s time. I also know there is a good man right in front of me, who has lost purpose in his life. What I mean is, why haven’t you booked your ship passage to New York City yet?”

“But I’ve just returned home!” Blaine exclaims.

“Home is where the heart is. You might be living at Westerville Abbey, but your heart is in New York City. Believe me, I don't want to see you go, but I just can't stand to see you stay here.”

“How could I leave the abbey? It’s everything I know. It’s where I grew up, and it’s the place I longed for when I was at the front and in the POW camp.”
“There will always be a special place in your heart for Westerville Abbey. Those memories will stay with you forever.”

“I think... I’m scared that if I leave Westerville Abbey, I’ll never be able to come back. Things change, and I’m not sure I’m ready to lose all that I know.”

The Dowager Countess takes a sip of tea, and Blaine can almost see the cogs turning in her mind.

“When my husband died, your father became the Earl of Westerville. It was only right that he and your mother take over my beloved abbey - my home - and I should move to Dower House. Your mother immediately started to redecorate the bedrooms and make other changes. Meanwhile, I felt very disconnected and was afraid that, somehow, Westerville wouldn’t be the same for me.”

“So, you do understand how I feel,” Blaine replies.

“Your father signed over the title deed to Dower House to me. At the time, he said that I was valued, and for as long as I lived, I would be an integral part of the Westerville estate. Knowing that Dower House couldn’t be taken away from me soothed my concerns.”

“My father is a wise man.”

“He inherited the wise genes from me. You see, I’ve left you Dower House in my will.”

Blaine is shocked. He never expected to own a piece of Westerville.

The Dowager Countess continues, “You might be the second son, with no title or right to the main estate, but you’re an integral part of Westerville, too. No matter where you travel, or where you might live your life, there will always be a place for you to return to in Westerville. Think of Dower House as a safe haven where you and Kurt can be... well, just be yourselves.”

“I’m absolutely speechless, Grandmama. I love you.”

“I love you, too, Blaine.”

Blaine knows that his grandmama didn’t say these words lightly. She doesn’t make rash decisions, and she’s not susceptible to emotional outbursts. The moment is lost when Spratt appears to clear the afternoon tea dishes.

“I must say that I was a little confused when I was listening to the plans of the fox hunt and other activities.” His grandmama leans in and asks, “Would you mind telling me... What is a weekend?”

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**One week later...**

“Follow me, boys.” Blaine leads his two eldest nephews into the kitchen, where Mrs Sylvester has packed them a lunch. When the cook isn’t looking, Blaine grabs some apples and sneaks them into his nephews’ jacket pockets.

When Mrs Sylvester turns around, she jests, “What the eye doesn’t see, the heart won’t grieve over.”

After Mrs Sylvester has shooed them out of the kitchen, they head towards the back door, almost bumping into Hummel.

“Any letters today?” Blaine asks. His hopes are dashed when Hummel shakes his head.
Once the boys have put on their boots, Blaine gives each one a pail.

“What’s this for, Uncle Blaine?” Michael asks.

“Interesting things we’ll collect along the way.”

“What sort of interesting things?” Richard wonders.

“We’ll have to go outside to see.”

When they step outside, it’s brisk, but the sun soon warms them. The trees are displaying the first flushes of autumn with an array of browns, pinks, oranges, yellows, and olives. The maple trees, which Blaine’s mother had imported from New England years ago, are now a brilliant red. Blaine waves at Dave, who is busy reverting the wartime vegetable patch into its former glory as a croquet lawn. Blaine stops them when they near a horse chestnut tree.

“See this spiky capsule? If I open it carefully, you’ll find a perfectly-formed horse chestnut. Michael and Richard, do you know what you can do with this?”

“Eat it!” shouts Richard.

“No, you can’t eat a horse chestnut, but you can play conkers.”

“What’s conkers, Uncle Blaine?” Michael asks.

“Oh, it’s a good thing I’m here because you’re missing out on a whole lot of fun. We’ll take some horse chestnuts back to the abbey and leave them in the sun. When we wake up tomorrow, the chestnuts will have turned brown and hard into a conker. We’ll thread each one onto a piece of string and then take turns striking each other’s conker until one breaks.”

“Did you used to play conkers with father?”

“I certainly did,” Blaine replies. He’s not going to tell his nephews about the time Cooper’s conker accidently hit him on the arm, and he ran home crying to their mother.

Once they have gathered a dozen horse chestnuts and placed them in the pails, they continue their walk to the stables. It takes some time as Richard and Michael gather colorful leaves, worms, and snails to be included in their pails as well.

“Good morning Masters Michael and Richard and of course Mr Blaine,” Wesley calls out when he sees them. “The horses are ready.”

The boys cautiously follow their uncle to the Shetland ponies in the training pen. After feeding them apples, Blaine lifts Richard onto the saddle, and Wesley deals with Michael. Each man takes a lead rope and slowly walks a pony around the pen. After a lap, Wesley asks, “Has anyone heard from Kurt yet?”

Blaine relates the details of his Uncle Hiram’s letter. “I guess he’s having too much fun to write anyone at Westerville.”

“Don’t be like that, Mr Blaine. I wonder if Kurt knows you’re alive.”

Blaine is so stunned that he stops the pony. “Why would you think Kurt doesn’t know?”

“Well, when Kurt left Westerville, we all thought you were dead. And your American uncle mentioned that he is no longer staying at the first boarding house, and that he left no forwarding
address. So maybe Kurt moved before the letters were delivered.”

“Uncle Blaine, can we do another lap?” Michael pleads.

Blaine grasps the horse’s lead rope and continues the walk. “Wesley, do you really think that Kurt might not know I’m alive?”

“I don’t know, Mr Blaine, but it’s strange that Kurt hasn’t written to you yet. Kurt doesn’t seem like the type of chap that would leave you hanging. He thinks the world of you.”

When the pony ride is finished, Michael asks, “Uncle Blaine, when will you teach me to ride a horse by myself?”

“Me, too! Me, too!” Richard shouts.

Blaine chuckles. “On your sixth birthday. Can you tell me how long that will be?”

As the boys use their fingers to count out the years, the Earl approaches the training ring.

“Grandpapa! Come see what Michael and I collected in our pails this morning!”

Richard asks, “Grandpapa, have you heard of conkers? Uncle Blaine said he would teach us how to play conkers tomorrow morning.”

The Earl smiles. “Go get your pails. I’d love to see what interesting things you’ve put in them.”

When the boys race to the barn, the Earl asks, “Blaine, are you going on a ride today?” When Blaine nods, he adds, “I’ll take the boys back to the abbey.”

After saying goodbye to his nephews and instructing them to put the horse chestnuts in the sun, Blaine packs the saddlebag, mounts Firebird, and heads off to the fields. The horse soon breaks into a gallop and Blaine steers him to his special place by the lake. Once they arrive, Blaine quickly dismounts and lays out the old woolen blanket under the old oak tree.

All this while, Blaine has assumed that Kurt has received the letters from both himself and Hummel. He has let his imagination run wild as to why Kurt hasn’t replied. His first thoughts were that Kurt’s love has diminished after so many years apart and that he is living a fabulous life in New York City. Blaine has tormented himself with images of Kurt with another man. Blaine knows how close Kurt is with his father, so it’s very suspicious that Hummel hasn’t received a letter since the telegram Kurt sent to let him know he arrived safely. Blaine’s thoughts then turned to Kurt being in trouble in New York City. He’s had nightmares about the New York gangs capturing and torturing Kurt. It has gotten so bad that Blaine no longer reads thrillers.

Leave it to Wesley to give him a perfectly reasonable explanation. It’s not that Kurt doesn’t love him anymore, or that Kurt is in trouble - it’s because Kurt hasn’t received the letters.

Kurt doesn’t know that he’s alive.

He goes through the timeline in his head, and it all makes sense. What if Kurt has quickly found a job that included room and board? What if Kurt is so busy as a tailor’s apprentice, that he hasn’t had a chance to write to his father? What if Kurt is saving up to send his father a Christmas package, which will include a long and newsy letter? What if?

Blaine pours himself a mug of tea and eats the cheese and pickle sandwich that Mrs Sylvester has packed for him. Now that he’s looked at the situation from a different angle, he feels more
connected to Kurt. A sun ray reflects off his promise ring, and Blaine takes it as a sign of what he needs to do.

His grandmama is right. Westerville will always be part of him, and he’ll always be part of Westerville. But right now, what he needs to do is go to New York City and find Kurt.

Chapter End Notes

The song that Blaine and Cooper perform is After You've Gone performed by Marion Harris (1919).

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I also thank Dblmalfuction, who performed a detailed final review, although all mistakes are mine.

I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: Blaine’s last days Westerville Abbey before he sets sail for America.
October 1919
Blaine

Blaine pulls at the stiff collar of his military uniform. He’s never needed to wear the formal red jacket with black trim used for ceremonial occasions before, and it’s itchy and uncomfortable.

“Don’t fuss with your jacket,” his mother whispers. “Oh look, there are King George and Queen Mary making their entrance.”

Blaine looks over and sees the royals, with the Lord Chamberlain following close behind. The
crowd in Buckingham Palace’s ballroom falls quiet when *God Save the King* is played. At the end of the song, Blaine promptly joins the queue of other officers.

King George begins the ceremony. “Earlier this year, I created the Order of the British Empire for the sake of honoring the many thousands of people who have served in a variety of roles during the Great War. We are here today to award those who have made a significant contribution to our great nation and empire.”

The King picks up a sword, and the Lord Chamberlain announces, “Captain Blaine Anderson will henceforth be known as a Knight Commander of the Order - not only for his heroics on the western front, but also for providing strong leadership to British soldiers in a German POW camp for two years plus their long journey home.

Blaine walks forward to face the King, and kneels on the investiture stool. King George places the sword on his right shoulder and whispers, “You had your family worried when we couldn't find you. I’m glad that you made it back home, Captain Sir Anderson.”

After the King attaches the decorative silver gilt and enamel medal to the clip previously pinned to his jacket, Blaine joins his parents, grandmama, and Hummel in the ballroom. His grandmama carefully inspects the impressive medal. “This medal is worth a tidy sum of money for the silver content alone.”

The Lord Chamberlain continues the ceremony with civilian awardees. He continues to call out people’s names, mentioning their contributions, whether it be in manufacturing munitions, caring for those affected by the conflict, or helping British soldiers repatriate.

“There are so many women being honored today,” the Countess whispers.

“And you’re surprised? We are strong women. Greatness is in the very air that we breathe,” the Dowager Countess retorts.

“Mrs Carole Victoria Hummel will henceforth be known as a Member of the Order for her tireless work in managing the farms and dairies in Westerville, Devonshire. Under her capable hands, Westerville was one of the most productive farming estates in Great Britain.”

Blaine watches Mrs Hummel proudly walk towards the King, wearing the same suit she had worn for her wedding. King George replaces the sword with his hand, and when he touches Mrs Hummel’s right shoulder, Blaine can see the King whispering to her.

When she rejoins the group, Hummel is beaming with pride. “I have a son who’s a VC, and a wife who’s an MBE. I’m so proud of my family.”

“And so you should be,” the Earl replies.

“Mrs Hummel, what did King George say to you?” Blaine asks.

“He thanked me for my contribution on the home front and said it had helped feed thousands of soldiers on the Western Front.”

When Mrs Hummel giggles, Blaine gives a questioning look. “His majesty also wondered when we would start producing clotted cream again.Apparently, the scones at Buckingham Palace don’t taste half as nice without Devonshire’s famous cream.”

Once the official photographs have been taken, the group heads to Anderson House in Belgravia. Sam and Mercedes greet them at the door, and offer to take their coats and hats.
When Sam takes Blaine’s overcoat, his eyes linger over Blaine’s red jacket. “That’s some fancy badge, Sir Blaine.”

Blaine’s chest swells with pride. It’s the first time anyone aside from the King has called him by his new title.

“Do we call you ‘my lady’ now that you’re a dame?” Mercedes asks the housekeeper.

Mrs Hummel shakes her head. “Only people like Sir Blaine, who are in the top two ranks, are called ‘sir’ or ‘dame’. I’m just a member, the lowest rank. I’m still Mrs Hummel, only I now have some fancy initials after my name.”

The Earl gently claps her on the back, “Mrs Hummel, you are quite possibly the most important member of the Order of the British Empire. King George told me people like you are the salt of the earth. Come join us in the parlor for a glass of champagne.”

Corks are popped and champagne flows freely. The Andersons and Hummels have two good reasons to celebrate. When the doorbell rings, the Hummels bid their goodbyes in order to help with the visitors.

The next few hours are a whirlwind for Blaine, as family friends arrive to join the celebrations. Everyone offers their congratulations and inspects his large ornate medal. His grandmama is sitting in the corner, surrounded by her old cronies. She’s in her element, regaling heroic tales of both her grandson and the former footman, who’s a well-known flying ace. He giggles when he overhears his grandmama say, “It must be something in the Westerville water. First a flying ace, then a knight. Even our housekeeper is a member of the Order of the British Empire.”

When the last guest has left, Blaine sits down next to his mother on the sofa, and loosens his tie. When Blaine leaves for America, he’ll certainly miss these private moments he shares with his mother.

Pamela wraps an arm around her son. “Well, it was nice to entertain once again. I haven’t seen people in ages… not since the Spanish flu started. I’m so glad that the pandemic is over.”

“Me, too,” Blaine agrees.

“Are you sure you want to leave for America before the fox hunt?”

“I’ve already got my first-class ticket for next week’s sailing.” Blaine doesn’t want to tell his mother that he no longer has any interest in hunting and that the timing was on purpose.

The Earl enters the room, consulting his pocket watch. “I want to get to Westerville by nightfall. We should get moving.”

“Can I say goodbye to Evans first? I won’t see him again before I go to America.”

“Yes, but be quick about it.”

Blaine heads downstairs to the servants’ area, and smiles when he sees Mrs Hummel hand over the heavily-guarded ring of keys to Mercedes. He quickly finds Sam in the butler’s pantry washing the crystal-cut glasses.

“Are you excited about becoming the butler of Anderson House?”

Sam sets down the linen towel and glass, and waggles his eyebrows. “I’m more excited about
staying at Anderson House alone with Mercedes. With just the two of us here, it’ll be a lot of work, but I’m sure we can handle it. Are you excited for America?”

Blaine is at a loss for words, so he simply hugs his childhood friend, and whispers, “I’m more excited about finding Kurt than visiting America.”

Sam pulls back and looks at him in the eye. “When you find Kurt, kick him in the butt for me. He should have been writing to you and to his father!”

Blaine laughs and claps Sam’s shoulder, then turns to heads upstairs. Sam certainly is one of a kind, and he’ll miss his candor and sense of humor.

They arrive at Westerville just past the dinner hour. When Blaine enters the abbey, his three nephews bound down the corridor to greet him.


Blaine is surprised that Duval is at the abbey. He wasn’t expecting him to visit. His nephews grab him by the hands and lead him into the study, where a table has been set up with miniature toy soldiers. Young Blaine climbs up onto Duval’s lap and starts making a noise that resembles a galloping horse.

“We have to keep the door closed. Mama says that if Elizabeth comes in, she’ll try to eat them!” Michael says, which makes Richard burst out in a fit of giggles.

“Lieutenant-Colonel Duval, what a wonderful surprise!” Blaine says in greeting.

“When you wrote to me that you’d soon be sailing to America, I couldn’t let you leave without seeing you first, Sir Anderson.”

“Uncle B,” young Blaine says, gesturing to a toy miniature soldier riding a horse.

“That’s right, Blaine. Your uncle B was once in the cavalry. He was the finest horseman in my unit.”

Quinn enters the library, clapping her hands. “Boys, it’s time for bed. Say goodnight to Uncle Blaine and the Lieutenant-Colonel.”

The boys shake Duval’s hand, give their Uncle Blaine hugs and kisses, and reluctantly follow their mother out of the study.

“So, how long are you staying?” Blaine asks.

“I have to leave tomorrow after lunch.”

Duval rises when the Earl and Cooper enter the study. Cooper heads to the cabinet and pulls out a bottle of port and four glasses.

The Earl shakes the officer’s hand. “Good evening, Lieutenant-Colonel Duval. I heard you were here. To what do we owe the pleasure?”

“Good evening, Lord Anderson. I had to see for myself that Blaine is really alive, and to congratulate him on his knighthood.”

The Earl takes the offered glass of port. “You must tell me how the military spending cuts are
coming along. Are they affecting your battalion?"

As Duval explains the details of the spending cuts and the reorganization, Blaine feels happy to be in the company of his good friend again.

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Blaine has a smug smile on his face when Duval finally catches up with him and Firebird. “You’re riding like an old man, Valley.”

“I’m not a man of leisure who can ride every day,” Duval laughs.

Blaine leads them to his special place by the lake, and he sets up the blanket and refreshments under the old oak tree.

“Shrimpy, why did you decide to go to America? Is it because your mother is an American?”

Blaine stares at the lake, wondering how to respond. When Duval stayed at the abbey’s hospital ward four years ago, he had figured out that Kurt was the ‘K’ in Blaine’s life. He decides to confide in his friend and tell him about Kurt’s departure and the lack of news since. “I’m not sleeping well at night. I keep having nightmares about Kurt being kidnapped and living in similar conditions as I did in the POW camp.”

“Do you mind me asking what it was like in the POW camp? I’ve read many reports, but you’re the only one I personally know who has been a POW.”

Blaine hasn’t whispered a word to anyone about his experiences in the POW camp. But Duval is an old and dear friend and seems to be genuinely interested. They’ve trained together, they’ve slept in tents together, they’ve been in combat together. He can trust Duval.

“When we arrived at the first camp, we found out that it had been placed under quarantine for typhus. The camp only had two doctors, who were POWs as well. They had nowhere else to take us, so we were kept in large tents. Imagine, it’s the middle of December and there’s snow all around, and you’re lying on the ground in a tent. We dug holes to keep warm.”

Blaine rubs the nape of his neck. “One day, a few weeks later, we were awoken early and ordered into carts pulled by oxen. It took us days to travel to the next camp. It was set up a little better with wooden barracks huts. Each one housed 250 prisoners with rows upon rows of bunk beds with large sack bags filled with hay. They mixed up the nationalities to reduce the possibility of a mass overthrow or escape. The dozen or so men from our troop were able to stick together.”

“What was the worst part of being in a POW camp?” Duval asks.

“Food - there was never enough of it.”

“I thought The Hague Conventions set out minimum food requirements?”

Blaine snorts, “The Germans could barely feed their own troops and the general population. Their POWs were low on their priority list. Watery soup with beans, oats, prunes, beets, codfish, or whatever they could find. KK bread made of bran and potatoes. I suspected it contained sawdust, as well. If it hadn’t been for the biweekly Red Cross packages, we would have all died from starvation. The Brits were the best fed because people received food packages from home. The Russians were the worst off when their country had the revolution. We would take turns at night guarding our meager food supplies. I made the soldiers share the food parcels from home equally, taking none for myself.”
“Blaine, you should have had some too!”

“I wasn’t receiving food parcels from home, so it didn’t feel right.”

“Did they force you to work?” Duval asks.

Blaine nods. “I spent two weeks working in a coal mine. I’ve never been so scared in my life. It was cold and dank, and the coal dust settled in my nose. There was always the danger of floods, cave-ins, and dynamite blasts.”

Blaine looks up at the tree branches and swallows hard, thinking of the poor caged canary in the mine. Although he missed the countryside and the joy he felt hearing birds chirping, working in the mine was the only time he hadn’t wanted to listen to a bird’s song. Their time together was brief, but Blaine befriended the little bird by often feeding it a breadcrumb or two, which he had saved from his meager meals.

When Duval shifts on the blanket, Blaine returns his attention to the conversation. “I got lucky when a German sub-officer overheard me talking about living on a large farm back home. I was immediately transferred to work as a farmhand. I enjoyed the work - it gave me something to do, and I was outdoors in the fresh air.”

“What were the guards like?”

Blaine crosses his arms, hands gripping his upper arms. “On the whole, the guards were everyday people who had a miserable job. They weren’t fed well either. It was the director and officers you had to look out for. Some were nastier than others. A new sub-officer had noticed that the British soldiers often looked to me for guidance and reported it to the camp’s director. He was a mean bastard. I was accused of organizing an escape. The next thing I knew, I was attached to an outdoor post, hands tied behind my back. I couldn’t move at all. I was left there for 24 hours without food or water. The camp director’s dog even pissed on me.”

“Oh, Blaine.”

“Sometimes, I dream that Kurt has been kidnapped, and he’s tied to a post like I was.” Blaine wipes a tear that falls down his cheek with his forearm. “I know there’s a possibility that Kurt hasn’t written to me because he doesn’t want me to be part of his new life in America, but I need to see him for myself and make sure he’s safe. It’s the not knowing that is tearing me apart.”

Duval hands Blaine his handkerchief. After blowing his nose, Blaine looks at his friend and asks, “Do you think I’m doing the right thing?”

Duval replies, “I’ve never been in this position before, but yes, I think you’re doing the right thing. Finding Kurt will give you a type of closure on the war. You need that.”

Blaine feels like a weight has lifted off his chest. He hadn’t realized how much he had been bottling up inside. His experiences as a prisoner will always be a part of him. They have changed the way he views certain things, like his basic needs, the value of freedom, and the life-long bonds he made with his soldiers. He hopes that if he finds Kurt, it’ll help close this horrendous chapter of his life and that the nightmares will stop.

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One week later...

