Everything Old is New Again

by vcg73

Summary

Kurt returns home with a broken heart and gets a little unexpected help in the form of an old friend. A rare-pair love story.

Notes

Future-Fic. Splits from canon around the time of "Furt". Contains occasional adult material/language. Nothing explicit.

Written before Glee's 3rd season aired, so my perception of Kurt's possible future and Mike's background was based on possibilities and might-have-beens from the first 1.5 seasons. Finn never died, there is no NYADA, Kurt took a different career path, Klaine didn't happen, Artina did, and Burt and Carole had children together.
Kurt grimaced and rolled his neck, massaging the nape as he tried and failed to work out a kink. It had been there all day. He needed to find some time to schedule a nice, relaxing massage and let go of some stress.

He sighed. There were times when he thought that his schedule really was going to kill him. He gave voice and piano lessons by day and had spent the last several years playing director/costumer/choreographer/set designer or whatever else was needed for a series of off-Broadway shows (Okay, fine, off-off-Broadway.) by night. It was challenging, sometimes frustrating, but very satisfying too, and he really did love it. His day job paid very well, which was lucky since his hobby was usually more entertaining than lucrative. It was great fun, though, even when the urge to sweep in and take over for the actors was maddeningly hard to resist.

Tonight had been closing night for the latest show and the entire run had been just plain exhausting. The show had been experiencing a lot more ups and downs than normal, and tonight's performances had been only decent. The audience, what little there had been of one, had seemed to enjoy the production but he would not be sorry to see this one go. Even so, he had felt a little down when the final curtain swept closed. Endings always left Kurt feeling a little empty and sad, and seeing everyone back stage crying and hugging and wishing each other well after the show, he knew that he could not tolerate the emotional closing-night party, so he made his excuses and left.

He always hated going to special events alone but his boyfriend had begged off tonight, citing a deadline for his latest feature. Zachary wrote freelance articles for New York's many special interest news magazines, and Kurt had not argued his need to skip tonight, even though an opening or closing night never felt quite right without the other man by his side.

Still, it had given Kurt an excuse to skip the party and it would be nice to just go home and have a quiet evening alone.

Kurt smiled as he walked along the bustling Manhattan streets toward home. He had needed a little air to clear his mind and had not bothered with a taxi, but the slow pace allowed him a chance to look around and be a part of the frantic nightlife of New York. While he wasn't exactly living the lavish lifestyle his boyish self had once lovingly dreamed about, full of Broadway stardom, adoring fans, luxury penthouses, a string of gorgeous men, and all the designer couture a person could ever desire, his reality was close enough. He lived in New York City, in a clean, decent sized apartment. He had a comfortable amount of money in his bank accounts. His bills were paid on time. His clothing was good quality, though Kurt Hummel was still the best discount mix-and-match designer shopper in all fifty states, and he had Zach.

Kurt absent-mindedly nibbled his lip. The writing deadline had been a valid excuse, but it seemed like he had been hearing similar excuses an awful lot lately. They hardly spent any time together any more, always busy completing one project or planning for their next.

Maybe it was time they took a real vacation together. Technically Kurt was between jobs right now, and Zach's schedule was fairly flexible. Elise and Emily were more than capable of doing inventory for all the costumes and props at the theater tomorrow, and they had already arranged for the sets to be struck and the final paychecks had been signed. There was no real reason he could not do something romantic and impulsive, sweeping Zachary away somewhere for a whirlwind getaway.

Of course, his partner would probably squawk and fuss about his workload, but Kurt was confident that he could be persuaded. It was high time they got their priorities straight. He needed to let his
lover know he had missed him and wanted to spend more time with him. Zach deserved to be reminded of how much he was loved.

Feeling a surge of renewed energy, Kurt bypassed the elevator and jogged up the four flights of stairs to his apartment. His work kept him in excellent shape and he was not even breathing hard when he reached the top. A dozen different destinations were tumbling through his mind by the time he reached his own door. He was smiling broadly as he unlocked it and walked inside, tossing his coat into a handy chair next to the table where he and Zach always dropped their keys.

As he looked around the apartment, Kurt's eyes sparkled. Zachary had left soft music playing and there was a delicious odor filling the air. An experimental sniff suggested spinach lasagna. How sweet. Zach loved to cook, but he did not always have time for anything fancy, and it meant a lot to know that he had gone out of his way to prepare Kurt's favorite meal.