When Blaine enters Dower House, it’s with a heavy heart. Although he’s excited to leave for
Southampton and sail to America, he’s also sad to be saying goodbye to his family. Last night, he spent time with his father, going through practical things like banking arrangements. His father has provided him with letters of introduction for his contacts in America. This morning was spent in his mama’s bedroom, listening to tales of Uncle Hiram and his American grandmother. Although his mama was weepy, she is now more determined than ever to visit New York City next summer.

Blaine makes his way to the front parlor, where his grandmama sits by the window.

“Are you ready?” the Dowager Countess asks.

“As ready as I’ll ever be. My trunks are packed, and Dave and Sebastian have taken them to the car.”

“Now, you must send us a telegram as soon as you arrive in New York City. Don’t be like Kurt and have us waiting for endless months for a letter. I simply couldn’t bear it.”

“I wouldn’t make anyone bear what I’ve gone through these past few months. I’ll write to you faithfully.”

“You better, otherwise I might have to set sail for America myself.”

Blaine looks at the painting over the fireplace, and thinks that Kurt has really captured the colors and textures of their special place by the lake.

“The painting will be yours when Dower House passes on to you.”

“I hope that won’t be for a very long time. Grandmama, I wish I could stay here… Maybe I should reconsider…”

“Really? In my experience, second thoughts are vastly overrated. One doesn’t get many chances in life, and if you miss them, they might not be repeated.”

Blaine’s face breaks out into a huge smile. That was exactly what he needed to hear. “Grandmama, you’ve always been so kind to me, ever since I was a little boy. Why’s that?”

“Even Dowager Countesses have their favorites.”

Blaine holds his grandmama tightly in his arms, trying to memorize the scent of rosewater, which he associates with her. “I love you, Grandmama.”

The Dowager Countess pulls away and reaches for her lace handkerchief. “I love you too, Blaine. Now, off you go, and remember to write to me.”

Blaine wipes the tears from his eyes. When he leaves the front door, he’s surprised to see Hummel. “Is something wrong?”

Hummel shakes his head. “Ever since my heart problem before the war, I’ve been taking daily walks. Today, I decided to take my exercise by walking to Dower House and back. I hope you don’t mind, Sir Blaine.”

Blaine claps him on the back, and they begin to walk along the path. “Of course I don’t mind. I wanted to speak to you anyway. Once I arrive in New York City, my first priority will be to find Kurt.”

“I’m rather anxious to hear from Kurt.”
“I know you are. As soon as I find him, I’ll send you a telegram, and follow it up with a letter.”

“You’ll tell me the truth? Who knows what Kurt is doing.”

“In the very unlikely event that Kurt is down on his luck, I’ll be honest in my correspondence. You deserve to know the truth.”

Hummel stops them on the path. “Sir Blaine, I like you. You are an honorable man. I’m comforted with the knowledge that you’ll find Kurt and will do everything to make sure he’s settled. Kurt loves you, just as much as you love him. I hope you find the happiness you both deserve.”

“Thank you, Hummel. It’s nice to know that there are people who support Kurt’s and my relationship. Not everyone is open-minded about two men falling in love with each other.”

Before Blaine knows it, they have reached the abbey’s main entrance. His family is standing in line to the right, and the servants mirror them on the left. He shakes hands and hugs the servants. Many of them have been an important part of his life at Westerville, and they feel like family. He pauses when he sees Mrs Sylvester extend her arms with a box. “A special treat for the journey, Mrs Sylvester?”

“It’s a fruitcake. I doubt any American can make a decent fruitcake, so save it for Christmas.”

Blaine gives the cook an extra special hug. When he’s finished with the servants’ line, he walks towards his father.

The Earl is smiling at him and quickly pulls his son into his arms. “The last time we said goodbye, you went missing for two and a half years. I don’t think we could bear that happening again.”

“I’ll write as soon as I arrive,” Blaine promises.

He next sees his mother, who is smiling with tears in her eyes. She gives him a long hug and several kisses on his cheeks. “I’m going to write to my mother and arrange for a visit next summer.”

“I would like that very much. Knowing that you’ll visit next summer is very comforting. We’re not saying goodbye to each other… It’s more like I’ll see you later.”

Blaine is caught off balance when his nephews clutch his legs.

“Uncle Blaine! Can you pack me in your trunk?”

“I want to go to America with you, too!”

“I love you, Uncle B.”

Blaine picks up one-year-old Elizabeth who is standing next to her grandmother, clutching her hand for support. She wraps her fingers around her uncle’s neck and squeals in delight.

“I wish I could take everyone with me, but I don’t think your parents would like that. They would miss you so very much. I’ll send you postcards and tell you about all my adventures. Before you know it, I’ll be back for a visit.”

“Boys, let your uncle go,” Cooper reprimands. “Blaine, we better get going if you want to get to Southampton on time.”

Blaine gives Elizabeth a wet sloppy kiss on the cheek before setting her back down next to his
mother. He slides into the back seat of the Renault, while Quinn settles behind the steering wheel, and Cooper sits beside her.

“I hope it’s not an inconvenience for you to drive me to Southampton.”

Cooper lets out a loud snort. He turns around and waggles his eyebrows. “A night alone with my lovely wife without four children waking us up? It’s not an inconvenience… It’s a blessing.”

When the car starts down the drive, everyone waves their final farewells. Blaine looks back until Westerville Abbey disappears from the horizon. When he turns around, he looks forward to finding Kurt and hopefully building a new life together.

Chapter End Notes

Datshitrandom created the photo manip of Sir Blaine in his formal military uniform with his medal at the start of the chapter. Please give her some love here.

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I also thank Dblmalfunctio, who performed a detailed final review, although all mistakes are mine.

I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: Blaine arrives in New York City and searches for Kurt.
November 1919

Blaine

When Blaine boards the ferry at Ellis Island, he decides to stand on the outside deck, in spite of the brisk cold air. Blaine feels both excited and determined, because now he’s that much closer to Kurt. He closes his eyes and wonders how Kurt felt when he took this exact same journey six months ago. Was he excited? Was he homesick and scared? Blaine decides that, like he, Kurt was probably feeling a combination of all these emotions.

The ferry docks at Battery Park, and Blaine immediately spots his Uncle Hiram. It’s uncanny how he looks so much like both his mother and Cousin Rachel. He finds it curious that his uncle is wearing a full-length fur coat. Perhaps Cousin Rachel inherited her fashion sense from her father.

“Uncle Hiram!” Blaine shouts, waving his hands. Blaine gets off the ferry, and a gentleman immediately greets the porters who have Blaine’s trunks and guides them to a nearby parking lot.

Uncle Hiram shakes his hand. “Blaine, it’s been years and years since I last saw you. My sister Pamela is right. You’ve turned into a handsome and dapper young gentleman.”

“Thank you, Uncle Hiram. It’s great to be in America and on firm land once again.” Blaine can’t help but stare at the fur coat, wondering which animal it’s made from.

“Raccoon fur.”

Blaine’s cheeks tinge pink. “Did I say that out loud?”

Uncle Hiram nods and laughs. “Never mind, Blaine. There will be many new things that you’ll see
in America. By all means, ask me about anything and everything."

The gentleman who was previously directing the porters now returns to Uncle Hiram’s side. He is roughly the same age as his uncle, but shorter.

“Blaine, I’d like to introduce you to my closest friend and companion, LeRoy Cohen.”

LeRoy takes off his hat and bows. “How do you do, Sir Anderson?”

Blaine shakes his hand and replies, “Please call me Blaine. Sir Anderson sounds so stuffy.”

“And you must call me LeRoy.”

“Do you have a suit of armor in those trunks?” Uncle Hiram teases Blaine.

Blaine quips, “I left the armor back in Westerville, but I’ve got my trusty sword.”

“I love the British dry sense of humor,” LeRoy chuckles.

Uncle Hiram leads Blaine to the waiting car, and they soon speed off to the Upper East Side. As they make their way through Manhattan, Blaine thinks that maybe the tall skyscrapers really do touch the sky. Thirty minutes later, the car stops in front of a townhouse on Fifth Avenue, which is much larger than Anderson House in Belgravia. Staff immediately rush outside to collect the trunks, and the men enter the townhouse and settle in the front parlor.

Once coffee and light refreshments have been served, Blaine says, “Do tell me the latest news of Cousin Rachel and Hudson.”

“Rachel telephoned us a few days ago. You should have heard her shrieks when I told her you were arriving in New York City today.”

LeRoy chuckles, “I think all of Manhattan heard her squeals. Dear Rachel certainly adores her Cousin Blaine.”

Uncle Hiram continues, “Rachel and Finn are currently in Chicago. Their vaudeville show has been a great success, selling out every night, but they’ll be back home in time for Christmas. My mother - your granny - is quite influential in the New York performing arts scene. In the new year, she’ll help Rachel find the perfect role on Broadway.”

Blaine hasn’t seen his granny since he was fifteen years old, and would like to connect with all his American relatives. “I’d very much like to visit Granny soon.”

“We’re going to her house for lunch on Sunday. Just a warning, though - Rachel has told her of your musical talents. If you’re not careful, she’ll make you her protégé too. It’s very difficult to say ‘no’ when the one and only June Dalloway sets her mind on something.”

“I don’t want to compete with Cousin Rachel for Granny’s attention. I have no dreams of performing on this Broadway.”

Uncle Hiram asks about family news in Westerville. He examines the photographs of Cooper and Quinn’s children and the other family members. “I can’t believe the old Countess is still alive.”

Blaine grins, ‘Grandmama always says, ‘Just because there's snow on the roof doesn't mean there's not a fire inside’. I think she’ll outlive all of us.”

Uncle Hiram sets down the photographs. “Your mother wrote that you’re on an extended visit to
New York City. Do you have any plans?"

Blaine replies, “My first order of business is to find Kurt Hummel, who used to live at Westerville Abbey. No one has heard from him since he first arrived in America last June, and his father is very worried.”

“Is Kurt special to you as well?” LeRoy asks.

Blaine twists the promise ring on his finger. “Yes, he is. Kurt’s job as the abbey’s second footman doesn’t define him. Kurt is a remarkable man, and he can do anything he sets his mind to. In his spare time, he studied hard and obtained a teaching certificate. At the beginning of the war, he changed the way the farmers worked on the Westerville estate to make it more productive. He enlisted in the Royal Flying Corps, and became a flying ace in record time. And Kurt has other wonderful traits. He’s kind and compassionate and…”

Uncle Hiram interrupts, “Okay, I think we got the picture.” Blaine notices Uncle Hiram give LeRoy a discrete smile before he continues, “We, too, were impressed with Kurt when he visited us. At your mother’s request, I’ve already stopped at the boarding house where Kurt first lived, and there are no leads there. I suggest you start looking for Kurt in the garment district. I gave him some information about it.”

LeRoy gets a map and circles the area of the garment district. Blaine tries to focus on it, but it’s been a very long day and he’s exhausted. He politely covers his mouth before he yawns.

“We’ll show you to your room and let you get some shut-eye.”

Blaine follows Uncle Hiram and LeRoy up the stairs to a large well-appointed bedroom. Blaine looks out the window and is surprised to see trees and grass.

“That’s Central Park. If you look over there, you’ll see the Met,” Uncle Hiram remarks.

Blaine glances at the large building. “What’s the Met?”

LeRoy answers, “It’s the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It has paintings from artists around the world - Renoir, Matisse and Van Gogh, just to name a few. Your uncle is a director on its board.”

“Once you’ve found Kurt, I’ll take you both on a personal tour,” Uncle Hiram offers.

Blaine looks around the room, and he is impressed by its sheer size and by the beautiful antique furniture and oriental carpet. However, there is one thing puzzling him. “Uncle Hiram, how can this room be so warm when there’s no fireplace?”

“We’ve got radiators in all the bedrooms.”

Blaine looks to where Uncle Hiram is pointing, and he sees a cast-iron contraption that contains strips that almost looks like an accordion. He touches the radiator but quickly pulls away his fingers before they get burnt.

Uncle Hiram chuckles, “Tomorrow we’ll explain how it works. In the meantime, have a good night’s sleep.”

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Blaine wakes up early the next day, not quite on New York time yet. He goes to the bathroom to wash and finds an interesting tiled stall in the corner. He’ll make sure to ask Uncle Hiram about
what it’s purpose is. He takes a quick bath, dresses for the day, and quietly makes his way to the kitchen, where a cook is already working.

She gives him a smile, “You must be Sir Blaine. Would you like a cup of coffee?”

“Is it possible to have a pot of tea instead?” Blaine asks.

“Yes, of course. I forgot about the British obsession with tea. If you go to the dining room, I’ll bring it right away.”

It takes several minutes for Blaine to find the dining room. Once the cook has arrived with tea and toast, Blaine gobbles it up while looking at the map LeRoy has given him.

Uncle Hiram enters the room. “Good morning, Blaine. I see you’re an early riser.”

“Not usually, but my body hasn’t figured out yet what time it is in New York. I’m more of a night owl.” Blaine looks at his wristwatch. “Can you tell me where the closest telegraph office is? I need to send a telegram to my family to let them know I’ve arrived safely. After that, I’ll head to the garment district.”

“My car and driver are available to you for the next few weeks. I can’t have my nephew lost in a new city. I’ll tell him your first stop is Western Union.”

Blaine returns to his room and checks his appearance. After all, he might see Kurt today, and he wants to look his best. A warm feeling grows in his belly at the thought of seeing his one true love once again, and he races out to the car to see what the day will bring.

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Two weeks later…

After a long and unfruitful day, Blaine is relieved to find James, the chauffeur, waiting with the car on the corner.

“Sir Blaine, I think we’ve looked in every nook and cranny in the garment district. Where to next?”

“I think I’ll call it a day. Home, please, James.”

Blaine slumps in the back of the car and takes off his hat and gloves. He’s been to every shop in the garment district.

Every. Single. One.

When Blaine had shown Kurt’s photograph, a few people recalled him inquiring about, and declining, a position within their shop. Sure, Blaine is disappointed that he hasn’t found Kurt, but part of him is also relieved that Kurt isn’t working in the horrific conditions he’s seen.

Perhaps it’s time to think outside the box in his search. How else could Kurt use his fashion and sewing skills? After ten minutes, he smiles when an idea forms in his mind.

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Blaine looks at the Christmas display in the large window that spans the length of the Macy’s Department Store. There are red Radio Flyer wagons filled with Raggedy Anne dolls, jigsaw puzzles, and teddy bears. Blaine is mesmerized by the electric trains that move on their own track around a Christmas tree. As much as he’d love to spend all day in the toy department, he has more
important business to attend to in the store. He shakes the snowflakes from his head, and checks his reflection in the window, ensuring that his pomade still holds each hair in place. After all, he has a role he needs to play.

Blaine enters Macy’s and walks directly to the information booth. He hands over a calling card and announces, “I would like to see the store manager, if it’s convenient.”

As predicted, the shop assistant’s eyes widen when she reads the name of the card. “I’m sure Mr Strauss would be available to see you, Sir Anderson.”

“Jolly good.” Americans are always impressed with his title, and this assistant is no exception. The prestigious Fifth Avenue address on the card doesn’t hurt either.

“I’ll take you upstairs myself, Your Highness.”

“King George is Your Highness. I’m merely a knight.”

The shop assistant giggles. “Like a knight in shining armor?”

“Something like that.”

Blaine follows her lead but hesitates when they stand at the bottom of a wooden staircase that moves. “Miss, what’s this?”

“It’s called an escalator. Macy’s is the first department store to have one installed. You simply step on one stair, and it will carry you to the top.”

Blaine carefully steps on the bottom stair and quickly grabs hold of the wooden rail as the escalator moves him up one level. He’s seen a lot of remarkable new things in America, but this one is at the top of the list. He stumbles off the escalator, and the assistant leads him to the back of the store, through wood-paneled corridors until they are in front of a desk.

“Mr Collins, this is Sir Anderson… a real live knight. He wishes to see Mr Straus.” The shop assistant hands over the card to Mr Collins, then turns to Blaine, batting her eyelashes, and says, “If there is anything I can do for you, Sir Anderson… Well, you know where to find me.”

“Yes, that will be all, Mable,” Mr Collins says sternly, before he leads Blaine into a large office.

“Mr Straus, this is Sir Blaine Anderson from…?”


The elderly gentleman immediate rises to greet him. “How do you do, Sir Anderson? I haven’t been to England since my brother died on the Titanic. How can I assist you today?”

“I’ve recently arrived in New York City, and I’m trying to find my friend, Captain Kurt Hummel. Perhaps you’ve heard of him? He was a flying ace during the great war.”

“Yes, of course. Everyone loves war heroes, especially British ones.”

“Captain Hummel arrived in America last June, and was seeking a career in fashion. Perhaps he found employment in your fine department store?”

“The name doesn’t ring a bell. Collins, could you check the staff records to see if there is a Kurt Hummel working here?”
When Collins leaves the office, Blaine chats with the store owner, discussing popular toys and window displays. Blaine is shocked to find out that Macy’s has its very own Santa Claus, and that children sit on his lap and whisper to him what they want for Christmas.

When Collins returns, he says, “There is no Kurt Hummel working at Macy’s. I’ve checked with Mr Butterworth, and he hasn’t applied for a job.”

Blaine’s bottom lip juts out at this news. He had hoped that today would be the day that he finds Kurt.

“Mr Collins, could you take Sir Anderson to the toy department? He’s interested in some of the new toys for his nephews and niece.”

Blaine follows Mr Collins, trying to remain optimistic. Kurt isn’t working for Macy’s, but there are plenty more high-end department stores in New York City. He’ll spend his days visiting every single one, but for now, he’ll indulge himself for an hour to see the workings of the electric trains up close.

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One week later…

Blaine has visited all the high-end stores in Manhattan - Bergdorf Goodman, Saks & Company, and Bloomingdale’s, to name just a few. Blaine is glad that he has received a knighthood. Having a ‘Sir’ on his calling card has opened many doors, and people were only too happy to help him. But the answer was always the same - there is no Kurt Hummel on the staff and he hasn’t applied for a position.

Tonight he’ll have to write his usual fortnightly letters back home, but he’s not looking forward to writing the one to Hummel - not one little bit. The butler is anxiously awaiting news about Kurt, but Blaine still hasn’t found him, in spite of all his efforts, so what can he possibly say?

When the car arrives at the townhouse, James asks, “Will you be needing me tomorrow?”

“Yes, tomorrow I’ll visit boarding houses.”

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Two weeks later… Christmas Eve

Blaine trudges up the steps of the townhouse, and shakes the snow off his boots before entering. He hears the sound of voices in the parlor - they sound familiar, but he doesn’t recognize them immediately. Uncle Hiram and LeRoy didn’t mention that there would company for dinner, so he decides to investigate. When he looks into the parlor, his frown turns into a large grin. “Cousin Rachel! Hudson! I’m so happy to see you both again!”

Cousin Rachel immediately jumps up from the sofa and leaps into his arms. “Cousin Blaine, you’re here! And alive! When we left Westerville Abbey, you had been declared dead.”

“I was just missing for a few years. I’m alive and well, thank you very much.”

When Cousin Rachel releases him, Blaine shakes Hudson’s hand.

“Good to see you again, Sir Blaine.”
“We’re not in England, so could you please just call me Blaine?”

“Only if you call me Finn. Americans are more relaxed about using titles.”

Cousin Rachel takes his hand. “Finn and I have just returned from our national tour. Sit down, and I’ll tell you all about it.”

Blaine takes a moment to look closely at Cousin Rachel. Marriage seems to suit her. She’s practically glowing. His eyes open wide when he sees the sweater she’s wearing. It’s striped in all colors of the rainbow and has a pink flower on top of each shoulder, with appliqued leaves flowing over the top. The picture on the front illustrates a cat growling. Where does Cousin Rachel find these sweaters?

Blaine sits down next to Cousin Rachel, who prattles on about the vaudeville show and the cities they’ve visited. It’s easy to sit back and listen to his cousin, who is full of energy. Thirty minutes later, LeRoy and Hiram join them. Blaine’s jaw drops when he sees that Uncle Hiram is wearing the exact same sweater as Cousin Rachel. Did her fashion sense rub off on Uncle Hiram...or vice versa?

Uncle Hiram chuckles, “Don’t worry, Blaine. I don’t wear this sweater out of the house. It’s my Rachel sweater. By the way, a large box has arrived from Westerville Abbey today. I’m sure it’s filled with Christmas presents. Santa will leave it under the tree tonight.”

Blaine rubs his hands together, unable to keep a big grin from his face. He hasn’t celebrated Christmas at Westerville Abbey for four years, and he misses his family terribly.

LeRoy sits down in a wingback chair. “I’ve just gotten off the telephone with the mayor. Kurt isn’t teaching anywhere in the New York City school system.”

“It was a long shot. Thank you for trying.”

“Did you have any luck today?” LeRoy asks.

Blaine shakes his head. “I’ve now visited every single boarding house in Manhattan. Nobody has seen or heard of Kurt. After Christmas, I’ll start looking in other boroughs.”

Finn says, “It’s so weird that Kurt hasn’t written to his father. They always seemed so close.”

Cousin Rachel takes Blaine’s hand and squeezes. “I’m sure that Kurt will show up eventually. You two are so in love and are meant to be together forever.”

Blaine’s eyes widen, and he shoots a quick look at the other people in the room. Then, he lowers his eyes to the floor and rubs the nape of his neck, wondering how to respond. Why on earth would Cousin Rachel say that in front of Uncle Hiram, LeRoy, and Finn? The longer the room remains silent, the more Blaine wishes he could disappear between the sofa cushions.

Rachel shrugs her shoulders. “Did I say something that I shouldn’t have? I thought I was stating the obvious.”

Uncle Hiram replies, “No, my dear, you didn’t say anything wrong. It’s just something that Blaine hasn’t shared with us yet. And LeRoy and I haven’t said anything about the exact nature of our relationship either.”

Finn gives a puzzled look. “I don’t understand. I mean, you and LeRoy live together and share the same bedroom.”
LeRoy chuckles, “Sometimes, the eye only sees what it wants to see.”

Finn continues, “But Blaine’s eyes go all gooey every time he talks about Kurt. It’s been like that since the day they met.”

“Finn, my eyes don’t go all gooey.”

“Yes, they do!” everyone shouts, and then they all burst into laughter.

Although he’s embarrassed, Blaine feels like a weight was lifted from his shoulders. The truth is finally out in the open. “Okay, this is something I usually keep to myself, but yes, I’m in love with Kurt. He’s my soulmate, and I feel like a little piece of my heart dies each day we’re apart. I know that society doesn’t approve of two men being together, but I can’t help but love my Kurt.”

Uncle Hiram wraps his arm around LeRoy’s shoulders. “Blaine, LeRoy and I feel the same way about each other. There are ways to have a relationship with another man and still maintain a facade of living by society’s rules. Discretion is key. But at home, with our family? We prefer to be ourselves.”

Finn shrugs his shoulders. “I don’t know why people make a fuss about two men loving each other. You love a person for who they are and not all the other stuff.”

Rachel takes Finn’s hand and looks lovingly at him. “I feel the same way, too.”

Uncle Hiram says, “We came in here to let you know that dinner is in ten minutes. We’ll meet you in the dining room.”

When everyone gets up, Blaine holds his cousin back. He takes her hands into his. “Cousin Rachel, you were extremely generous to set up that trust for the Westerville estate. You’ve single-handedly kept it from financial ruin.”

“I would much rather leave the money to Westerville and my family than marry a stuffy titled Englishman and have it used for his crumbling estate. Besides, being a part of a special place like Westerville Abbey makes you special, right?”

Blaine squeezes her hands. “You will always be a special part of Westerville Abbey. You’re very big-hearted to hand over such a large amount of your fortune.”

“Finn’s and my life is rather simple. I’ll become a Broadway star, adored by thousands… live here with papa and LeRoy… and spend summers in the Hamptons. We have simple needs.”

Blaine struggles not to roll his eyes. Stardom, a smart Fifth Avenue townhouse, and a mansion in the Hamptons are hardly simple needs. “Cousin Rachel, I wish to thank you from the bottom of my heart for the trust fund you set up for me. The monthly allowance I receive gives me a freedom I never thought I would have.”

“At the time, it seemed to me that if the Andersons have a brood of potential heirs, and the estate has enough money, you wouldn’t have to marry a rich lady. But you would still be expected to earn money. I set up the trust fund so that you would be free to do anything. And what better way to spend it than to visit your favorite cousin in America?”

Blaine pulls Cousin Rachel into his arms and gives her a long hug. He can’t fault her logic. Without the trust, he wouldn’t be in New York City and that much closer to Kurt.
Eight days later, New Year’s Day…

Blaine and the family return to the townhouse at one o’clock in the morning, after spending the evening at a private party at the Astoria Hotel’s Peacock Alley restaurant. When the clock struck midnight, Blaine closed his eyes and hoped that 1920 would be the year that he found Kurt.

“I’m too wound up to go to sleep yet. Why don’t we have a nightcap before going to bed?” Cousin Rachel suggests.

“That’s a marvelous idea, Rachel,” Uncle Hiram replies.

Blaine is exhausted, but who is he to disappoint his cousin? Blaine follows the others and sits down on a chair, accepting a glass of whiskey.

LeRoy asks, “What did you think of the food tonight, Blaine? The chef used to work for the King of Prussia.”

Blaine recalls the various courses of rich food. “I thought the courses were created to impress the guests rather than for their flavors. There was one dish that had lobster, truffles and caviar, drowned in a heavy butter and cream sauce. I personally like simple dishes, made with the very freshest of ingredients… Each one selected to enhance the flavors of the meat or fish.”

“You seem to know what you’re talking about,” Uncle Hiram remarks.

Cousin Rachel bounces on the sofa. “Cousin Blaine is an excellent cook! He makes the most amazing vegetable pie. If it wasn’t for him, I would have starved to death during my stay at Westerville Abbey.”

Blaine coughs discreetly. Cousin Rachel has no idea what it’s really like to be starved. The conversation turns to New Year’s resolutions. Cousin Rachel vows that she’ll become a leading lady on Broadway. Finn states that he’s had enough of performing on stage and will happily help his wife memorize lines and practice her solo musical numbers.

“And what about you, Blaine?” LeRoy asks.

Blaine lets out a deep sigh. “Kurt. I want to find Kurt. But… Has anyone ever felt like your life is somehow slipping away? And there is nothing you can do to stop it?”

LeRoy replies, “I think everyone feels like that one time or another.”

Uncle Hiram looks at his nephew. “We know that you want to find Kurt, but you can’t put your life on hold forever. Perhaps the New Year is a good time to change your approach.”

“What do you mean?”

“For the past six weeks, you’ve been fully focused on finding Kurt, and it hasn’t yielded any results. Maybe you should focus on doing something for yourself, and leave the Kurt hunt for the weekends.”

Finn pipes in, “I’ll help you on the weekends, if you’re planning to do something else during the weekdays. Two heads are better than one.”

“But what would I do? I can ride a horse and play polo, flatter a lady and dance with her in a ballroom, govern Indians based upon studying their history and customs… Oh, and I can fire a machine gun and cut barbed wire. None of these skills are useful in New York City.”
Cousin Rachel leaps out of her seat. “Cousin Blaine, you can do so many other things! You’re an excellent piano player and have a beautiful tenor voice, you can cook, and you’re the best-read person I know. I set up the trust for you so that you could explore what you really want to do. You don’t need Kurt for that. The trust fund gives you freedom, so use it!”

“Rachel, dear, you’re being a bit harsh,” Uncle Hiram reprimands.

Blaine shakes his head. “No, I think Cousin Rachel said what I needed to be told. I need to face the fact that it won’t be easy to find Kurt. Now, if you’ll please excuse me, I’m going to retire for the evening.”

After Blaine climbs into bed, he thinks about the conversation in the parlor. Ever since he’s arrived in New York City, he’s devoted all his time to finding Kurt. But it’s like searching for a needle in a haystack. Tears fall down Blaine’s cheeks. He’s so tired of that sinking feeling in his belly each time he leaves a shop or a boarding house. It’s like acid corroding every fibre of his body.

He’s pinned everything - literally everything - on spending his life with Kurt. It could take months, or even years, to find Kurt. Cousin Rachel is right. He needs to think about what he wants to do with his life, and she has given him the financial means to make it happen. He just needs to figure out his plans for the future.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I also thank Dblmalfuction, who performed a detailed final review, although all mistakes are mine.

I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: You’ll find out where Kurt is.
March 1920
Kurt

Kurt walks into the El Fay Club, and heads down the stairs to the basement. He hangs up his jacket on the peg, and puts on the white apron. “Hey Joey, what’s the password for the evening?”

“Blackbird,” the bouncer replies. “I’ll be checking for membership cards at the door.”

Kurt waves at his friends in the band, who are warming up on the stage, and begins to take the chairs down from the tables to prepare for this evening. He still can’t believe that he’s working in a speakeasy...in Hell’s Kitchen.

Last summer, after he left the Upper East Side boarding house for Bushwick, he was full of optimism about the new opportunities he could explore. However, his hopes were dashed when he found it was bursting with new immigrants. Local businesses hired people from their home country over others. It didn’t help matters that the Irish were fighting Great Britain for their independence, and nobody in Brooklyn wanted to anger the Irish. His money soon ran out, so he took odd jobs during the day, moving every week to less expensive and seedier boarding houses. In September, he traveled to Chatham in the Catskill Mountains and became a seasonal apple picker. The owners were impressed with his knowledge of apples. Kurt told them that England’s west country was famous for them. When the last apple was picked, Kurt had saved enough money to give New York City a try again.

Kurt was surprised at how easy it was to get a job in a nightclub. After looking at the Earl’s letter of recommendation, the manager had asked him whether he was willing to serve alcohol. Kurt had thought this was a strange question - after all, serving drinks was part of a footman’s job - but on January 16th, he realized why. At the stroke of midnight, America went dry, and the Prohibition...
Act went into effect. Not that it had made much difference. People drank more than ever, and thousands of speakeasies replaced neighborhood saloons overnight.

“Hey, Kurt. The truck’s here,” Joey shouts.

Kurt makes his way to the back alley, where there’s a parked truck full of booze, which has been smuggled in from Canada. When he spots the Gold Bug Speedster parked behind the truck, Kurt quickly opens the door for the speakeasy’s owner, Larry Fay. The gangster is dressed in his trademark indigo-blue shirt and loud necktie, and he has a flapper on each arm. His thugs follow close behind, on the lookout for the police and other mobsters.

“I’ll be up in my office. Let me know when you start your set,” Fay orders.

“Yes, Mr Fay. I shall notify you just before I start,” Kurt replies.

“Ooh, such lovely manners. Where did you find him?” a flapper asks coquettishly, batting her eyelashes at Kurt.

Fay merely grunts and pulls her arm tighter as they enter the club. A thug practically growls at Kurt as he walks past. Joey and Kurt start moving the crates of booze from the truck to a concealed room in the back of the club. When the last crate is inside, Joey wipes his brow with his forearm.

“If you know what’s good for you, stay well away from Fay’s gal. He’s already racked up 49 arrests, and hasn’t spent a day in jail. Fay wouldn’t think twice about using his Colt to shoot you down. The police don’t care what happens to someone who works in a juice joint.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not interested in Fay’s gal,” Kurt replies.

What Kurt leaves unsaid is that he has no interest in any ‘gal’. There seems to be a different breed of ladies in New York City. The flappers are easy to spot with their short skirts, bobbed hair, and painted red lips. Kurt admires how they defy the usual social conventions. Why, they even dare to smoke cigarettes and drink cocktails in public.

Kurt sets up the bar with the usual soft drinks and coffee, although every customer will be ordering something made from the bottles hidden underneath. The bouncers take their position by the doors, and the club is soon packed with both rich people and ordinary folks. After a few jazz dance numbers and rounds of drinks, the crowd loosens up. When the bandleader gives Kurt a nod, he goes upstairs to let Fay know that he’s about to go on. Once Fay and his entourage are sitting in the reserved seats, he walks onto the stage and begins to sing.

After you've gone and left me crying
After you've gone, there's no denying
You'll feel blue, you'll feel sad
You'll miss the only pal you've ever had

Kurt loves the bluesy melody that the band is playing. He’s still amazed at how he became a performer at the speakeasy. After closing time, the other staff would overhear Kurt sing quietly while cleaning up. When Ethel Waters called in sick, the staff persuaded him to sing two songs on stage. He ended up impressing the audience so much that Fay offered him a regular spot in the lineup.

There'll come a time, now don't forget it
There’ll come a time when you regret it
Oh babe, think what you're doing
You know my love for you will drive me to ruin
After you've gone, after you've gone away, away

After Kurt has finished his song, he leaves the stage and heads to the backroom with a tear running down his face. Kurt loves the song he has performed, he truly does, but the lyrics trigger the painful emotions that he tries to keep buried deep inside his soul. There’s no denying that Blaine’s death has left him feeling empty and lonely.

Once Kurt has composed himself, he returns to his bartending duties. Two couples sit down at the bar, and a gentleman snaps his fingers. “Gimme four juices.”

“Anything else you need to tell me?” Kurt suggests.

“Blackbird.”

When Kurt hears the correct password, he asks, “Wet or dry?”

“Two to wet our Manhattan whistles and two neat juices.”

Kurt mixes the Manhattan cocktails, fills two coffee cups, and pours neat Canadian whiskey in the other two. With no other customers needing drink refills, he wipes down the bar’s countertop, and cannot help but overhear the couples’ conversation.

“Dinner tonight at Healy's was so delicious. The duck was to die for.”

“That new chef is doing amazing things to standard English pub fare. He’s New York’s best-kept secret.”

“The steak and fries were really good. What did ya think, Harry?”

“I think we should go again before word gets out about the new chef, and they jack up the prices.”

When the jazz band begins to play a popular upbeat ragtime song, one couple hops off the barstools to hit the dancefloor. The other gentleman looks at Kurt. “I gotta use the restroom. You’ll look after my gal?”

Kurt nods, and makes another Manhattan cocktail for her. “I couldn’t help overhearing your conversation about Healy’s. Is it really that good?”

“It was the best food I’ve ever tasted. Nothing too fancy, but the chef really knows how to combine flavors. Are you homesick for some good old English food?”

“Something like that,” Kurt replies.

“They don’t serve booze in the dining room, so it’s not too busy… for now. Once people will discover their new chef, it’ll packed every night of the week, I’m sure. I’ll write down the address for you.”

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Later that night, once all the customers are gone and the club has been cleaned, Kurt trudges up two flights of stairs to his room. He’s exhausted and quickly goes through his nighttime routine before climbing into bed. Next door, he can hear Fay entertaining one of the flappers, and the wall vibrates when the headboard knocks against it. But he’s not complaining - he truly is not. Room and board comes with the job, and it certainly beats Bushwick’s overcrowded boarding houses.
In spite of being surrounded by people all night, Kurt has never been so lonely in his life. When he sees couples in Central Park holding hands, laughing, and so obviously in love, it tugs on his heartstrings. He no longer has any warm hands embracing him... loving him... needing him.

He’s alone, and he doesn’t mean anything to anyone.

When Kurt had first arrived in New York City, he promised himself that he would somehow get over the pain and sadness of losing Blaine. After all, he’s twenty-five years old and has decades to live. He has met other men who are attracted to him, of course he has. He recalls a fellow Brit, Adam, who also worked in the apple orchards last autumn. He was cute, friendly, and he had discretely flirted with Kurt, his eyes filled with hope. But there was no spark. Kurt shakes his head - there is no one in this world who is more perfect for him than Blaine Anderson. He needs to face the fact that he won’t find anyone to fill the Blaine-sized void in his heart.

He’s alone, and he’ll never fall in love again.

Kurt is grateful that Fay has finished his business next door - until the shower is turned on, and the pipes begin to rattle. Not for the first time, Kurt wishes that Fay would call someone and get the plumbing sorted out. But he’s not complaining - he truly is not.

Loneliness is his only reliable friend, morning, noon, and night. It’s only in the wee hours of the morning that Kurt allows himself to think of his father, Mrs Hummel, and his friends at Westerville Abbey. Last summer, he had promised himself that he would write them as soon as he was settled and established. But it took so long. He was moving Bushwick boarding houses each week without any job prospects, and the seasonal apple orchard work had him traveling every few days. Kurt honestly had no good news to share with them.

Now that he has a steady job and accommodation, how can he write and tell them that he’s working in a speakeasy? A job that involves illegal activities? No, he couldn’t bear the shame. Of course, the problem is that without giving them his address, he hasn’t heard from his father or friends since he left Westerville last May.

He’s alone, and it’s his own fault.

Tears flow down his face, and Kurt stifles his sobs on his pillow. After all he’s been through - his mother’s death... the Great War... losing Blaine - he can’t let himself wallow in this dark hole of misery. He needs to fix this. But how?

It’s been so long since he’s done something fun and has enjoyed himself. Perhaps he should treat himself on his next day off. After working on Christmas, New Year’s Eve, and Valentine’s Day, he’s managed to get St Patrick’s Day off. He loves the Irish, but not so much when they’re drunk, and they most certainly will be drinking in the speakeasies after the annual parade.

Kurt thinks of the conversation he overheard earlier in the evening about the fantastic food at Healy’s Tavern. This could be the treat he deserves, and with a belly full of good food, he might figure out a new direction to pursue.

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One week later... St Patrick’s Day

Kurt takes one final look at himself in the cracked mirror in his room and is satisfied with his appearance. Earlier in the day, he took a long hot shower with the last sliver of his aunt’s lavender soap. He then went to the barber for a haircut and a shave. It was a close call with the razor when
he giggled, remembering Blaine and his problem with stiffies. The barber was skeptical when Kurt insisted that his hair be swooped up in the front instead of the popular slicked-down look. He’s wearing his best suit and makes a mental note to buy a new one when he’s more successful. With the physical labor in the apple orchard and shifting crates of bootlegged whiskey, his biceps have developed, and his upper body is broader.

When Kurt walks down the streets to the nearest trolley stop, he hears the ruckus of drunken Irishmen staggering along the sidewalk, looking for their next watering hole. Yes, he has made a wise decision to ask for St Patrick’s Day off. When he alights the trolley at Gramercy Park, he checks the address again. He walks two blocks to 18th Street and is surprised to see a queue at Healy’s. It seems like the tavern is no longer New York City’s best-kept secret.

After an hour’s wait, Kurt is led to a table. It’s in a dark corner, but he’s not complaining- he truly is not. From his table, he can see the entire tavern. There isn’t an empty seat left, and the waiters are rushing around trying to keep everybody happy. It reminds Kurt of his footman days, when there were so many people to serve at the Anderson’s dinner parties.

After ordering a ginger ale, Kurt glances at the menu. There’s the typical English pub fare like fish and chips, shepherd's pie, toad-in-the-hole, and steak and kidney pie. It makes his stomach rumble at the thought of having a favorite dish once again, but which one? On further inspection of the menu, some items surprise him - salmon with yogurt and dill sauce, coq au vin, and vegetable pie. When Kurt sees duck with sour cherries on the menu, he knows he must order the dish. It reminds him of that day he went to Spitalfields Market in London with Blaine, who bought sour cherries to create a duck dish. He had never heard of that combination before, but it seems it’s now popular in New York City.

When the duck dish arrives, Kurt sucks in his breath. It looks exactly like the duck with sour cherries that Blaine had prepared, complete with roasted potatoes, carrots, and runner beans - all of Blaine’s favorite vegetables. Kurt slowly eats the dish, savoring each tasty morsel. It’s so similar to the dish served at Anderson House, it’s eerie.

Once the waiter has cleared away the dishes, he returns with a notepad. “Is there anything else you would like this evening? Dessert perhaps?”

Kurt smiles and replies, “Is it possible to have a very small slice of the vegetable pie?”

“Was the duck not sufficient?” the waiter asks with concern.

“Yes, it was. I’m actually pretty full, but I used to eat homemade vegetable pie back in England. A slither of vegetable pie would bring back such fond memories.”

“Very well, sir. You won’t be disappointed.”

“By the way, are there Brussels sprouts in the pie?”

“No, there are no Brussels sprouts anywhere on the menu. The chef doesn’t like them.”

Kurt taps his fingers on the table, impatiently waiting for the serving of vegetable pie. When it finally appears, Kurt carefully examines the filling and takes a bite. He recognizes the taste of the vegetables, the gravy and pastry. It’s the exact same vegetable pie that he and Blaine created together all those years ago, when Miss Berry first arrived at Westerville Abbey.

Surely, this can’t all be a coincidence. The chef must be somebody who used to work at Westerville Abbey. But who? Mrs Sylvester is too old and set in her ways to immigrate to New
York City and start a new life. The only person he knows that is in America is Mr Hudson, but he’s in a travelling vaudeville show. Besides, Mr Hudson never gave the kitchen a second glance. He was more interested in eating than cooking.

When the waiter takes away the partially-eaten vegetable pie, Kurt asks for the dessert menu. He’s not surprised to see apple crumble, Victoria sponge cake, and all of Blaine’s other favorites listed. He decides to order the one item he doesn’t recognize - Flying Dreams.

When the dessert is presented, Kurt carefully examines it. There’s a breadcrumb base smothered in a layer of blackberry jam. It’s topped with soft meringue peaks that look like clouds, and there’s hot vanilla custard on the side.

“It’s our most popular dessert,” the waiter says.

“Is it possible for me to give my compliments to the chef?” Kurt asks with a breathy voice.

The waiter shakes his head. “I’m very sorry, but as you can see, we are very busy tonight. I’ll pass along your compliments to the chef.”

As Kurt eats the Flying Dreams dessert, he wonders what he should do. He can’t make a scene, demanding to see the chef and barges into the kitchen. What if everything is really coincidental and the chef isn’t from Westerville? On the other hand, he won’t get a wink of sleep until he sees this chef for himself. After thinking it over, he comes up with a plan.

When the waiter comes over with the bill, Kurt asks, “What time do you close?”

“Eleven o’clock. Last order orders are at 9:30.”

Kurt consults his pocket watch and is surprised that it’s already 10:45. With all his courses, he’s been at the tavern for a little over two hours. Kurt pays the bill, and is generous with his tip. He knows how difficult it is to provide good service, particularly when there don’t seem to be enough waiters for the crowd in the tavern.

Kurt walks around the block until he finds the alleyway leading to the back of the tavern. He’s careful not to step on the stinking garbage that is overspilling from the cans. He startles when he hears a nearby catfight. When the screeching, hissing, and yowling fade away, Kurt continues until he’s at the back of Healy’s Tavern.