There was also a whiff of cologne in the air and a light coming from the direction of their bedroom. Kurt's heart beat a little faster. Maybe he was not the only one who had felt the need for the rekindling of their romance.

Removing his tie, Kurt ran a hand through his hair and had managed to get his shirt halfway unbuttoned by the time he reached the bedroom door – slightly rumpled was a look that Zach claimed was super sexy on him – but then the expectant smile on his face froze, melting slowly into an expression of horror.

Zachary, his Zachary, was on his knees on their bed, back facing Kurt, his naked body glistening with sweat as he energetically thrust into a happily moaning, equally naked stranger.

"Gotta make this quick, babe," Zach grunted, pushing harder. "Kurt never stays at those parties for long and I need enough time to get you out of here and clean everything up before he gets home."

In spite of this practical and entirely unromantic speech, the other man just redoubled his efforts, his ass slapping revoltingly loud against Zach's pelvis. "Fuck, yeah. Give it to me." Lifting his face out of the comforter, the stranger got up on his hands to give himself better leverage, then casually asked, "Are you ever gonna dump that guy? It's not like you're in love with him."

Kurt's gut twisted when the man he had poured his heart into for the last two years just laughed and said, "Why should I? This is a damn nice place. Things have been slow at the papers these last few months and I could never afford something this classy on my own. Besides, he keeps me warm at night."

They laughed, then the words disappeared into a matched groan of sexual pleasure that made Kurt want to vomit.

Zach's callous words had been spoken far too easily to be anything less than truthful and each one had driven a blade through Kurt's heart. Zach did not love him. He did not even care enough to feel bad about cheating on him! Apparently, all those so-called deadlines over the last few months had been nothing but excuses to fool around with other men while Kurt blindly supplied them with a hook-up location. Zachary was, plainly and simply, using Kurt for whatever he could get out of him.

"You freeloading bastard." Kurt heard his own voice, faint and shocked, before he had even realized that he intended to speak.

The two startled men pulled apart with a disgusting slurping sound that made Kurt's stomach roil even harder. The stranger scrambled to his feet and grabbed a pillow to cover himself, eloquently muttering, "Shit! Shit, shit, shit!"
Zachary just looked stunned. "B-babe, you're home. I-I wasn't . . ."

"Don't call me that," Kurt snapped, knowing he would never enjoy that endearment again after hearing his lover casually use it toward another man. "Especially since you so obviously were."

Picking up a bundle of discarded clothing, much too small to belong to his tall and muscular boyfriend, he flung it at the stranger. "Put your damned clothes on and get the fuck out of my apartment. Your dildo will be joining you shortly."

"Now, hold on a minute, Kurt! You can't-"

"Fuck you," he snapped, cutting off Zach's irritated protest. "You lost all right to tell me what I can and cannot do the moment I walked in to find you balls-deep in another guy! How long has this been going on, Zach? How long have you been cheating on me?"

Those lips, those sensual rosy lips that Kurt had always thought so beautiful, twisted into an ugly sneer. "You really want to know?" Uncertain now, Kurt nodded. He did not want to know, but he had to hear the truth. "Last summer; that guy we met on the shore over the 4th of July. Oh, don't look so shocked. He was flirting with me all day long, and you didn't say a God-damned thing."

"I trusted you!" Kurt bellowed, picking up the nearest object, a book, and flinging it at Zach's head just to get that horrible smile off his face. "I didn't think I had any reason to get angry just because some stranger thought I had a hot boyfriend!"

"No, you just couldn't be bothered to notice what other men did," he snapped back, tossing his thick, curly blonde hair and planting both hands on his naked hips. It should have looked ridiculous, especially since he was still sporting a half-erection, but instead it just rubbed in how little their relationship had meant to him. He was proud of what he had done, not remotely ashamed that he was admitting to seeing other men behind his lover's back. "Come on, Kurt. Think! When was the last time you looked up from your work long enough see what was happening? Or you busy with other things than work? Oh, don't look shocked, you probably think I haven't seen you with all those pretty little chorus-boys you spend all day with. I'll bet you've boned every last one of them so don't blame me for getting my share."

"Don't you dare turn this around on me!" Kurt grated. "Don't make me the scape-goat for you not being able to keep it in your fucking pants! I loved you, Zach. I have never been with another guy since the day we met! Never! If you weren't interested in me any more and you wanted to break up, why couldn't you have done it honestly? It would have hurt, but it wouldn't have been this awful, ugly thing tearing my heart out!"