Kurt stands under a nearby street lamp that gives a good view of the tavern’s back door. He’s both excited and nervous about seeing the chef. His mind goes through all the staff at Westerville Abbey, and he decides that it must be Sebastian or Dave, or maybe both. They are the only ones who are young and ambitious enough to immigrate to New York City. They both are hardworking, and Sebastian has knowledge of what food dishes are served at the abbey. Yes, it’s surely Sebastian. Kurt hopes to see Dave with him as well.

When two men exit the door, Kurt is disappointed that he doesn’t recognize them. He walks over and asks, “Is the chef still inside?”

“Chef is reviewing tomorrow's food order and then he has to change. He should be out in about fifteen minutes.”

Kurt resumes his position by the lamp post, bouncing on his toes, incredibly excited to see who comes out of the door. Other staff come out slowly, but they look like the waiters. So he waits...

And he waits… and he waits.
When Kurt hears distant church bells ring twelve times, he decides that the chef has probably already left, and he didn’t even know it… didn’t even know him. Kurt closes his eyes and his face contorts with pain, as disappointment floods through his body. He had thought that he would reconnect with someone from Westerville, and the waiting in a dark alleyway has all been for naught.

Fat raindrops begin to splatter on the ground, and before he knows it, the darkened clouds burst and there’s a steady rainfall. The gusting wind lashes the rain across his body. Kurt curses for having forgotten to bring his umbrella this evening. His hair droops and clings to his face, his suit becomes soaked, and Kurt can feel water start to seep into the soles of his shoes.

Kurt’s tears join the raindrops on his face. He begins to walk away but freezes in his steps when he hears, “Kurt! Is that you?”

Kurt thinks his mind is playing tricks on him when he recognizes the smooth tenor voice. When Kurt turns around, he sees a short man by the backdoor, holding an umbrella. He’s wearing blue denim trousers that cling to what looks like powerful thighs. His eyes move to the tiny waist and then take in the leather jacket - the type that pilots wore during the last years of the Great War. But he can’t see the face beneath the umbrella.

Kurt’s body trembles. “Who is it? I can’t see your face. Show yourself!”

When the umbrella comes down, and warm hazel eyes meet his, Kurt feels as if time has stopped. Kurt places one hand over his mouth, and the other grips onto the lamppost, afraid that his legs will give out at any second.

In front of him stands the ghost of Blaine Anderson.

Chapter End Notes

Song that Kurt sings is After You’ve Gone performed by Marion Harris. It was 1920’s number one hit. In 1962, Ella Fitzgerald recorded the song, and it’s this version that I imagine Kurt singing. Cooper and Blaine sang the exact same song back at Westerville Abbey in Chapter 55.

Datshitrandom created a photo manip of Sir Blaine in his formal military uniform with his medal. Please take a look and give her some love here.

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I also thank Dblmalfuction, who performed a detailed final review, although all mistakes are mine.

Next up: The chapter title is "Reunited" :).
March 1920
Blaine

Blaine washes and dries his face and hair in the tavern’s staff restroom, and he quickly puts on his denim trousers and a plain white T-shirt. He forgoes the usual pomade - it’s late and James is waiting around the corner to whisk him back to Uncle Hiram’s townhouse. When he had accepted the job at Healy’s, he had no idea how much hard work it would be. He has a new-found appreciation for Mrs Sylvester, who not only prepared lunch and dinner but breakfast as well.

Once he had decided to become a chef, Uncle Hiram’s connections had helped him secure a job at Healy’s. Although the tavern had been an institution on the restaurant scene for many decades, the new owners couldn’t find their footing. As one chef after another was replaced, and the food quality declined, the clientele dwindled. The first thing Blaine looked into was finding new food suppliers, to make sure that the ingredients were of the highest quality. He then revamped the menu to include his family’s favorites and recipes he created on his own.

He should be pleased with the success of the new menu, but it’s all come so quickly. There aren’t enough waiters and staff in the kitchen to keep up with the never-ending queue of customers. Thank goodness he has tomorrow off. He needs to sleep and think of a way to convince the owners to hire more staff.
When Blaine puts on his leather jacket, he hears the claps of thunder. He returns to his small office to fetch an umbrella and opens it as he steps out the tavern’s back door. His eyes immediately focus on the figure in the distance near the lamppost - a man with a soaked suit and hair plastered to his face. He draws in a startled breath when he recognizes his soulmate.

Blaine squints his eyes in the darkness to see if it’s a trick of the lamppost light or the heavy rain, and his heart starts racing when he realizes it’s not. Blaine has spent months and months looking for Kurt, but in the end, it’s Kurt who has managed to find him. “Kurt! Is that you?”

Blaine lowers his umbrella when a strong gust of wind blows. The only thing he can hear is a fearful Kurt. “Who is it? I can’t see your face. Show yourself!”

Blaine lowers his umbrella and sees a terrified Kurt, grasping the lamppost. His legs are trembling and he looks so frightened, like a paralyzed deer, staring at Blaine with wide eyes. It’s as if Kurt has seen a ghost. Blaine quickly realizes that Wesley was right - Kurt mustn't have received the news that he’s alive.

Although Blaine wants to run across the dark alley towards Kurt and take him into his arms, he knows that would only frighten Kurt even more. Blaine stands still and holds up one hand to show that he means no harm. “It’s me, Blaine Anderson.”

Kurt pulls himself up tall. “The Blaine Anderson I once knew was killed in action during the Great War.”

“No, Kurt. I was captured by the Germans and was a POW until the war ended.”

“But my Blaine didn’t return with the last soldiers. I don’t believe you! Prove to me you’re Blaine Anderson.”

“I’m the second son of the Earl of Westerville and fought in the Great War with the 9th Queen's Royal Lancers.”

“Anybody could look that up. Tell me something no one else would know!”

Blaine decides to abandon facts and reveal more personal things. “I think my heart has belonged to you since the first time I saw you, when you didn’t serve me Brussels sprouts at dinner. We spent the most wonderful two weeks at Dower House during our home leave. That was the last time I saw you. You painted a watercolor of our special place by the lake. It’s where we first kissed when Westerville hosted a fox hunt. The painting is now over the parlor’s fireplace at Dower House. Grandmama says the painting is very special to her as well.”

Blaine’s voice falters, desperately trying to think of other things to say that would convince Kurt that it’s really him, before Kurt runs away. “What else? … Oh, we used to meet in the kitchen gardens, and I made certain promises to you…”

Kurt interrupts, “You’re wearing the ring.”

Blaine looks at his finger, where he wears the ring with the never-ending pattern. “I don’t make promises lightly.”

Blaine discreetly looks at Kurt’s hand, and his heart races when he sees the same ring on Kurt’s finger. In that moment, he falls in love with Kurt all over again. In spite of thinking Blaine was dead, Kurt is still wearing the ring.

Blaine, unable to keep his emotions under control, chokes out, “I once promised to always love
you… and I still do.”

Kurt walks slowly across the dark alley toward him. “I love you, too.”

Blaine lets his umbrella fall to the wet ground and be blown away by the wind. He cups Kurt’s face, rubbing his thumb and appreciating the skin’s smooth feel. Blaine stares into Kurt’s blue eyes, which reveal a whirlwind of emotions - joy and disbelief, but most importantly, love.

The skin around Kurt’s eyes crinkles as the corners of his mouth form a shy smile. “Aren’t you going to kiss me?”

When their lips touch, it’s as if the world has melted away, and they are back at their special place by the lake once again. Their lips move together as one, and Blaine tries to convey everything he feels in the kiss - both his love and the promise of a future together. Although it’s raining all around them, Blaine doesn’t care that the cold drops chill his skin. The sun is once again shining in his heart and warming his very core.

Kurt clutches his back, pulling him closer, and claims his lips more firmly. A wave of new emotions courses through Blaine’s body. In spite of the cold rain, the warmth of Kurt’s body gives him the love and hope that he hasn’t felt since before the war.

A clap of thunder startles them apart, but Blaine quickly buries his face in Kurt’s neck, hands flexing around his back. Blaine’s body shakes, secretly crying for the missed time they will never get back… crying for the desperate searching without any results… crying because he feels so overwhelmed at being in Kurt’s arms again. Blaine feels Kurt’s thumb brush the tears away from his cheeks and the comforting gesture is like a salve for his loneliness and despair.

“I’ve missed you so much,” Kurt whispers, crying.

When Blaine feels Kurt’s body shiver, he pulls back and rests his forehead against Kurt’s. “I’ve lost you once, and I can’t lose you again. Is there anywhere you need to be tonight?”

When Kurt shakes his head, Blaine begs, “Come home with me.”

Kurt takes his hand and starts to walk, signaling his agreement, and Blaine doesn’t care who sees them on this dark rainy night walking hand in hand through the alley. When they return to the main street, Blaine spots James waiting in the car. He opens the door to the back seat for Kurt to climb in.

“You have a chauffeur,” Kurt says calmly.

“It’s actually my Uncle Hiram’s car and chauffeur. I’m staying with him in New York City.”

“Maybe I should go home. Your uncle won’t like you bringing home a man, especially your family’s former footman. We can meet again tomorrow morning.”

Blaine swallows hard, knowing that Kurt might still be unsure and a little scared of him, but he simply can’t let Kurt leave. He pleads, “Please don’t go home. My uncle won’t mind a bit. Everyone will be asleep, and by the time we wake up, they’ll probably be out of the house, getting on with their day.” Feeling more desperate with every passing moment, he grips Kurt’s shoulders and implores, “I can’t let you go… not when I’ve just found you.”

Kurt slides into the car and Blaine immediately joins him, sitting as close as possible, thighs pressed against each other’s. When the car leaves the curb, Kurt takes Blaine’s hand, rubbing his thumb over his. The simple act calms Blaine down, soothing any fears that Kurt doesn’t want to be
with him tonight. The rain continues to lash down, and the windshield wipers beat their steady rhythm. The car makes slow progress as James adeptly avoids deep puddles that have formed near the streets’ gutters.

Kurt breaks the silence. “I have so many questions, I don’t know where to begin. Why did the Royal Army declare you as killed in action? Where have you been for the past two and a half years?”

Blaine gives an abbreviated version of what has happened in his life between that fateful day in the trenches during the Battle of the Somme until his return to Westerville Abbey. Kurt interrupts a few times, asking for details about his soldiers and the Danish plan used to repatriate them home. Blaine is startled when Kurt punches his upper arm.

“Why didn’t you get a fellow soldier to write to your family? We all thought you were dead!”

Blaine rubs his sore arm. “All the mail was checked by the camp’s sub-officers before it was sent. Often they ordered prisoners to write specific things in their letters, and even distributed standard wording. There were punishments if letters didn’t make it past the censors. As much as I wanted to send news back to Westerville, I couldn’t jeopardize one of my soldiers’ lives.”

The rain slows down to a gentle pitter-patter. “Kurt, why haven’t you written to your father? Both your father and I have written to you countless times, only to find out that you had moved boarding houses without a forwarding address.”

“I have my reasons,” Kurt replies sharply.

Blaine turns his head and watches the raindrops race down the car’s windows. He still knows Kurt well enough to sense when he doesn’t want to talk. He can almost see the wall being built between them, and it hurts. But there will be plenty of time to find out what Kurt has been doing since he arrived in America. Blaine needs to focus on rekindling the flame and bask in the glow that is Kurt Hummel.

When the car stops in front of the Fifth Avenue townhouse, Kurt lets out a low whistle. “I’ve been here once before, but I forgot how grand it is.”

Blaine checks his shoulder against Kurt’s. “See, I told you that no one in the townhouse will know that you’re with me... unless we want them to know.”

When they enter the townhouse, Blaine takes off his soaking-wet leather jacket, and turns to Kurt to offer assistance with his own. Blaine notices Kurt staring at his white T-shirt, and he looks down to see if something has accidently spilt on it. “Kurt, is something wrong?”

Kurt shakes his head and glances at his lips briefly, before his gaze meets Blaine’s eyes. “I’ve never seen you dressed so casually. That tight white T-shirt…. Umm… It’s a good look on you.”

“I’m a working man now.” Blaine hangs up his jacket on the hooks, careful that it doesn’t touch the dry coats already hanging. He’ll take Kurt’s coat upstairs with them so no one will notice a strange coat in the morning. After taking off their shoes, Blaine asks, “Are you hungry? I can always make something for you to eat.”

“Are you kidding? I had dinner at Healy’s Tavern tonight. The duck with sour cherries… the vegetable pie… and no Brussels sprouts anywhere to be seen? The menu tipped me off that the chef was from Westerville Abbey. Never in my wildest dreams did I think it would be you.”

“How did you come to have dinner at Healy’s Tavern?”
“I overheard customers talk about it and decided to treat myself on my next day off.”

“Do you have to work tomorrow?”

“I do, but I don’t have to be there until late in the afternoon,” Kurt replies.

When Blaine sees Kurt fold his arms in front of his body, he knows that the wall is coming up again. Kurt’s life in New York City seems to be a sensitive topic, and Blaine decides to stay well away from discussing it, until Kurt brings it up himself. Meanwhile, there are plenty of other, more important, things for them to talk about.

Blaine takes Kurt by the hand and they quietly climb the stairs and make their way down the corridor until they enter his bedroom.

“Wow, this is as big as your parent’s bedroom at Westerville Abbey.”

“Wait until you see the view tomorrow morning. From the window, you can see Central Park.”

Blaine can see Kurt shivering and immediately gets him a big fluffy towel. While Kurt dries his hair, Blaine finds spare nightclothes from the bottom drawer of the antique Chippendale dresser. He hands them over to Kurt, who turns around to disrobe. Blaine’s eyes take in the strong muscular back when Kurt takes his shirt off, and Blaine can’t help but admire the long legs as Kurt slowly pulls down his rain-drenched trousers. Kurt has become so buff since they last shared intimate moments together at Dower House all those years ago.

But why has Kurt turned around to change into the nightclothes? He’s never been modest when alone with him before. When Kurt said he loves him, did he mean the memory of him? Is it possible that Kurt has a new lover and wants to stay faithful to him? Or does Kurt no longer find him physically attractive? Questions keep swirling in him mind until Kurt turns around, looking so beautiful that Blaine can hardly breathe.

Blaine asks, “Would you prefer to stay in the guestroom? It’s always made up, and it’s just down the corridor.”

Kurt tilts his head and gives him a quizzical look.

“You don’t have to sleep in my bed tonight. I’m not expecting anything, not really. Okay, I’d really like some cuddles.”

“Of course I’m going to sleep in your bed, silly.”

“But if you’re not comfortable undressing in front of me, I’m not sure you’re going to be comfortable in my bed… and if you’re not comfortable… I won’t be able to sleep… I wouldn’t be comfortable knowing…”

Kurt walks over and places a finger over Blaine’s lips. “You’re rambling, Blaine, and as adorable as it is, I assure you that I’m perfectly comfortable around you.”

“Then why did you turn around to change into your nightclothes?”

Kurt’s cheeks tinge pink. “It’s just what I automatically did when I was living in the RFC barracks. No other person has seen me naked since the last time we were together.”

Blaine’s smile lights up the room. With one sentence, Kurt has inadvertently put his mind at ease. Kurt neither has a current lover nor has he had one in his past.
“My hair must look a right mess,” Kurt mutters, carding his fingers through his hair.

“Kurt, you look so beautiful, it takes my breath away. Besides, I’m sure my mop of curls is way worse.”

Kurt tangles his fingers into Blaine’s thick curls. “As much as I like dapper Blaine Anderson, I prefer to see you natural like this. I’m the only one…”

When Kurt hesitates, Blaine realizes that maybe Kurt is also wondering if he has a lover. He immediately replies, “Yes, you are the only one who gets to see me like this. It always has been you and always will be you. There’s no one else.”

Kurt gives him a kiss on the forehead, and Blaine closes his eyes, reveling in the sensation of his soft lips lingering.

“Blaine, you look like you’re going to fall asleep on your feet. It’s already one in the morning. Let’s get you changed and washed.”

Blaine can’t deny he’s exhausted. It was a long evening’s work at the tavern, and he’s run through a gamut of emotions since he found Kurt again. Blaine watches Kurt find his nightclothes underneath the pillow and lay them out on the bed. He prompts Blaine to raise his hands and takes off his T-shirt, folding and placing it on a nearby chair. Blaine hasn’t had anyone to take care of him like this since…

“Kurt, you don’t have to do this, you know. You’re not a footman taking care of an Earl’s son any longer.”

“You’re right, Blaine. I’m not. I’m a man taking care of the person I love.”

Kurt unbuckles Blaine’s belt and makes quick work of the trousers’ buttons. He kneels on the floor and pulls the wet denim and boxer briefs slowly down, and Blaine has to close his eyes, worried that he’ll get a stiffie seeing his love in that position.

Once Kurt has helped him put on his nightclothes, Blaine follows him into the bathroom, where they wash their faces. Blaine finds a spare toothbrush and they brush their teeth together, just like they used to do at Dower House. It might not be everyone’s idea of an exciting reunion, but it’s perfect to him.

When they slip into bed, Blaine’s body automatically seeks out Kurt’s, and they hold each other as if they’ll never let go. The familiar lavender smell floods his senses, and Blaine knows he’s home again.

When the first rays of sunlight hit his eyes, Blaine silently curses for forgetting to close the curtains last night. He looks at Kurt, who is sleeping on his back, and he has to pinch himself to remember this is real. Blaine carefully removes his arm from around Kurt’s chest and gets up to close the curtains. After going to the toilet, he returns into bed. Kurt rolls to his side and pulls Blaine close to his chest. Blaine tangles their feet together so that every inch of their bodies is touching, connecting. He listens to Kurt’s gentle breathing and feels warm puffs of air on his neck. This is the happiest he’s felt for a very long time, and he’s going to savor every moment.

“How long have you been awake,” Kurt croaks in a raspy voice.

“For half an hour or so. Go back to sleep, Kurt. It’s still early.”

Kurt gets up and trudges into the bathroom. After a few minutes, he returns, shivering slightly as
he slides back under the covers and holds Blaine tight, slinging a leg over his.

Blaine can feel Kurt’s strong arms around him and the hard-muscled body against his. It makes his cock stir and fill until Blaine feels hard and needy. But he’ll wait… He’ll wait until Kurt gives him a sign that he wants something more, too.

Kurt grabs the back of his neck, angles his head and gives him a long, deep kiss. Blaine’s mind goes fuzzy with desire, and his hips automatically push forward so that his cock gets a little friction. When Blaine feels his cock rub against Kurt’s hip, he pulls back. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to do that.”

Kurt pushes his own cock against him, and Blaine realizes that Kurt is hard and needy, too.

“Let’s lose the nightclothes. I want to feel your skin against mine,” Kurt whispers huskily in Blaine’s ear.

Blaine immediately pulls off his night pants and top and tosses them towards the door.

“Somebody is keen,” Kurt teases, taking more time stripping off his nightclothes.

Blaine growls and pulls Kurt’s nightshirt off, chucking it in the general direction of the door. Now that Blaine can feel Kurt’s hot body, he can’t control himself anymore. It’s been more than four years since he’s been physically intimate with Kurt.

Kurt rocks their bodies together, and Blaine lets out a deep, loud moan when their cocks brush. Blaine clutches Kurt’s back, needing an anchor. “Kurt… Kurt… Don’t stop!”

“Cousin Blaine, you’re just having a nightmare again. Oh… Kurt!”

Blaine feels Kurt push him away. He opens his eyes to find Cousin Rachel in the doorway. “Finn, come quick! Cousin Blaine has found Kurt!”

It takes Blaine several moments to snap out of his lust-filled haze. He hears running footsteps along the corridor, and Kurt pulls up the sheets to their chins. Blaine can’t believe that Cousin Rachel, Finn, Uncle Hiram, and LeRoy are all gathered in his bedroom, still dressed in their pajamas.

Blaine snaps, “Yes, I’ve found Kurt. Haven’t you heard of knocking, Cousin Rachel?”

Cousin Rachel pouts, “But I thought you were having another nightmare. How was I to know you and Kurt were having sex?”

Uncle Hiram puts his arm over Cousin Rachel’s shoulder. “I think we should all go back to our bedrooms and get dressed. I’ll let the cook know to expect all of us for breakfast in half an hour.”

Finn waves at Kurt. “Good to see you again… Not all of you because I’ve never thought I might see you naked, but… you know what I mean.”

Kurt grimaces and waves back at Finn. When everyone has left the bedroom and the door is shut, Kurt turns toward Blaine and hisses, “I thought you said nobody would disturb us.”

“How was I to know that Cousin Rachel would hear me and think that I was having a nightmare? It was more like the best dream of my life!”

“Very funny, Blaine. I can’t go downstairs for breakfast and face your uncle and his friend. What
on earth will they think about me?"

“Uncle Hiram and LeRoy already know that I’m in love with you. They’ve watched me search everywhere for you for months. They are probably doing a happy dance in their bedroom as I speak.”

“I’m still not coming downstairs.”

Blaine knows that Kurt can be stubborn, and no amount of pleading will get him to change his mind. “Fine. Why don’t we take a shower, and I’ll lend you some clothes to wear. You can stay in my bedroom and I’ll bring breakfast up to you.”

They make quick work of the shower, taking turns to wash their own bodies and rinse off under the water spray. Blaine finds some clothes that Kurt can fit into and then quickly dresses himself. Kurt stands by the window, looking at Central Park. Blaine gives him a kiss on the cheek. “I’ll be back soon.”

When Blaine enters the dining room, the rest of the family are already there.

Cousin Rachel asks, “Where’s Kurt?”

Blaine sits down. “Kurt isn’t joining us for breakfast. He’s very embarrassed that you found us in bed together. Kurt is afraid that he hasn’t made a very favorable first impression on Uncle Hiram and LeRoy.”

Finn frowns. “I don’t understand why Kurt would feel that way. I mean, Hiram and LeRoy must do that stuff all the time.”

LeRoy rises from his seat. “Leave it to me. I know exactly how Kurt feels right now.”

The rest of the family fill their plates in silence. Blaine prepares a second plate filled with breakfast items to take up to Kurt later.

“How did you find Kurt?” Uncle Hiram asks.

“It’s funny. He had dinner at Healy’s last night. When he saw the menu, he realized that the chef must be someone from Westerville. Kurt was waiting at the backdoor when I left.”

“And…” Uncle Hiram probes.

“It was like we thought. Kurt never got the news that I was alive. It was a shock at first, especially for Kurt. But then we were glad to have found each other, and we realized we’re still very much in love.”

“So the spark is still there?” Finn asks.

“Judging by the noises coming out of Cousin Blaine’s bedroom, I’d say it was more like firecrackers on the fourth of July,” Cousin Rachel giggles.

“That’s enough, young lady,” Uncle Hiram reprimands.

“Uncle Hiram, is it possible for you to book a trunk call to Westerville Abbey? I know that Kurt’s father is quite anxious for news about his son.”

“Yes, of course. I’ll arrange it after breakfast.”
“When you do see Kurt again, could everyone refrain from asking what he’s been doing since he left Westerville? He was quite cagey about it last night, and I want him to tell me about it in his own time.”

Blaine is shocked when LeRoy and Kurt enter the dining room. Uncle Hiram immediately stands up. “Kurt, I’m so pleased to see you again. After watching Blaine search for you for months, it’s a relief to see you are safe and well.”

“How do you do, Mr Berry?” Kurt replies.

“None of this ‘Mr Berry’ stuff. You’re like family. Please call me Hiram.”

Blaine wonders what LeRoy had said to Kurt to coax him downstairs to the dining room. “Kurt, come have a seat next to me. I’ve already prepared a plate with the food you like for breakfast.”

“You remember what I like to eat for breakfast?”

Blaine playfully rolls his eyes. “Of course I do.”

Kurt sits down and begins to eat. Blaine squeezes his thigh gently. “Uncle Hiram, have you seen the new exhibition at the Met yet?”

The conversation moves from the Met exhibition to what’s playing on Broadway. Kurt is silent, but Blaine keeps his hand on Kurt’s thigh underneath the dining room table. He hopes it reassures Kurt that this doesn’t have to be an awkward first meeting.

Uncle Hiram sets down his coffee mug. “Blaine, before you came downstairs, we decided to go to the Hamptons for two days. We’ve never stayed at the house this time of year, and we thought it would be fun. Rachel and Finn will be joining us.”

Cousin Rachel’s bottom lip juts forward. “I still don’t know why we have to go to the Hamptons when it’s not even summer. It’ll be cold and miserable, and nobody else will be there.”

Finn stands up. “Sweetheart, I’ll explain it to you later. Let’s go and start packing.”

Cousin Rachel gives Finn an adoring look and quickly follows him out of the dining room.

Uncle Hiram continues, “The staff will be going with us as well. Cook assures me that there are plenty of provisions in the kitchen. Blaine, I’ve taken the liberty of phoning Healy’s Tavern, and I explained that you are in bed with a high fever. Kurt, would you like me to call your boss as well? You must be feeling a bit poorly after waiting in the back alley with all that rain pouring down on you.”

“Yes, but I’m not sure if they have a telephone.”

“Where do you work? I can arrange for a boy to deliver a message.”

“That’s okay. I really should show up for work this evening. They depend upon me.”

Blaine is surprised that Kurt has changed his mind about calling in sick. Again, Kurt is guarded when anything about his life in New York City comes up.

“LeRoy, we better get a move on. We can’t let Finn and Rachel be ready before us.”

When Uncle Hiram and LeRoy have left the room, Blaine refills Kurt’s teacup. “See, that wasn’t so bad. I’m really curious what LeRoy said to persuade you to come downstairs.”
“LeRoy said a lot of things to me. He’s quite a remarkable man.”

“LeRoy certainly is one-of-a-kind. Can you tell me one thing? Pretty please?”

Kurt giggles. “He told me that when your Cousin Rachel was six years old, she burst into their bedroom while they were having sex. She broke down in tears thinking that LeRoy was trying to eat her father. It took them hours to reassure her that they were just playing. After that, Rachel begged them to play the eating game with her.”

Blaine roars with laughter. He can certainly imagine Cousin Rachel doing something like that.

“LeRoy said that they quickly learnt to keep the door locked when Rachel is around. They still do.”

As they drink their tea, Blaine relates the story of when Cooper burst into his room while he was masturbating and the teasing that followed for years after. Before they know it, they hear footsteps coming down the stairs and voices near the front door. Blaine and Kurt get up to join them, and hear the last part of the conversation.

“I still don’t understand why we have to leave. I promise not to go into Cousin Blaine’s bedroom.”

“My dear Rachel, I’ve made my final decision on this matter.”

“Blaine…. Kurt, we’re about to leave,” LeRoy says when he sees them.

“You really don’t need to leave on our account,” Blaine replies.

Uncle Hiram frowns. “Why won’t anyone believe that I want to visit our house in the Hamptons? We’ll see you Friday night after dinner. Oh, by the way, the trunk call has been booked for three o’clock.”

When the front door is closed, Blaine is grateful for the silence. As much as he loves his American family, they fill every space with noise and energy. It’s very rare that Blaine has the townhouse to himself.

Blaine turns toward Kurt, who is leaning against the wall, and says, “Well, that was interesting. Uncle Hiram seemed almost desperate to get away.”

“I think that your uncle and LeRoy appreciate how difficult it is for two men to share intimate moments when others are around.”

“Intimate moments?” Blaine asks, bowing his head and looking up through his long eyelashes.

Kurt’s eyes darken. “You know I can’t resist you when you look at me like that.”

Chapter End Notes

The chapter’s photo is of Fifth Avenue in 1920. This is where the Berry’s have a townhouse.

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I also thank Dblmalfunction, who performed a detailed final review, although all mistakes are mine.
I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: Kurt has a telephone conversation with his father.
March 1920
Kurt

Kurt can’t think straight when Blaine looks at him through his eyelashes like that. How can he be so adorable and sexy at the same time? He hates that they were interrupted earlier in the morning. It’s been so long since their bodies communicated what they feel inside their hearts. This morning allowed him a tantalizing teaser of watching Blaine’s arousal, smelling the lingering scent of sandalwood soap, tasting Blaine’s mouth with his exploring tongue, and caressing in just the right places to draw out whimpers and moans of pleasure.

Kurt wants to kiss him, and taste him, and feel him, right then and there, to remind himself that this isn’t a dream. Blaine is alive and still in love with him, and reality is so much better.

Kurt gently presses his lips against Blaine’s, and revels in their warmth and softness. Before Kurt can let his desires get carried away, he pulls back. He clears his throat and hotly whispers, “Can we carry on where we left off earlier?”

“You always have the best ideas,” Blaine answers playfully, bumping their shoulders together.

Kurt silently takes Blaine’s hand and leads him upstairs to the bedroom. He closes the door, rotates the brass skeleton key in the keyhole, and turns the doorknob to ensure it’s really locked.

“I don’t think we’ll be interrupted,” Blaine snickers.

“I’m not taking any chances. Who knows if someone has forgotten something so important that they will return to fetch it. And once I get started with you, I won’t be able to stop.”

Blaine bows his head, and Kurt can see that Blaine’s face is flushed, and that he’s trying to hide a
bashful smile. If that isn’t adorable and sexy at the same time, what is?

Kurt curiously eyes a rectangular box and hand towel, which weren’t there before breakfast, sitting on each night table. He moves toward them to inspect one and reads the label: K-Y Lubricating Jelly. He opens the box to find a tube that looks similar to toothpaste. When he twists off the cap and gently squeezes, he discovers that it’s scentless and has the consistency of an oily salve.

“Kurt, what is it?”

“I’m not really sure. Do you think your uncle put these here when he was upstairs packing?” When Kurt sets it back down, he notices a piece of paper. “Oh, wait, there’s a note. It says ‘A little goes a long way to bring pleasure.’ Do you think it’s meant to be used when…?”

Before Kurt can finish his question, Blaine turns beet-red and hides his head in his hands, groaning. “I can’t believe Uncle Hiram left a lubricating jelly in my bedroom. It’s so embarrassing! He must think we’re going to spend the entire time having sex.”

“Well, maybe not the entire time,” Kurt teases.

Blaine sits down on the bed and rubs the back of his neck. “I know that I still love you, always have and always will. You’re it for me. But we really need to talk about what’s happened in our lives the past four years and what we want for the future… our future. That’s more important to me than using those tubes of jelly.”

Kurt bows his head as his fingers rake through his hair. He knows that Blaine is right and that they need to talk. He must tell Blaine that he’s failed at finding a respectable job and is working at an illegal speakeasy. He needs to face the fact that Blaine will probably feel differently about him once he knows.

Kurt hears Blaine’s gentle footsteps approach behind him and then feels firm hands massage his shoulders. It goes a long way to help relax his tense muscles and his fears.

“Look, Kurt, I know there’s something upsetting you. I can see it in every fiber of your body. We hardly got any sleep last night, and we’re both tired. It’s probably not the ideal time for having a meaningful talk or even doing other things. Maybe we should get a little shut-eye first.”

Kurt appreciates that Blaine is offering him some breathing space. Blaine has always known when to hold back and give him time to collect his thoughts. It’s one of the many reasons why he loves the man. “You’re right, as always, Blaine. I feel so emotionally drained. In less than 24 hours, I’ve found you in New York City and discovered that you are alive. It’s turned my world upside down - in a good way, mind you. Once I’m rested, I’ll be able to sort through my thoughts more clearly, and we’ll have that talk. But I’m on board with taking a nap first.”

Blaine turns Kurt around so that they are facing each other. “With cuddles?” he asks, with hope and affection glowing in his eyes.

“Definitely with cuddles,” Kurt replies and bops Blaine on the nose.

When Kurt starts to undress to put on nightclothes once again, he notices that Blaine is setting the wind-up alarm clock. It’s a reminder that he really has to go to work this evening. He doesn’t want to imagine what could happen if he were in Mr Fay’s bad books. “I have to leave for work around five o’clock.”

“I’m setting it for two o’clock. I’m expecting a call from Westerville Abbey at three.”
Of course Blaine keeps in touch with his family, but overseas telephone calls are rather expensive. “Is it usual for your family to call you?”

“No, but I want to let your father know that I’ve found you. Uncle Hiram booked the trunk telephone call for me.”

A feeling of panic grows inside Kurt. He wasn’t expecting to speak to his father today. What will he tell him? That he’s become a failure in America? And like a cat trapped in a corner, the hairs on Kurt’s neck stand up. “You have no right to interfere like that,” Kurt hisses.

Blaine slowly walks towards him and takes hold of his hands. “Kurt, everyone at Westerville Abbey is so worried about you. They have no idea what’s happened to you. Without letters, they are expecting the worst… that you might be dead. Last night, you got angry at me for not letting a fellow prisoner send a message back to Westerville Abbey. Think about how that felt… because it’s exactly how your family, your friends, and even my family feel right now.”

Kurt hates to admit it, but Blaine has a point. Thinking back, any scrap of news about Blaine would have been better than the pain he experienced when Blaine was missing in action and the subsequent mourning when the government declared that the last soldiers had returned home.

“Kurt, you don’t have to speak to your father if you don’t want to. But I promised him that I would let him know the moment I found you. And as you are well aware, I don’t make promises lightly.”

“Okay, I can understand why you had your uncle book the telephone call. Let’s go take that nap, and I’ll think about it when we wake up.”

They slip into bed and Blaine snuggles into Kurt’s side, wrapping an arm around his chest. Kurt pulls Blaine’s body as close to him as he can and rubs soothing circles on Blaine’s back. Kurt takes in the fragrant mixture of sandalwood and the scent that is uniquely Blaine.

“Are you mad at me?” Blaine whispers.

“No, Blaine. You’re doing the right thing, honoring your promise to my father. I wouldn’t expect anything less from you. Your sense of duty and caring for people are part of what makes you Blaine Anderson, the man I love and hold dear in my heart.” Kurt takes Blaine’s hand and presses it against his chest, wanting Blaine to feel his heart beating his love, strong and steady.

“I’m so in love with you,” Blaine says, letting out a big yawn.

Kurt continues to rub Blaine’s back until he hears gentle rhythmic breathing. He kisses the top of Blaine’s head and considers that for so many years, he thought he would never get to kiss him again... would never feel this connected to another person. Kurt has everything he wants right here in his arms.

No matter how hard Kurt tries, sleep eludes him. Kurt listens to the wind rattle the bedroom’s windows and watches the sunlight fade from the cracks of the curtains as dark clouds loom in the sky. His mind is whirling with thoughts about this afternoon’s telephone call from Westerville Abbey.

Blaine has given him the option of not speaking with his father on the telephone. Blaine is willing to just give his father the news that Kurt is very much alive and well in New York City. Of course, Blaine will tell his father that Kurt will write very soon, giving him the time to sort out his thoughts.

But Kurt misses his father so very much, and just the thought of hearing his voice once again is
both exciting and comforting. His father has always been the steady rock in his life, dispensing his special brand of wisdom and supporting his choices unquestioningly. Kurt couldn’t bear to receive his father’s news secondhand, knowing that he could speak directly with him.

But how will he tell his father that he’s involved in illegal activities? Both his father and Blaine - and even Kurt himself - are from a world with rules and structure. Customs dictate all manner of things in life, whether you’re from the rich upper class or devote your life to domestic service. What would the second son of an Earl and a butler think when they find out that he’s working for a gangster in a speakeasy, serving bootleg whiskey?

Raindrops start to fall outside, and Kurt concentrates on the steady rhythm as they beat against the window panes. Blaine’s arm squeezes Kurt’s chest tighter, and Blaine’s foot rubs against his leg. These simple intimate movements stop Kurt’s thoughts from buzzing, and they calm him. He and Blaine have already made it through some stormy times - a potential move to India and marriage to Miss Cohen-Chang, long periods of separation during the war, and of course, the misery of mourning Blaine’s death while he was in a German POW camp.

Since Kurt has arrived in New York City, loneliness has seeped into his heart, leaving him feeling so very disconnected from the people he loves. Loneliness has been his best friend. Now that he and Blaine have found each other again, Kurt feels hopeful once again. There’s the underlying feeling that they will have their forever. It might not be the fabulous lives that they once wrote about in letters or spoke about in private moments at Dower House, but their lives will be wonderful nonetheless.

And reconnecting with his father will be another way to help the loneliness fade away from his heart.

When the alarm clock goes off, Blaine grunts and pushes down the knob on the top to turn it off. He quickly returns to snuggling Kurt. In a raspy low voice, Blaine asks, “Did you have a good nap?”

“I didn’t sleep a wink.”

Kurt looks at Blaine, and his heart squeezes. His eyes resemble pots of warm honey, and his curls are tousled this way and that. Blaine looks good enough to eat. At the thought of eating, Kurt’s stomach starts to rumble. He really didn’t eat much at breakfast, feeling uncomfortable with the Berry family.

“Is it okay if I go downstairs and make us something to eat? It’s been a while since we had breakfast.”

Blaine sits up in bed. “Let me cook for you.”

They quickly get dressed and race down to the kitchen. Blaine opens the ice box and takes out a few items. Kurt looks in awe at the appliance, gently touching its smooth surface. “I’ve never seen an ice box up close before.”

“Uncle Hiram bought one of the first models last year. He likes to have all the new conveniences in the townhouse.”

“Lucky you.” Kurt sits at the nearby kitchen table, watching Blaine prepare tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches for lunch. Kurt knows that Blaine has always enjoyed spending time in Westerville Abbey’s kitchen, creating new dishes under Mrs Sylvester’s careful supervision. But Kurt notices a new confidence as Blaine expertly slices cheese and butters bread, knowing exactly
when to turn around and stir the soup in the pot. Not only is Blaine comfortable in the kitchen, but he’s happy. He was surprised to find Blaine working as a restaurant chef, but seeing him now, preparing their lunch, it all makes sense.

Blaine flips the grilled cheese sandwiches onto plates and pours the soup into bowls. “Do you want to eat here or would you prefer to go upstairs to the dining room?”

“Let’s eat here. It’s more comfortable than the stuffy dining room.” Kurt takes a bite and lets out a soft moan. It’s the perfect combination of toasted bread and gooey cheese. “This tastes fantastic. Is it something you created?”

Blaine shakes his head. “I’d love to take credit for it, but I had a grilled cheese sandwich at Whitney’s Cafe last week. They used a bland American processed cheese, but I think it tastes better made with proper English cheddar.”

“Considering the Westerville estate produces Devonshire’s finest cheeses, you would say that,” Kurt smirks.

Blaine chuckles, and they continue to eat their lunch at the small kitchen table. Blaine stretches his legs and tangles their feet together. Kurt’s heart warms at such a simple gesture. It’s the little things that Blaine does that make him feel so loved.

“Kurt, the telephone will ring in about fifteen minutes. Have you thought about what you want to do?”

“If it’s all right, I’d like to speak to my father.”

Blaine’s eyes light up. “It’s more than all right. Your father will be so happy to hear your voice.”

Blaine reaches across the table and covers Kurt’s hand. “Your father deserves to know what you’ve been up to since you arrived in America.” Blaine rubs his thumb slowly over the top of Kurt’s hand, and continues, “You can give your father an abbreviated version, leaving out anything you don’t want…umm…to reveal. But honestly, your father will be so relieved to know that you’re safe, he won’t care about anything.”

And of course, Blaine is right. Kurt can give him an abbreviated version of events. The most important thing is that they reconnect.

They make quick work of the lunch dishes and move to the parlor. Kurt goes to the window and watches the steady rain come down and swiftly run into the street gutters. When the telephone rings, Blaine immediately jumps up and answers it.

“Yes, this is Sir Blaine Anderson. I’ll wait on the line.”

Kurt is surprised to hear Blaine call himself ‘sir’. He makes a mental note to ask Blaine about it later.

“Hello, Father. Yes, everything’s fine here in New York City. I’m calling to tell Hummel that I’ve finally found Kurt, or rather, Kurt found me.”

“Yes, Kurt is fine. He never received the letters that Hummel and I sent him.”

“Yes, I would love to speak to Mama.”

“Hello, Mama. It’s so wonderful to hear your voice.”
“No, everything is perfect here. The restaurant is extremely busy. The New Yorkers can’t get enough of Westerville’s home cooking. I’ve told the owners that they need to hire some more staff.”

“Really? Give my congratulations to Cooper and Quinn. When is the due date?”

“No, Uncle Hiram and the family left for the Hamptons today.”

Kurt watches Blaine speak on the phone with his mother. Blaine’s got a huge grin on his face, and he’s gently bouncing on his feet. Kurt walks toward the telephone when Blaine beckons him over with a hand gesture.

“Yes, I’ll call Granny if I need anything. Look, I’m here with Kurt, and he wants to speak to Hummel.”

“I love you, too, Mama.”

“Good afternoon, Hummel, or rather good evening. I’m calling because I saw Kurt after the restaurant closed last night. He’s here with me now. I’ll put him on the line for you.”

“You’re most welcome.”

Blaine gives Kurt the telephone hand piece, and Kurt’s legs are trembling so hard that he has to sit down. Blaine lights the previously laid out kindling wood and small logs on the fireplace grate, and sits down in a corner wing chair. Kurt appreciates that he’s giving him some space, but staying close by in case…

“Hello, Father?”

“Is that really you, Kurt?”

Kurt grips the hand piece tighter when he hears his father’s familiar voice. “Yes, it’s really me. Can you hear me clearly?”

“You sound as if you’re in the next room. Kurt, are you all right? Has anything bad happened to you?”

“I’m doing perfectly fine.”

“Son, you don’t know how relieved I am. I’ve been so worried… You haven’t written to me since you sent that telegram when you first arrived. Mr Berry said you had moved boarding houses, and I had no idea where you were.”

“I’m so sorry, Father. I got it into my head that I would write to you when I had good news and was settled. It turns out that New York City doesn’t have tailoring shops like they do in England. They’re more like workhouses filled with immigrants slaving away at the sewing machine all hours of the day and night. I had to rethink what I should do.”

“If it’s like being in a workhouse… well, that’s certainly no place for my son. What are you doing?”

Kurt takes a deep breath. “It’s taken me some time to get my footing. I’ve done a lot of odd jobs here and there and moved around boarding houses a lot. In the autumn, I even went upstate and picked apples to earn some money. When I returned to the city, I found a job as a singer at a fancy nightclub. It comes with room and board, which is convenient. I’m looking for another job, but I’m
not sure what to do.”

“Kurt, maybe you aren’t happy singing at a nightclub, but you’re doing what you need to earn money, keep a roof over your head, and food in your belly. It’s giving you some time to figure out what you want to do and how to make that happen. And how about Sir Blaine?”

“Quite by accident, I found Blaine late last night. I assumed I was seeing a ghost because I thought he was dead. Once I got over the shock, we found out that we still feel the same about each other. How is Mrs Hummel?”

“My dear is doing very well and is crying tears of joy beside me.”

“I saw Finn at breakfast this morning. He looks very happy with his new wife. They’ve left for a few days, but I’ll make sure to catch up with Finn when they return. I’ll even write to you both to let you know his news.”

Kurt hears a commotion on the other end of the line, as if there is a gaggle of people in the room.

“Kurt, the Dowager Countess would like a word with you. Where can I write to you?”

“You can write me at Mr Berry’s address. I’m sure that Blaine will deliver it to me.” Kurt can’t hold back his tears any longer. “I love you, Father. I’m sorry I haven’t written you. I’ve missed you so much.”

“I’ve missed you, too, son.”

“I speak into this part?... Is this an instrument of communication or torture?... Kurt? Is it really you?”

“Yes, My Lady. It’s Kurt Hummel on the line.”

“Are you fine?”

“I’m very well, My Lady. I ate at Healy’s Tavern last night and found Blaine.”

Kurt can hear a muffled “Yes, I know there isn’t much time left.” He appreciates this telephone call is quite expensive and makes a note to thank Mr Berry later. “Sorry, Kurt. I won’t beat about the bush. You’ve had everyone worried about what happened to you. I’m sure that Blaine was happy to see you again.”

“Just as happy as I was to see him, My Lady.”

“I would be very cross indeed if you did another disappearing act like Houdini, young man.”

“I promise I won’t, My Lady.”

“I’m so relieved that you and Blaine have found each other. Could I please have a quick word with him?”

Kurt calls over Blaine, who rushes to the telephone and takes the hand piece. He smiles when he sees the excited look on Blaine’s face. Kurt walks toward the window and continues to watch the rain, while listening to one side of a conversation.

“Grandmama? It’s me, Blaine.”

“Yes, I was so excited to see Kurt again.”
Kurt knows that Blaine was very excited to see him again, but hearing Blaine say it makes warmth radiate throughout his body.

“We still feel the same way, but it’s still early days. There are things we need to work out.”

“I love you, too, Grandmama.”

“Ta ta for now.”

When Kurt hears the click, he realizes that the telephone call with Westerville Abbey is over. It was so good to hear his father’s voice, although it wasn’t as strong and steady as he remembered, but rather shaky and filled with concern. Kurt feels terrible that he’s made his father worry for nine months, that his pride got in the way of writing a letter. His father could have been such an enormous support during the bad times, but his sense of honor stopped him from writing.

When Kurt’s legs start trembling, he clutches the window sill to keep himself steady, and tears run down his face like the raindrops on the window pane. *It was senseless. I’ve lost so much valuable time with my father.*

Blaine pulls Kurt into arms and leads them to the sofa in front of the fireplace. Kurt holds on for dear life as sobs rack his body. *If I had swallowed my pride and had written to my father, I would have known sooner that Blaine is still alive. I’ve lost so much valuable time with Blaine.*

Kurt cries over the lost time with the people he loves, all because he was too proud to write. He cries for the loneliness he has endured in America. He cries for the joy he felt at hearing his father’s voice once again. He cries because he’s back in the arms of the man he loves. He cries and cries… until there are no more tears left to cry.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I also thank Dblmalfuction, who performed a detailed final review, although all mistakes are mine.

I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: Blaine goes to El Fay Club with Kurt. I promise that Kurt really has no more tears to cry.
March 1920
Blaine

Blaine holds Kurt as he cries, knowing that Kurt needs to release the emotions he must have had pent up for a very long time. Blaine tries to comfort his love by rubbing his back. As hard as it is, Blaine keeps silent while Kurt lets it out of his system. Blaine concentrates on Kurt’s breathing while he watches the yellow flames flicker and dance in the fireplace. Radiators might be more practical in a city, but he still prefers the crackle of the logs and the smell of a real fire.

After a long while, Kurt’s sobs diminish into sniffles, and the fire settles to red hot embers, pieces falling underneath the grate. Kurt pulls away and looks up at him. Although Kurt’s eyes are swollen and red, his beauty takes Blaine’s breath away.

Blaine pulls out a handkerchief from his pocket and offers it to Kurt. “Are you okay? What can I do for you?”

Kurt wipes the last tears and blows his nose. “Thank you for placing that call to Westerville Abbey. Talking to my father again... That meant everything to me. Well, almost everything, because being here with you... That means the most.”

Blaine’s heart melts, and he holds Kurt in an embrace that he never wants to end, one that hopefully conveys to Kurt that everything will be all right.

Kurt pulls away. “So, you’re Sir Blaine Anderson now?”

“How do you know that?”

“That’s how you answered the telephone, and my father called you Sir Blaine.”

“Yes, I’m now a Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire. It’s a ridiculous title.”

“No, it’s not, Blaine. After spending two years in a German POW camp, giving guidance to the
British soldiers, and leading them back home, mostly on foot, you certainly deserve a knighthood.”

Blaine blushes at Kurt’s compliment. “Did you know that Mrs Hummel is also a member of the Order of the British Empire for managing the Westerville estate’s farms and dairies? She’s now known as Carole Victoria Hummel, MBE.”

Kurt claps his hands. “That’s absolutely marvelous. I must write her a letter to congratulate her, after writing to my father, of course.”

Blaine is relieved that Kurt plans to keep in touch with his father. He captures Kurt’s lips in a kiss that leaves him feeling dizzy. Blaine can’t get enough of this man, and he starts kissing Kurt’s strong jawline and slowly makes his way down Kurt’s neck. He tastes good enough to eat. When Kurt pulls back, Blaine whines and chases him with his lips.

“Before we get carried away, do you know what time it is?” Kurt asks.

Blaine sighs, because who cares what time it is? But, always the gentleman, he looks at his wristwatch and replies, “A little after four o’clock.”

Kurt throws his head back so that it sinks into the sofa cushions. “I need to leave for work no later than five. I should go and get ready.”

“Will you be performing tonight?” Blaine asks.

Kurt nods, and Blaine’s face lights up with delight. “I’d love to come to the nightclub with you tonight to watch you perform. I haven’t heard you sing in years, and it would be a joy to hear you sing again. You know how much I love your beautiful voice.”

When Kurt doesn’t answer, Blaine holds his hand and says, “I’ll be very good and sit at a back table. I won’t clap too loudly at the end of each song. I promise not to embarrass you.” Blaine makes his best puppy-dog eyes. It’s the same look he used to give Mrs Sylvester to get extra treats. “Pretty please.”

Kurt’s silence is deafening. Why wouldn’t Kurt want to him to go to the nightclub to watch him perform? Is Kurt having second thoughts about them being together? Blaine feels more desperate with every passing second. “I really can’t let you go, not after I’ve just found you. I-I’m afraid that when you walk out that door, I won’t see you again.”

“Blaine, please believe me when I say that won’t happen.”

“But it’s too soon…. And I really can’t lose you again. It would crush my heart.”

Blaine watches Kurt carefully, worried about what he’ll say. Kurt is biting his lower lip, which is never good news.

“Okay, you can come,” Kurt replies.

“Really? I get to come to the nightclub with you?”

“Yes, Blaine. I don’t want to be apart from you either, or else I’ll think I’ve made this all up in my head. Twenty-four hours ago, I thought you were dead.”

Blaine squeals and does kicky feet before he gets up from the sofa. “I can’t wait to hear you sing. I’m so proud of you, Kurt.”
They go upstairs to the bedroom to get ready. While Kurt uses the bathroom to freshen up, Blaine looks through his wardrobe for something suitable to wear. He hasn’t bought any new suits since before the war. He hasn’t needed to. He takes out his black-tie attire and lays it on the bed. He hopes it still fits him, because he wants to look his very best for Kurt tonight.

When Kurt returns to the bedroom, he notices the clothes laid out on the bed. “Err… the nightclub isn’t that fancy.”

“I’ve never been to a nightclub in America… I haven’t really been anywhere other than to my granny’s house and a few restaurants. I haven’t bought a suit since that time we went to Exeter before the war.” Blaine ducks his head, and adds, “I want to look good for you.”

“Oh, honey, you always look good to me. Why don’t you wear that charcoal grey suit you had made in Exeter? Do you still have it?”

Blaine nods and gets it from the wardrobe. Once he dresses, he stands in front of the mirror, cursing to himself that he hasn’t bought a new suit. This one looks so old-fashioned compared to what gentlemen are now wearing in New York City. “I’m sorry, Kurt. I look like a man straight out of an old silent movie.”

“No, Blaine, you really don’t. A well-made suit is timeless, and it lets your natural good looks speak for itself. It says I know who I am, and I don’t need to follow fashion trends. That kind of confidence is very sexy.” Kurt gives Blaine a once-over. “Your body shape has changed since before the war. Later this week, I’ll do some alterations so that your suits flatter your new muscular legs and tiny waist.”

Blaine’s heart soars at the news that Kurt will still be around later this week, caring for him by the simple act of tailoring his suits. Hopefully, they’ll do things together that will require him to wear them. Blaine goes to the bathroom, and stands before the sink with a pot of pomade.

“Let me help you with that,” Kurt offers.

Kurt adeptly starts slicking down Blaine’s hair. “I’m surprised that you haven’t been to more social events since you’ve been in New York City. I would have thought that your American granny would have wanted to show you off and introduce you to eligible young ladies.”

Blaine chuckles, “Well, Granny has certainly tried, but frankly, I’ve been too busy.” Blaine looks at Kurt’s reflection in the bathroom mirror. “Since I arrived in New York City, I’ve spent every spare moment looking for you.”

“Really?” Kurt squeaks.

Blaine replies, counting on his fingers, “I’ve been to every workshop in the Garment District and every store that has a men’s fashion department. Uncle Hiram checked the New York City school system to see if you were using the teaching certificate. I’ve visited every single boarding house in Manhattan, and Finn was helping me visit those in Brooklyn. And…”

“Wow.”

Blaine turns around and cradles Kurt’s face with his hands. “It feels as if I’ve been looking for you forever.”

“Oh, honey, I wish I had known that you were alive. I would have never left Westerville.”

Blaine strokes his thumb across Kurt’s cheek before giving him a gentle kiss. “I wish that, too. But
we’re together now, Kurt, and we will never have to be apart again.”

Kurt nuzzles into Blaine’s touch and draws his arms around his waist, holding him for a moment. After a few minutes of basking in tender silence, Kurt pulls back and smiles. “So you’ve been to the Clinton neighborhood?”

“Yes, I have.” Blaine recalls the two days he had spent in the west side of Manhattan. His uncle had told him that it was nicknamed Hell’s Kitchen and was the poorest neighborhood in the city. He had passed tanneries and large warehouses on his way to the boarding houses, which were rundown and overcrowded. Blaine had made sure that he left the neighborhood before nightfall. It was no place to be with James and the red Fiat.

“Good, because that’s where the nightclub is.”

Blaine slowly gulps. He doesn’t like the idea of Kurt performing and living in Hell’s Kitchen, but he also doesn’t want to be judgmental. He knows absolutely nothing about the city’s nightlife, but Americans do like to live life to the fullest, and maybe that includes frequenting nightclubs in Hell’s Kitchen.

When they leave the townhouse, Blaine hails a taxicab, and Kurt tells the driver the address. Once the taxicab crosses 59th Street, Blaine notices dogs sniffing at the rubbish set out on the sidewalk in front of rundown tenement buildings and small groups of young men hanging out on the street corners. Blaine startles when a police car zooms by with its blue and red lights flashing and the siren blaring. Kurt squeezes his hand, but it’s not comforting. Blaine feels so out of his element in this neighborhood.

The taxicab stops and Blaine pays the fare. He can see a large group of people standing outside of a building that has an awning with El Fey Club printed in black bold letters. Blaine feels less uneasy when he sees that the nightclub is so popular with customers that don’t look like they live in Hell’s Kitchen.

Kurt leads him through the crowd to find yellow tape on the door with a sign that reads, Closed by order of the New York City Metropolitan Police. “That’s just perfect. I’ve lost both my job and my room in one night,” Kurt huffs. “I want to get my stuff. Let’s get in through the back door.”

Blaine follows Kurt through the darkened alley. “Why would the police shut down the nightclub? It looks so popular.”

Kurt stops and faces him. “El Fey Club is a speakeasy.”

“I don’t know what you mean, Kurt.”

“Are you that naive, Blaine? The club is owned by a gangster and it sells alcohol. When I’m not performing, I’m serving bootleg whiskey. It’s illegal!” Kurt snaps.

Blaine bows his head and bites his lower lip. He has heard of the new Prohibition Act that came into effect at the beginning of the year, of course he has. But it hasn’t really affected him. He feels so foolish, and Kurt’s harsh words stab at his heart. “Healy’s doesn’t serve alcohol and Uncle Hiram stockpiled the cellar with crates of booze at the end of the year. I didn’t know that there were still places that served alcohol. So… I guess I really am naive.”

Kurt’s face softens. “I’m sorry for snapping at you. I didn’t want you to see me working at a speakeasy, learning that I’m serving bootleg whiskey. But you seemed so excited to hear me sing again… and you gave me those puppy-dog eyes… I couldn’t say no to you.”
“Hey, Kurt! Is that you? It’s me, Joey.”

Blaine looks up and sees a burly-looking man standing at the back door. Kurt immediately starts walking toward him, and Blaine races to catch up with him.

“What happened, Joey?” Kurt asks.

“Those Christian do-gooders reported the club to the police, and they’ve closed it down. It’s pretty unbelievable since Fey has got half the city's police on his payroll. He’s making arrangements to open a new club later this month.” Joey hands Kurt a slip of paper. “Here’s the number to call at the end of the month to find out the new address.”

“Let’s go, Kurt.” Blaine doesn’t want to hang around any longer than what is necessary.

Kurt shakes his head vehemently. “Joey, is there any chance I can get my things from my room?”

“I’ll keep on the lookout, but you better be quick. The police will soon be back to confiscate the booze.”

Kurt and Blaine enter the club and go up the two flights of stairs. “Listen, Kurt. I’ll buy you anything you need. We don’t have to do this.”

Kurt stops at the top of the stairs. “I want my war medals and the letters that you sent me. Even your money can’t buy them, and they’re special to me.”

Blaine nods. Of course Kurt has things of sentimental value, and his heart flutters at the thought of Kurt keeping and rereading the letters that he sent during the war. When they enter the small room, Kurt takes out a suitcase and starts to pack. Blaine slowly looks around, thinking it looks much like a servant’s room at Westerville Abbey, with minimal furniture. Although the paint is peeling, the room is very clean and tidy. There are little homely touches like houseplants on the window sill, the decorative plate from Woolworths, and photographs in frames on the dresser.

Blaine moves toward the dresser to inspect the frames. There are photographs of his father and Mrs Hummel, Kurt receiving his Victoria Cross medal, and his own family in a formal setting. His heart melts when he sees the photograph of himself taken before the war.

“Can you bring those over? We need to hurry.”

Blaine dutifully gathers the frames and sets them down in the suitcase. Once Kurt has inspected every nook and cranny to make sure he hasn’t forgotten anything, he closes the suitcase. “Let’s go.”

When the leave the nightclub and return to the main street, Blaine is relieved to find a taxicab very quickly. He can’t wait to leave Hell’s Kitchen. Once the suitcase is placed in the trunk (Blaine thinks it’s such a funny word for the boot when it holds trunks), he gives the driver the address. Blaine glances at Kurt, who is sitting as far away from him as he can possibly get and looking out the window.

The invisible wall has gone up again.

The rain starts again, increasing in intensity with every minute. Blaine feels restless, wanting to get home as soon as possible, so that he and Kurt can talk. Sure, he knows that Kurt is upset that El Fey Club has closed down, leaving him without work or a room to sleep in. But Kurt has him now, and Blaine will do everything in his power to help him, comfort him and please him.
When the taxicab reaches the Fifth Avenue townhouse, Blaine pays the driver and rushes to open the door, while Kurt deals with his suitcase. When they’re in the entrance hall, Blaine notices that Kurt is soaked to the skin.

“This isn’t how I thought tonight was going to be like,” Kurt mutters.

“Sweetheart, why don’t you take a long hot bath to get warm again? In the meantime, I’ll change into comfy clothes and prepare us some dinner. We still need to eat tonight.”

Kurt gives him a kiss on the cheek. “That sounds absolutely wonderful.”

Blaine takes the suitcase and brings it up to his bedroom. He runs a hot bath, making sure to add a few drops of chamomile oil to help Kurt relax. Once the bath is ready, he returns to the bedroom to find Kurt in a thin bathrobe. After Blaine changes into his nightclothes, he takes a peek into the bathroom. Kurt has his body and hair submersed in the water and he’s humming to himself. It looks like his plan might be working.

An hour later, Kurt joins Blaine in the kitchen. “Everything smells delicious. What are we having?”

Blaine pulls out a dish from the oven and places it on a wooden chopping board. “Steak and kidney pie with mashed potatoes and carrots.”

“Goodness, I haven’t had a decent meat pie since I left Westerville Abbey.”

“I thought as much. Besides, you haven’t eaten my steak and kidney pie, which is pretty delicious. I used some Guinness beer to make the gravy. Would you like to help me finish the bottle?”

“I can’t have you doing everything. Tell me where the glasses are, and I’ll pour the beer. You can get on with mashing the spuds.”

Five minutes later, they are sitting at the kitchen table with platefuls of home-made comfort food. As soon as Kurt has taken a bite, he closes his eyes. “This is absolutely scrumptious. Don’t tell Mrs Sylvester this, but your pie is much better than hers.”

“It’s the Guinness that makes all the difference.”

They are silent as they enjoy their meal. Blaine doesn’t want to bring up work and things, not when Kurt is practically wolfing down his food. Once they’ve finished and have taken their plates to the sink, Kurt says, “You go start the fire in the parlor. I’ll just take care of the dishes.”

Blaine does as he’s told and then decides to pour them each a glass of port wine. It reminds him of the days when he would remain in the dining room with his father, Cooper, and male visitors to discuss matters of importance. And he and Kurt certainly have matters of importance to talk about this evening.

When Kurt enters the room, Blaine immediately stands up.

“Always the gentleman, Sir Blaine Anderson.”

“Come sit down with me,” Blaine says and offers Kurt the port wine. Once they’ve taken a sip, Blaine decides it’s time they really talk. “Kurt, tell me what you’re thinking.”

Kurt huffs. “I’m thinking that I’ve lost my job, and who knows if Fey is really going to open a new nightclub. And not only did I lose my job, but I have nowhere to live. This is a major setback.”
“Come live here with me.”

“No, I couldn’t.”

“Why ever not? Uncle Hiram certainly wouldn’t mind. It would give you some time to rethink what you want to do… And hopefully, I fit into those plans.”

“Blaine, I can’t just live here and do nothing! I don’t want to be a kept man. No doubt your American granny will find you some rich young lady to marry so that you can save Westerville. Who knows what will happen then and if I will still fit into your life.”

Blaine then realizes that there is so much more he needs to tell Kurt. “I don’t need to marry a rich young lady anymore. Cousin Rachel has left half her fortune in trust for the Westerville estate. There’s more than enough money for generations to come.”

“Oh, that explains a lot. I’ve always thought it was weird that your father hired more staff once your cousin and Mr Hudson left. Your father and Lord Cooper looked so happy, and I assumed that there had been some small windfall in some investment. I hadn’t realized that your Cousin Rachel had been so generous with her fortune.”

“Cooper and Quinn also have three sons - maybe more now that Quinn is pregnant again - so, there’s no pressure for me to marry. I can do as I please.”

“I have no money saved, and I bet that job of yours as a chef doesn’t pay well enough for the two of us.”

“You’re right, I don’t get paid much money as a chef, but Cousin Rachel has set up a small trust for me, and it gives me a comfortable income. It’s allowed me to do what I love, which is cooking, without worrying about money.”

“Wow, Blaine. You’re a knight and you’ve got money of your own. Next thing you’ll tell me is that you’ve got property.”

Blaine grins, “Grandmama has left me Dower House in her will.”

Kurt chuckles, “Of course she would - she absolutely adores you. Still, I don’t want to be a kept man. It’s not who I am, and for my own sense of pride, I need to work.”

Blaine takes Kurt’s hands in his. “I wouldn’t expect anything else from my brave flying ace. You’re smart, hardworking, and I have no doubt that you can do anything that you put your mind to. What I’m offering you is time to figure out what you really want to do.”

“Blaine, that’s very sweet of you, but I still want to find a job and somewhere to live as soon as possible. I’ll never be a knight or have a fancy trust fund, but I really want to be an equal in our relationship. I promise you that whatever I decide to pursue, we’ll discuss it. After all, it’s our fabulous future… together.”

A wave of happiness washes over Blaine. Sure, he’d prefer it if Kurt lived with him at the townhouse, but he knows they need to take it slow if they want to get their happy ending.

“Kurt, I was umm… wondering… I know how important it is for you to find a job… you know I love you…”

“Spit it out, Blaine!”
“Uncle Hiram and the rest of the family aren’t expected back until tomorrow night. Can you hold off on the job hunting until Saturday?”

Kurt’s eyes darken. “Nothing could tear me away from you.”

Chapter End Notes

Trivia: There really was a gangster named Larry Fay. When the police closed down the "El Fay Club", he soon after opened a new one called the "Del Fay Club." Guess he really did have the police force on his payroll. As an aside, Larry Fay was shot down by his club's doorman, when he found out that everyone's wages were being reduced by 30%.

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I also thank Dblmalfunction, who performed a detailed final review, although all mistakes are mine.

I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: We find out how Kurt is feeling, and Blaine has surprise news. Heads up - there are two more chapters and an epilogue remaining.
March 1920
Kurt

Kurt subconsciously shifts his body to the center of the bed, trying to snuggle up to Blaine. When he feels the empty cold sheets, his eyes flutter open, and he’s disappointed that Blaine is not there next to him. After yawning and rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, he spots a note on Blaine’s pillow. He reaches over to grab it and reads:

My dearest K,

I’ve gone to a meeting at Healy’s this morning. I’ll be back by 11 AM. If you wake up beforehand, just relax. I’ll bring you breakfast in bed.

I love you fearlessly and forever,

B
xoxoxo

He’s surprised that Blaine hasn’t told him about this morning’s meeting, but then again, they were too busy last night to talk about mundane things like work. Kurt gets out of bed and stretches his arms above his head. Although his bones have fully healed since the parachute jump, he suffers muscle pains in the morning, particularly when it’s been raining. After stretching a little, he uses the bathroom and opens the curtains to let bright sunshine light up the room.

Kurt glances at the clock, which shows it’s 10:10 AM. With almost an hour before Blaine’s return, he decides to take full advantage of lounging in the comfortable bed. He fluffs the pillows and lies down again, brushing his legs across the soft luxurious bed sheets. He snuggles into Blaine’s pillow and loves that his scent still lingers.

Kurt closes his eyes and thinks back to last night. Once they left the parlor, it was a frenzy of clothes being torn off and thrown in every direction (he makes a mental note to sew Blaine’s shirt
buttons back on). They flung themselves on the bed, kissing and groping every piece of skin that they could get hold of. Their bodies connected like magnets, and they soon were rubbing their cocks together. It was passionate, intense, and intoxicating. All it took was one touch to Blaine’s cock, then he was a goner, and Kurt quickly followed. The only things Kurt remembers afterwards are a warm wet washcloth gently brushing his stomach, and the feel of Blaine in his arms. Sometimes, reality is better than dreams.

But then again, sometimes, reality can be a nightmare.

It’s not that he particularly liked his job at the El Fay Club. It was hard work, and he didn’t like dealing with the gangsters and their thugs. Last night, he had been nervous and ashamed to bring Blaine - his innocent Blaine - to an illegal speakeasy. But what else could he do? Blaine had been so excited to hear him sing again, and it had felt too soon to let Blaine out of his sight. Besides, Blaine had given him that puppy-dog look - how could he say no?

It’s a mixed blessing that the police have shut down the El Fay Club. Although he has Larry Fay’s telephone number in his jacket pocket, he doesn’t want to use it. The closure allows him to leave the job without worrying about what Larry Fay might do to him. It also has also forced him to think about pursuing new avenues. But the grim reality is that it’s left him without a job and a place to sleep.

He needs to find a solution to his immediate needs and fast. Of course Blaine would offer him the comfort of staying at his uncle’s townhouse. It’s in Blaine’s nature to be generous and caring towards those he loves. But what would really happen? Miss Berry - now Mrs Hudson - has only ever thought of him as a servant. Would he naturally slip into that role at the townhouse? Would he be trapped again in the attitudes and conventions of the British class system?

Now that he is in America, Kurt wants to be treated as an equal. He’s already discovered that, by and large, Americans view people by their merit and not by their social class. He has a real opportunity to move up the ladder by his own hard work and ingenuity.

Kurt has to hand it to Mrs Hudson. She was generous and farsighted in leaving half her fortune to the Westerville estate. It’s taken away the need for Blaine to marry a rich lady. Not only that, but she’s set him up with a trust fund. It seems that Blaine is the master of his own future. Blaine is now a knight, a man with money, and will eventually inherit property. It doesn’t get better than that. But Kurt is determined to bring something to the table, too.

“Good morning!”

Kurt looks up to see Blaine looking very dapper. He’s wearing his suit trousers, white shirt, bow tie, and a cooking apron. Kurt is slightly disappointed that Blaine has already shaven and has slicked back his hair with pomade. He was hoping that he could do the honors and see if Blaine would get a stiffie.

Kurt sits up. “Good morning.”

Blaine sets the bed tray on his lap and gives him a kiss on the cheek. Kurt’s mouth waters when he sees orange juice, tea, eggs, bacon, sausages, and… “Blaine, what are these?”

“Pancakes.”

“They don’t look like the thin pancakes we eat with lemon and sugar on Shrove Tuesday.”

“American pancakes are much lighter and fluffier. You eat them with butter and syrup from the
maple tree. Have a taste. I think you’ll like them.”

Kurt tucks into his breakfast, enjoying the pancakes. “You look handsome this morning. It must have been an important meeting.”

“It really was important. I’ll tell you about it later.”

Kurt finishes his breakfast quickly. “I love these pancakes, but the syrup is a bit sweet for me. Americans sure love to eat sugary things for breakfast.”

“They certainly have a sweet tooth,” Blaine agrees.

“What do you want to do today? The sun is out for the first time in a week.”

Blaine suggests, “How about a stroll around Central Park? It’s right at our doorstep. Why don’t you wash and dress, and I’ll tidy up?”

Kurt searches his suitcase for a change of clothes and pulls out his nicest suit. He gives Blaine a kiss on the cheek before he leaves for the bathroom. Kurt takes a quick shower, not wanting to waste a single moment with Blaine. He takes particular care in grooming his hair, arranging it to have some volume at the front. He wants to look good for Blaine. As he’s buttoning up his shirt, he hears quick footsteps and signs of frustration in the bedroom.

“Ughh!”

Kurt’s curiosity is now piqued. He opens the bathroom door by a crack to see what is going on. Blaine is holding the bottom mattress up, trying to tuck in the bed sheets. When Blaine plops down the mattress, it skids so one side overhangs the bed frame. Blaine scurries over and pushes the mattress back in place, but it messes up the sheets.

Kurt giggles and moves to the bedroom, “Having a little problem?”

“This is harder than it looks.”

“You mean to tell me that you’ve never made a bed before?”

Blaine looks at him sheepishly. “I haven’t had to.”

“Not even during the war?”

“A private was always responsible for the officers’ quarters. In the trenches, I had nothing but a blanket. And it really didn’t matter in the camp.”

“It seems that there is a very huge gap in your fancy education, Sir Anderson,” Kurt teases.

“Shut up, you. I know my way around the kitchen,” Blaine cries out and throws a pillow at Kurt.

“You’re really asking for it, honey,” Kurt says before picking up a pillow and swinging it into Blaine’s face.

A stunned-looking Blaine picks up a pillow. “You've wounded my pride, Kurt Hummel, and you won't get away with it. Charge!”

They chase each other around the room, thumping each other with pillows, until feathers fill the air. Kurt pulls Blaine down on the bed and tickles him in all the special places he’s discovered so many years ago.
“Stop! I give up!” Blaine screeches.

“Now we know who the best man really is,” Kurt laughs and pecks him playfully on the lips. “I’ll make the bed if you sweep up the feathers. I presume you know how to use a broom?”

“Ha, ha. Very funny. Of course I do.”

They make quick work of tidying the room, and they take the breakfast tray down to the kitchen, deciding to leave the washing up until they get back.

They walk across the street into Central Park and amble along the pathways. Kurt tips his hat so that the sun doesn’t shine directly in his eyes. “I love Central Park, and being surrounded by trees and grass. It’s not as beautiful as Devonshire, but it’s as close as it gets in the city.”

“I love Central Park, too. I really miss Westerville and riding Firebird. My uncle says that when the weather warms up, he’ll take me to the outskirts of the city, where I can go horse riding. Will you accompany me?”

Kurt loves that Blaine is including him in his future plans. “I’d like that so very much. I haven’t been horse riding since I left Westerville.”

They continue their walk, and Belvedere Castle appears in the distance. Kurt notices Blaine is practically skipping. “What’s got you so excited?”

“I have some important news to tell you, but let’s sit down near the lake first.”

They find an empty park bench on the shores of Belvedere Lake that affords a view of the castle.

Blaine confides, “This is my favorite spot in Central Park. I can get away from the hustle and bustle and think or whatever I’d like.”

“And it has a lake.”

“Yes, I must admit that sitting here does make me think of our special place by the lake at Westerville. I’ll treasure those memories for as long as I live.”

“Me, too, Blaine. It’s where we had our first kiss.”

“This could be our special place in New York City.”

“I’d really like that. The castle reminds me of those I used to imagine when my auntie would tell me fairytales. At night, I would dream about a handsome prince waiting for me.”

“How about a knight in shining armor?” Blaine teases.

Kurt scrunches his nose. “ Hmmmm… I think I could settle for a knight, as long as he’s handsome and dapper… and has a large package.”

They burst into giggles at their silliness. It’s the type of light relief that they both need after their serious discussions over the past 24 hours. When their laughter has calmed down, Kurt asks, “What’s this important news you have?”

Blaine ducks his head and twists his fingers on his lap. “You know I would do anything for you… and I figured out how to kill two birds with one stone… and I don’t want you to get angry or anything…”
Kurt wants to hold Blaine’s hand and reassure him that no matter what he says, he’s not going anywhere. But there are too many people in Central Park for two men to hold hands without being observed. “Deep breaths, Blaine. I promise I won’t get angry, but you have me a little nervous. Just tell me slowly.”

When Blaine has calmed down, he finally looks up. “I met with Tom and John Healy this morning. Since I’ve started working at the tavern, it gets busier each day, and there’s not enough staff.”

Kurt nods in agreement. “You can say that again. When I ate there two nights ago, my only criticism was that the service was so slow.”

“They’ve hired two assistants for me in the kitchen who will start this weekend, but they’re still interviewing people for a waiter’s position. I told them that they could stop looking because I know the perfect person. He comes with a personal recommendation from the Earl of Westerville, who has the very highest standards.”

“Me? I’ve never worked as a waiter in a restaurant before.”

“Think about it, Kurt. You’ve worked as a footman, serving numerous complicated courses, and managed beautifully during dinner parties and the Westerville ball. You know the proper etiquette - which side to serve from, politeness, when to offer help and when to leave people alone. You know more than all the waiters in the tavern combined.”

Kurt wraps his arms around himself. “You didn’t need to get me a job. I could have found something for myself.”

“Last night, you told me that you wanted to get a job as soon as possible. Working at Healy’s Tavern provides you with a steady wage and gives you time to figure out what you want to do in the longer term. The tavern really does need more staff, and it would really help me out to have the food fresh and hot from the kitchen be served right away. We would be working together, and I’ll be guaranteed to see you.”

“I'll always want to see you, Blaine. You don't need to give me a job to guarantee that.”

Kurt mulls it over. His father has taught him well, and he does have experience serving meals. He could probably do the job with his eyes closed. The tavern does need more waiters, so it’s not like Blaine is offering him a job without an urgent need. It does give him some breathing space to decide what he wants to do in the long term. It seems like a perfect solution.

Kurt looks up and sees Blaine sitting with his elbows on his knees and his hands between his open legs, looking down and twisting the promise ring on his finger.

“When do I start?”

Blaine looks up and his smile lights up his face. “Is tomorrow too soon? I’m working the lunchtime shift.”

“I’ll have to find a place to live. Maybe the waiters will have some suggestions.”

Blaine’s smile turns into a smug look. “I have news on that front too. Two doors down from the tavern is a reputable boarding house. A few of the waiters take rooms there. I visited the owner, Mrs Murphy, after the meeting. She’s a kind lady from County Cork. When I gave her my calling card, she was happy to let me inspect an available room. It’s simple but spacious and clean. I explained to her that my dear friend, Kurt Hummel, from back home needs a place to stay. When I asked her if she had heard of your flying prowess during the war, she practically swooned. She was...
only too willing to provide a discounted rate to a flying ace, and the room is ready for you to move into anytime you want. I’ve paid for the first month.”

Kurt is amazed at how quickly Blaine has been able to sort things out. “I don’t know what to say. You’re not only a knight but also a fairy godmother.”

“I hope you don’t mind, but I asked Mrs Murphy if another bed could be added to the bedroom. I explained to her that I’m the head chef at Healy’s Tavern, and sometimes I work so late that it can be difficult to find a taxicab. It would be convenient if I could stay with you on the odd night. Mrs Murphy was happy to oblige. I thought it might be fun for us to have sleepovers at each other’s places, that is, if you want to.”

“Of course I want to, silly.”

“Are you hungry? We could always go to the Boathouse for a late lunch,” Blaine suggests.

“I’d rather go back to the townhouse. Maybe practice having fun at a sleepover?”

Blaine ducks his head and blushes. “I like the way you think.”

They retrace their steps in Central Park, discussing Healy’s staff, customers, and menu. When they leave the park’s exit, Blaine stops them in front of a bakery.

“Kurt, wait here. I’ll only be a moment.”

As Blaine dashes into the bakery, Kurt watches passers-by, thinking that some people have more money than fashion sense.

Blaine leaves the bakery with a baguette under his arm and carrying a small box. “I noticed that there’s some pate and cheese in the ice-box. I thought we could have a picnic later, like we did at Anderson House before I left for the war.”

“Good idea. What’s in the box?”

“Uh-uh, not telling. It’s a special treat for our afternoon tea.”

When they enter the townhouse, they immediately go to the kitchen. Kurt puts the water kettle on and measures out tea leaves for the pot, while Blaine sets the kitchen table. Once the water has boiled and the tea is ready, they sit down for their afternoon snack. Kurt watches as Blaine slowly takes the ribbon off the box, opens the lid, and he carefully takes out two donuts, handling them as if they were royal jewels.

“Blaine, I’ve eaten donuts before.”

“I bet you’ve never eaten a donut covered with chocolate before. You’re in for a real treat.”

Kurt takes a small bite of the donut and lets out a moan. “The chocolate icing takes a simple donut to a new level.”

“You’ll never believe this, but a Russian immigrant living right here in New York has invented a machine that makes donuts. Can you imagine, a machine that automatically creates these beauties.”

“There’s a lot of things that Americans do well.”

As Kurt sips his tea, he recalls the last dessert he’s eaten. “Blaine, I’m curious about one thing. When I ate at Healy’s, I had a dessert called Flying Dreams. Did you create it?”
Blaine chuckles. “Yes, it’s a Blaine Anderson original and the most popular dessert on the menu.”

“How did you come up with Flying Dreams?”

“With a name like Flying Dreams, you must know that I created the dessert thinking of you. The base is made with breadcrumbs and not flour. It reminds me of how we used to feed breadcrumbs to the ducks by the lake at Westerville. Then, there’s a layer of blackberry jam. Remember when we first met and picked blackberries in the kitchen gardens? The meringue topping is supposed to look like clouds - the type you would have seen when flying aeroplanes.”

“And the custard?”

“The custard is creamy and delicious, like your skin. Besides, every dessert tastes so much better with hot custard.”

Kurt giggles. “That is so true. So, I get the Flying part, but what about the Dreams?”

“My dreams were always filled with you and finding you again. I wanted to dedicate this dessert to you. I think of you every time I make it.”

Kurt’s eyes well up with tears. “That is the most touching thing anyone has ever done for me.”

Kurt hears the scraping of chair legs as Blaine moves closer to him. Blaine cups his face with both hands, and Kurt can see the love swirling in his honeycomb-colored eyes.

“Kurt, you are always in my thoughts. You inspire me, whether it’s creating a new dessert or being brave in the face of the enemy. You’re my everything. And I just feel so lucky that I found you again, because all I want to do - all I’ve ever wanted to do - is spend my life loving you.”

Kurt breathes deeply, trying to keep the tears at bay. When he’d realized that he was attracted to men, he never imagined finding someone as special as Blaine - an amazing friend and his one true love.

Kurt feels so emotional that he’s not able to find the words to tell Blaine how he’s feeling, so he simply replies, “I love you so very much.”

Blaine brushes his lips softly and gently with his own. Kurt grabs the back of Blaine’s neck to deepen the kiss, strong and demanding. And then, they are lost in their own little world of love and happiness.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to my fantastic betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. I also thank Dblmalfonction, who performed a detailed final review, although all mistakes are mine.

I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr.

Next up: One more chapter before the epilogue.
March 1920
Blaine

When Blaine feels Kurt’s lips smiling against his own, he pulls away and takes a good look at Kurt. His face is flushed, and Blaine can barely see the blue in his darkened eyes. Kurt is literally glowing. Blaine hears Kurt take a deep breath, and in that moment, he knows Kurt has been equally affected by the kiss. Blaine suddenly wonders how the kitchen got so hot. His eyes dart to Kurt’s kiss-swollen lips, pondering if it’s too soon to kiss him again. He looks down and shakes his head, to dampen the urge to have his way with Kurt on the kitchen table. He wants more, but he also wants them to take their time.

“Shall we go upstairs?” Blaine asks.

Kurt stands up and collects the plates and teacups from the table. Blaine can’t tear his eyes away from Kurt’s swaying hips as he takes the used items to the kitchen sink, and his trousers are getting tighter by the second. Kurt moves about the kitchen with the kind of smile that radiates true happiness, and Blaine feels a surge of pride, knowing that he is the one who makes Kurt smile like this.

Kurt holds out his hand. “We can save the washing up for later.”

When they enter the bedroom, Blaine laughs when Kurt locks the door, and double-checks it.

Kurt places a hand on his hip. “They said they would be home after dinner, but who knows if their plans have changed. I don’t trust your cousin one single bit.”

“I don’t trust Cousin Rachel either. Perhaps I’ll ask Uncle Hiram if a deadbolt can be installed.”

Kurt takes off Blaine’s jacket and hangs it up in the wardrobe, followed by his own. Blaine goes to the bathroom to wash his face, and buys himself a little time. Last night’s sex was all about giving and seeking pleasure as quickly as possible. After four years, he had felt desperate for the release. However, this afternoon, he wants it to be about love-making - rediscovering Kurt, both
emotionally and physically. Blaine really hopes that he’s up to the task of making it special for Kurt.

When Blaine returns to the bedroom, Kurt is sitting fully clothed on the bed, with his head lowered. It’s not their first time together, but they are both so nervous. There is tension in the air, and this is not how Blaine wants it to be. They need to relax and just be themselves, do what comes naturally.

Blaine gets an idea, a marvelous idea. “Come dance with me.”

Kurt looks up and tips his head, giving him a quizzical look. “But there’s no music.”

“Could you sing for me? I didn’t get the opportunity to hear you sing last night, and you have such a beautiful voice.”

They walk toward each other, slowly. Their hands clasp together, and their arms move swiftly, like one unit, to the correct position for Kurt to take the lead. When Kurt starts humming the song’s introduction, they begin to dance.

*Night time am a-fallin’, everything is still
And the moon am a shinin’ from above
Cupid am a callin’ every Jack and Jill
It’s just about the time for making love
Someone is a-waiting all along for me
No more hesitating, I must go and see
How dee do, Dear, it’s with you dear
That I love to be

Kurt’s body feels slightly different against his since the last time they danced, after the Westville ball. His muscles are more defined, and his body is a more mature and fully-developed version of the young second footman Blaine fell in love with. Blaine nuzzles into Kurt’s neck and follows his lead. Their bodies move effortlessly, as if they were melded together as one. Kurt’s voice is so strong and pure, it brings tears to his eyes. Blaine knows this song well, of course he does. It was popular before the war, and his mother used to sing it while arranging the flowers in the large crystal vases scattered throughout the abbey. When it’s time for the chorus, Blaine joins Kurt’s singing.

*Put your arms around me, Honey, hold me tight
Huddle up and cuddle up with all your might
Oh! Oh! Won’t you roll those eyes?
Eyes that I just idolize
When they look at me, my heart begins to float
Then it starts a rockin’ like a motor boat
Oh! Oh! I never knew anyone like you

Kurt’s head rests on Blaine’s shoulder, and their dancing slows down to gentle swaying. Blaine’s heart is so full of his love for Kurt that any worries or nervousness that he felt earlier has melted away. Right here, right now, he’s in his love’s arms, and nothing else matters.

When Kurt lifts his head, Blaine places two fingers under his chin and looks into his clear blue eyes. “Many years ago, I made certain promises to you. They mean more to me today than ever. I promise to always love you…."

Kurt interrupts, “I promise to defend you even if you’re wrong.”
“You remember my promises?”

“Every single word. Blaine, it was the most romantic moment in my entire life. Of course I remember them.”

Blaine’s heart flutters, and he kisses Kurt softly. “I promise to surprise you.”

Kurt takes the lead and brushes his lips against Blaine’s, murmuring against them. “To always make the time to talk with you when you need me.”

Blaine can’t bear to take his lips off Kurt’s, so he doesn’t. “To kiss you when I can, but cherish you always.”

Kurt punctuates each whispered word with a tender kiss to Blaine's mouth, “Mostly, to make sure you remember how perfectly imperfect you are.”

Their foreheads touch. The simple gesture makes Blaine swoon. It’s so intimate and private, and it feels like their hearts are speaking to each other.

The moment is broken when Kurt pulls his head away. “I have a new promise. If we’re going to be together forever, there will be some bumpy roads ahead. I promise to talk about the tough issues so that we can solve problems together.”

Blaine smiles, knowing that if they openly talk about things, their relationship will only grow stronger. There’s one last important promise that he wants to make to Kurt.

“I also have a new promise to you. It wasn’t one I could have made when I gave you the promise ring. At the time, I loved you so dearly, and I still do, but I was obligated to marry a suitable lady. Now that Westerville is financially secure and there are heirs to the estate, I have no intention of ever marrying. You are all that I’ll ever need in a partner. I promise that my heart and body will only ever belong to you.”

Kurt’s eyes well with tears. “My heart and body have only belonged to you since the first day I met you.”

Blaine tilts his head as their lips meet to seal their promises to each other. Blaine’s hand automatically cups Kurt’s jaw as the simple kiss grows more urgent, more demanding… more everything. Blaine feels intoxicated as Kurt overtake his senses. When Kurt’s hand slips down to cradle his hip and pull him closer, Blaine is enveloped by the strength and warmth of Kurt’s heart beating rapidly against his chest. Blaine wants him so badly that he can hardly stand it any longer.

They pull apart slightly and take shaky, shallow breaths. “You take my breath away,” Kurt whispers.

Blaine’s smile is so large that it hurts, but he can’t help himself. He’s the happiest he’s ever felt.

Kurt’s finger rubs small circles on Blaine’s hip. “I’m going to use the bathroom for a few minutes. Why don’t you get comfortable in bed? And by comfortable, I mean losing the clothes.”

When Kurt shuts the bathroom door, Blaine grasps his hands together in front of his body and squeals. This is everything he wants...everything he needs… everything with the man he loves. He quickly shucks off his clothes and slips under the covers. He’s a bundle of excitement and nerves. The night they lost their virginities to each other, Blaine had suggested that they switch positions the next time. But now that it’s about to become a reality, he has second thoughts. Their first and only time had felt bloody fantastic. In the cold damp trenches and the POW camp, he would
daydream about the way in which Kurt took care of him, filling him, making him feel so good. He needs to feel that way again, but how does he tell Kurt?

Kurt returns to the bedroom only wearing only his boxer briefs. He looks so incredibly sexy that Blaine is worried he’ll cum on the spot. He feels the mattress sink with more weight as Kurt crawls onto the bed beside him. He can feel Kurt wiggle about as he takes off the boxer briefs, and the thought of Kurt naked next to him is intoxicating.

“Blaine, have you given any thought to what you want?”

“I-I… I love you so much, and umm…I want to show you with my body.”

Kurt rolls his eyes playfully. “That’s pretty obvious with the size of your stiffie. Blaine, is it okay if we do things like the last time? I have this overwhelming need to take care of you and make it special. I’m not sure if that would happen if we reversed the roles. It makes me nervous, and I’d feel more comfortable knowing what will happen.”

Blaine lets out sigh of relief. “I want that, too. You don’t know how many times I’ve thought about that special night at Dower House. We have a whole lifetime to experiment with different positions and roles. No matter what, it will be special because it’s me and you.”

Kurt lays his upper body over Blaine and ravishes his mouth in a toe-curling kiss. Blaine opens his mouth, and it’s all teeth and tongue, seeking… demanding… and it makes Blaine’s cock dribble precum.

When Kurt pulls back, Blaine’s lips chase him. “Shhh… we will get to that soon enough.”

Kurt strokes Blaine’s hair. “I love how dapper you look when you wear the pomade, but in private, I prefer the curls. They were made just for me - for my fingers to play with.”

“Do you want me to wash the pomade out?”

Kurt shakes his head and peppers kisses along his jaw. “I love how your skin can feel smooth, especially after I shave you, yet it’s also rough with whiskers.”

Blaine’s eyes flutter closed as he enjoys the soft kisses. Kurt plants a kiss on each eyelid. “I love your expressive eyes. They can look like the golden sunlight on a summer’s day rimmed with green moss. Other times, they look like coffee with swirls of rich honey. I could spend every waking moment looking into your eyes.”

Kurt establishes a rhythm of kissing, sucking, licking, and blowing warm air along Blaine’s neck and upper chest. Blaine is so turned on that it takes all of his strength to stay silent and relaxed, but he’s loving every moment. “I love how your skin tastes. It smells faintly like the sandalwood soap that you use. It’s smooth, but sprinkled with hair as a reminder that you are my man.”

Kurt’s tongue swirls around a nipple and gently sucks. Blaine can’t help but whimper, and more precum dribbles from his cock. “I love how your nipples stiffen when I do this. Your body is so responsive to my attention.”

Blaine can feel Kurt smile into his chest before he continues exploring. “I love your tiny waist and the V-line that directs my attention further down your body.”

Kurt flattens his tongue and slowly drags it over the thick vein on his cock. Blaine’s hips buck involuntarily, and his fists grabs the bed sheets. Kurt swirls his tongue over the tip, collecting the drops of pre-cum. “I could write a sonnet about your cock.”
Blaine moans at the sensation, every nerve on edge. “K-Kurt, if you keep doing that, it’s going to be over really quickly.”

“Why don’t you lie on your stomach?”

Blaine quickly flips over and tries not to rut his cock into the mattress. Kurt shifts a pillow underneath Blaine so that his ass is elevated. Blaine feels Kurt’s fingers wrap around his bicep, and he gently sinks his teeth into the skin. “I love how muscular your upper arms are. You might be the son of an Earl, but you’re not afraid of hard physical work.”

Kurt trails kisses from his upper arm to his shoulder. Blaine’s body stiffens when Kurt starts kissing his scar from a wound suffered in the POW camp. Blaine huffs, “I don’t think that you can say anything nice about that big ugly scar.”

Kurt gently caresses the scar. “I think the story of how you got this scar is for another day, but I really want to know. I want to understand what you went through when we were apart. The scar is a reminder of the Great War. While the wartime memories might fade over time, they don’t completely go away. They become a part of who we are, and it makes for a very beautiful person.”

Kurt rubs Blaine’s back, and it feels comforting and soothing. Blaine has never thought of his scar in those terms before. He’s proud that he survived the war, and the scar is simply a reminder of that.

Kurt’s lips and fingers dance down Blaine’s back. He shuts his eyes once again and feels his body relax under Kurt’s touch. He’s been on his own for so long that he’s forgotten how nice it is to let Kurt take care of him. He’s never felt so loved and cherished in his entire life. When Kurt’s fingers reach the dip of his lower back, Blaine can’t help but wiggle his buttocks to get them the attention they also deserve.

Kurt squeezes his ass cheeks. “You’ve got the perfect ass, so round and firm. I can think of a lot of things I could do with this ass.”

“I’m really hoping you get on with those things. I need you, Kurt.”

Blaine feels Kurt’s weight as he reaches across his body to the night table. Blaine hears Kurt opening the tube of lubricating jelly. He turns his head to watch, and when he sees Kurt slick up his fingers, his cock twitches.

Kurt opens Blaine with his finger, gently pushing in and pulling out. He twists slowly, while his other hand massages Blaine’s ass cheeks. Blaine tries to relax his body to make it easier for Kurt. “I’m ready for more.”

Kurt removes his finger and remarks, “This lubricating jelly is so much better than the oil. It’s not half as messy.”

Kurt continues adding fingers one at a time, and slowly opens Blaine, pushing, twisting and rubbing. When Kurt pushes extra deep, Blaine feels a jolt of pleasure run through his body, “Right there… Gggh.. so good… I need you now!”

Blaine feels empty when Kurt pulls out his fingers. He turns his head again to see Kurt wipe his fingers on the hand towel, then squeeze some more lubricating jelly onto his hand.

“Flip over, Blaine. I want to see your face when I’m filling you.”

Blaine happily obliges and keeps the pillow under his ass. He can’t take his eyes away from Kurt.
slathering the jelly along his hard long cock. If they hadn’t done it before, Blaine would never believe that it would fit inside him.

Kurt slides his body over Blaine’s, kissing Blaine’s chest and neck while he positions his cock near Blaine’s entrance. Kurt pushes his cock in slowly, and once again, Blaine feels full and complete. When there is no more movement, Blaine looks up and gasps when he sees a swirl of emotions in Kurt’s eyes - lust and desire, but most prominently, love.

Kurt pulls out and pushes in again, building up speed with every thrust. Blaine wraps his legs around Kurt, and arches up against Kurt’s body, thrusting his hips in time with the movements. His fingers cling to Kurt’s back, needing an anchor as the feeling intensifies. Blaine can’t coordinate his lips anymore, and they pant against each other’s mouths instead.

Kurt lets out a moan. “You feel so hot, Blaine. Are you okay?”

Blaine’s eyes shine with tears, and he tries to blink them back. “I feel amazing… You’re amazing… I love you.”

Kurt’s cock hits that spot, and an intense pleasure spikes through him. “Right there! More!”

Blaine groans loudly as the passion builds. His eyes roll back because he’s so close, and he just needs a little push to go over the edge. Kurt wraps his fist around Blaine’s cock and quickly pumps. It’s slick and hot and feels so, so good. Blaine’s orgasm tears through his body, and his cock shoots out ropes of thick white cum over Kurt’s hand and across his chest. He feels Kurt’s body tense and hears his name upon his lover’s lips. Kurt slows the pace as he works them both through their orgasms.

Kurt pulls out and collapses on Blaine’s messy chest. Blaine immediately starts pecking soft kisses on every bit of skin his lips can reach. When his breathing returns to normal, Blaine shifts Kurt’s body over.

Kurt whimpers, “No... I want to stay close to you.”

Blaine slowly sits up. “You will, my love, but let me take care of you.”

Blaine crawls out of bed, his head still feeling sluggish. He slowly heads to the bathroom, and after a few minutes, he returns with a damp, hot washcloth. He carefully cleans Kurt, being gentle around his sensitive cock. He slips back into bed and lies on his side. He brushes the hair out of Kurt’s eyes and tangles their fingers together.

And in that moment, his world is Kurt and time is forgotten.

Blaine gazes at Kurt, and his heart races. “You've lived your life, and I've lived mine. Now it's time we lived them together.”

“I love you so very much, Blaine.”

“I love you, too, my love.”

Kurt kisses Blaine on the forehead. “I love that you’re now free to do what you want, without having to find a wife.”

“There are many things I’d like to do but can’t. I want to shout my love for you from the top of the Woolworths Building. I want to hold hands with you while we walk through Central Park. I want to dance with you at the fancy balls. I would marry you if I could.”
Kurt blinks several times, trying to hold back the tears. “Oh, darling, I would marry you, too.” Kurt captures his lips in a gentle kiss, and Blaine feels on top of the world.

Kurt pulls away slowly. “I think we’ll need some guidance from your uncle and LeRoy about how to make this work.”

“I agree. I want us to be like Uncle Hiram and LeRoy, living together and creating a lifetime of memories.”

“Blaine, I want that, too, but I also want to take this slowly. A lot has happened to both of us since we were together four and half years ago. I think we need to step back - together - and really understand each other’s experiences, spend time discovering who we are as individuals and how we fit together.”

Blaine lets out a deep sigh. After waiting so long to be with Kurt again, he wants everything yesterday, yet he understands how Kurt feels. Kurt isn’t the same person as he was when he served as an 18-year-old second footman, and neither is he. “I know you’re right, and maybe we don’t need that pressure right now.”

Blaine closes his eyes when Kurt cards his fingers through his curls. The simple act feels comforting and loving, and it keeps him grounded. When Kurt stops, Blaine opens his eyes and sees Kurt worrying his lower lip.

“What is it?” Blaine asks.

“Blaine, it would be so easy to rush things, but I think we’re being very smart by protecting something that’s very precious to us. You know that, right?”

“Of course I know that. It’s a new chapter of our story, and we don’t need to rush to the happy ending. I’ll just miss seeing you all the time.”

“Well, we’ll be working at the same tavern,” Kurt reminds him.

“I’m going to make sure that we work the same shifts so we can see each other as much as we can.”

“That would be wonderful. I love watching you in the kitchen. It’s as if you’re lost in your own little world.”

Blaine rubs the tip of his nose against Kurt’s. “The only world I want to get lost in is your world is ours.”

They figure out what they want to do on their time off. They get lost in the warmth and scent of each other. They tell each other the places they wish to visit, and they discuss future holidays, including Westerville Abbey to visit their families. They kiss slowly and explore every crevice of each other’s mouth. They dream of what their future might look like in a year’s time... five years’ time... when they’re old and gray. Hands reverently roam across bodies. They confide in each other, sharing their biggest fears, their hopes, dreams, and aspirations. They kiss until they’re left dizzy and breathless.

Blaine feels an inner peace that he’s never felt before. He gazes at Kurt while he takes his hand and kisses Kurt’s promise ring. “We’re going to make it.”

Kurt squeezes Blaine’s hand and kisses his promise ring in return. “We’ve faced so many challenging times together. We’ve managed to overcome our class differences. The Great War has
forced us to spend so many years apart. And while the world forbids our love, it still beats true in our hearts. Yes, we’re going to make it, now and always.”

Chapter End Notes

The song that Kurt and Blaine danced to is "Put Your Arms Around Me Honey" from the Broadway Show "Madame Sherry" (1910). There are so many covers of this song (one as recently as 2001). My favorite version is performed by Judy Garland in 1949.

Thank you to Datshitrandom for creating the chapter photo. She has produced so much wonderful fic artwork that you can find here. It’s an incredible feeling to see your ideas come to life like that.

Although there’s still the epilogue to go, I want to take a moment to thank my betas, Fearlessly and Lilyvandersteen. They say it takes a village to raise a child, but honestly, this is also true of a long and complicated Klaine fic. They have both spent countless hours providing me feedback about the plot and the chapters, as well as suggesting edits. I’ve learnt so much about writing from them, and you must go read their stories at once! Dblmalfuction came on board once I had posted about a dozen chapters. The punctuation and grammar became much better as a result. I made final edits before I posted chapters, and so all mistakes are mine.

I also want to thank every single reader who has left a comment, messaged me, reblogged a chapter announcement, or simply read every chapter as I was posting. You spurred me on, not only to post chapters like clockwork, but to continue writing.

Next up: The epilogue, set eight months later.
November 11, 1920
Nine months later

You hear bugles play *To The Color* at exactly 11 a.m., marking the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month, which signals the exact moment the Great War ended, two years ago. You quickly find a place to stand amongst the crowd near Riverside Park in Manhattan, waiting for the parade to pass by. The trees have shed all their leaves last month, and the wind whips down the street. About an hour later, two flag bearers appear, leading the parade. Both the American flag and the Allied Forces Victory flag flap in the breeze.

Towards the end of the parade, you notice two handsome soldiers, who are wearing different uniforms than the others, marching alone. As they come nearer, you see that one soldier is holding a sign reading “9th Queen's Royal Lancers”, and the other one’s sign reads “Royal Flying Corps”. You count three - no, four - medals on their jackets, and the shorter fellow also has a large fancy blue and red medallion. You decide that they must be brave British soldiers who have also fought in the Great War. You recognize the face of the RFC soldier, but you can’t recollect from where that might be.

While the two British soldiers are marching, they are also talking to each other and laughing. It’s obvious that these men are friends… the best of friends.

How right you are.

You wonder how their paths crossed, given that they served in different branches of the Royal Army. Did they know each other before the Great War? Or did they meet at the front line? You think that they must have experienced something special together to be so close.

You follow the crowd to the main entrance of Riverside Park and jostle yourself into a good
position in front of the Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Memorial Monument, the focal point for today’s Armistice Day anniversary celebrations. The crowd settles down when General Pershing, who served as the commander of the American Forces on the Western Front during the Great War, stands on the podium.

“Two years ago today, our enemies laid down their arms...”

Your mind drifts as the general continues his speech. You think it might be a great speech, but it’s going on for a little too long. You shuffle your feet, trying to stay warm. You notice that the two British soldiers, who were marching in the parade earlier, are now sitting on the stage as well. When they stand up, you return your attention to the general’s speech.

“We are joined today by two honored soldiers from Great Britain. Captain Sir Blaine Anderson served in the Royal Army for all four years of the war. He received the Distinguished Conduct Medal and is a Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire. Also with us is Captain Kurt Hummel, VC from the Royal Flying Corps. You’ll know him as Flying Porcelain, and I’m sure that you’ve all heard tales of his heroics in the air.”

The crowd cheers with the news that the famous flying ace is in the park. You facepalm, realizing where you’ve seen photos of the pilot before... of course you’ve heard of Flying Porcelain. Everyone likes a hero, especially a handsome British one.

When the bugles start to play *The Last Post*, the British captains pick up two wreaths made of red poppies and set them down at the base of the monument. You take out your hankie to dab your eyes at this moving tribute to their homeland and soldiers.

At the end of the service, you walk to the park’s main exit. You’re cold and your stomach is rumbling, and you decide to stop at a nearby soda shop. The queue is long, but you join it and wait for your turn.

“I think I’m going to have a hot dog and an ice cream sundae.”

“Kurt, I can’t believe that you’re going to eat a hot dog!”

“It’s not merely a hot dog, Blaine. It’s a true New York experience.”

“Cheesecake and bagels are true New York experiences. Not a steamed sausage made from dubious parts of a cow. And an ice cream sundae on a cold November day?”

“Blaine, every day is the perfect day for an ice cream sundae!”

You turn around to check out who the voices belong to, and realize it’s the two British soldiers bantering with each other.

The hostess shows you to a stool at the counter. While you take a look at the menu, the waitress is clearing the used plates and wiping down the countertop near you.

“Do you mind if we sit here?”

You look up to see Captain Sir Anderson gesturing to the empty space next to you at the counter, and you smile, shaking your head.

The shorter captain immediately sits and spins around in his stool a few times.

“Honestly, Blaine, I can’t take you anywhere.”
“Why would they make stools that turn if people don’t spin them?”

As they quietly giggle, you order a chocolate malt and a club sandwich. While you wait for your food, you cannot help but overhear their conversation.

“Let me guess, you’re going to have a cheeseburger and a strawberry milkshake.”

“Am I that predictable?”

“Blaine, I know you very well, and you can never pass up anything with berries.”

The waitress comes over and takes their order. You sit straighter when you hear the captain say, “I’ll have a cheeseburger and whatever that is,” pointing to your chocolate malt.

“You are certainly full of surprises today, Captain Anderson.”

“I think you’ll find I can be spontaneous in many other ways as well, especially when large packages are delivered.”

You notice the pilot’s cheeks redden, and he looks like he’s about to self-combust, while the other officer is gently chuckling.

“Changing the subject, what did you think of today’s service, Blaine?”

“I’m glad that we made the effort to join today’s parade and service. I know that everyone at Westerville will be doing something similar today. It makes me feel more connected to my family, even if I’m in America.”

“And I’m glad that we still fit into our uniforms! Your cooking is too good,” the pilot teases.

“Kurt, what were you thinking about when you laid the wreath on the memorial?”

“I was thinking of my fellow pilots who died during the war… The officers I met in the abbey’s hospital ward, and those who suffered brutal physical injuries. I was also thinking of Dave and the inner demons he continues to face. Those red poppies remind me of a very dark period in my life… when I thought you had been killed in action. The war seems so senseless now.”

Captain Anderson squeezes his companion’s shoulder. “At least we still have each other.”

“What were you thinking about, Blaine?”

“I thought about the upcoming war crimes trials in Leipzig. I hope the officers at my POW camps are convicted at the trials.”

Their conversation is interrupted when the waitress brings them their food and drinks.

“Oh my goodness, Kurt. You’ve got to take a sip of this! I’ve never tasted anything quite like this before.”

From the corner of your eye, you notice the pilot take a sip of the chocolate malt. “Gosh, this is delicious.”

The British soldiers remain silent as they finish off their meal. You reflect on what they must have gone through during the Great War and are glad that the two friends - no, best friends - made it through.
“On a happier note, we have the rest of the day off. What do you want to do?”

“Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde is now showing at the cinema.”

“You know I don’t like horror films, Blaine.”

“I’ll buy the tickets and popcorn…. Then I’ll make you a steak and kidney pie for dinner… I’ll buy a slice of cheesecake for dessert… I’ll…”

“Blaine, stop! You had me at popcorn,” the pilot chuckles.

“Excuse me, ma’am. Could we have the bill?”

“Say, aren’t you the Flying Porcelain?” the waitress asks.

The captain’s face lights up. “Yes, my friend is the Flying Porcelain! One of the bravest British flying aces during the Great War.”

“Then this meal is on the house. Would you mind signing the bill? My Louie will never believe that I met a real flying ace.”

“Certainly. What is your name?”

“Deloris.”

The pilot signs the bill, and whispers, “Goodness knows what she would do if she knew that you are a knight.”

“Shh… don’t tell her.”

When they jump off the stools, they turn to you and tip their caps. You want to thank them for their efforts during the Great War. You want to wish them happiness in their new lives in America. You want to tell them to cherish their close friendship for the rest of their lives.

But the words won’t come out, so you smile instead.

As they place a few coins on the counter for the tip, you notice that both officers are wearing identical rings on their left ring fingers, and you wonder if it’s a British tradition amongst soldiers or friends. What you’ll never know is that the rings are engraved with a never-ending scroll pattern, and that their lives are intertwined…

Fearlessly and forever.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, the last words have been typed (and canon ones!). When a story ends with Kurt and Blaine getting together, I always want it to continue to see what type of relationship they have. I want to read the fluffy and sexy times, and everything in between. Therefore, THIS STORY WILL HAVE A SEQUEL.

You read that right. Once I finish drafting the sequel, I’ll start posting “Life in the Big Apple”, which chronicles their lives for the next 18 months. It’s already 21 chapters
long and about 77k words. I’m about two thirds through my plot outline, which constantly changes as I write. Make sure you subscribe to my author’s page so that you’ll receive notification when the first chapter is posted in 2019.

Hopefully, I’ve given you many hours of enjoyment reading this story. Please take a minute or two to let me know what you think in a comment. Whether you’ve read the epilogue ten minutes after I posted it or ten plus years later, I’ll read it and I always reply. If you give the story kudos or a bookmark, it will also bring a huge smile to my face.

You can reblog the Master Post on Tumblr here.

I’m HKVoyage on Tumblr, so please don’t be a stranger!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!