The other man finally looked a bit guilty, a little less self-righteous. Picking up his bathrobe, he put it on and took a step closer to Kurt. "I didn't want to hurt you, Kurt. I never thought . . ."

"What? That I'd find out? That I'd stop wanting to be your meal-ticket and bed-warmer?"

Zachary finally flinched at those cold, bitterly spoken words, apparently realizing that Kurt had heard what he had said to his bed partner. "I'm sorry."

A horrible, strangled laugh burst from Kurt's chest. "You're sorry! Well, that just makes it all better. You fucking slut. How could you do this to me? To us? If you really felt like I was too devoted to my work and was taking you for granted, you could have said something. You should have said something! I would have done anything for you, Zachary. You didn't have to fucking cheat on me!"

Kurt had no idea how he was managing not to cry. He felt as if a scalding hot waterfall of tears were
"Get your things, leave your key and don't ever talk to me again." His words were hard and distant as he moved to the closet and yanked out a suitcase, ripping Zach's half of the wardrobe off their hangers with no regard for whether or not he tore them and throwing the clothing haphazardly on top of the case. "Goodbye, Zachary. If I find anything else of yours still here in the morning, I will throw it in the dumpster out in the alley. Feel free to dive in with the rest of the rats and fight for it."

Shoving his way past the now-fully-dressed stranger, Kurt walked stiffly out of the bedroom.

It had been his intention to storm out of the apartment, but the scent of dinner baking changed his mind. Diverting to the kitchen, he shut off the oven and grabbed a mitt. Taking the glass lasagna pan out, he dumped it straight into the garbage, not caring that it was red-hot and already melting the plastic liner as he grabbed the fire extinguisher off the wall and gave the container a good dousing. He smiled oddly when the freezing cold liquid hit the hot pan and shattered the glass with a loud pop. It had been Zachary's favorite pan, part of a set Kurt had given him for Christmas, and it felt extremely satisfying to destroy it.

Dumping the oven mitt on top of the mess, Kurt grabbed his coat and keys and walked out with a firm slam of the door.

In spite of what he had said to Zach, Kurt had no intention of entering the apartment again that night. In fact, right at this moment, he was not certain that he could ever face that once-happy living space again. The lease was paid for two more months, but right now he couldn't imagine living in it.

Thundering down the steps, he breezed past the desk clerk and back out into the cold night. Hailing a cab, Kurt climbed in and said, "JFK, please."

The driver nodded and cruised along the familiar route, leaving his fare lost in a tumble of conflicting thoughts and emotions. Oddly enough, the urge to cry had departed. Kurt just felt empty and lost, so numbed by the hurt and confusion of the last few minutes that he could muster no physical reaction. He just stared blankly out the window at the bright, bustling New York crowds; seeing a life that suddenly seemed so desperate and fake that he could not stand it.

All the meaning of the last two years had vanished in the space of fifteen impossibly long minutes. Two illusory years of happiness and love and good times with a man he had been convinced was "the one" since the day they met. The A&E section of one of the local newspapers had been covering a benefit for local theater arts programs. Zach had been covering the event and Kurt had been representing one of the plays being showcased. They had hit it off immediately, dating within a week, moving in to Kurt's apartment together within six months. He had given his heart, freely and foolishly, believing that he had gotten a fair trade in Zach's.

Now he was nothing but a fool with a large empty hole in his chest.

How had he never once suspected that things were so wrong between them? He and Zach had been growing apart lately, but he had fooled himself into thinking they were just busy and things would be fine once they had a little time to themselves. Kurt snorted softly, filled with self-disgust as he remembered his earlier plan for a nice romantic getaway. Sure, and probably provide Zach with an open opportunity to find some cabana-boy to bang the moment Kurt's back was turned.

How could he not have known this was happening?

Kurt suddenly noticed his eyes, reflected in the glass of the taxi-cab window. They looked huge in his narrow, shocked-white face, like one of those paintings of little waifish children. That's what he
was, wasn't it? A child, running away from something that had hurt him, destination unknown. He had made no plans, he carried no possessions outside of his wallet, keys and phone, and he had no idea where he was going.

His cell rang and Kurt looked at the read-out, halfway expecting it to be Zachary, full of apologies and panic, begging him to change his mind and give him another chance. Part of him was even hoping for that. It would be nice to think the past couple of years had been worth one lousy phone call.

Instead, the readout showed the smiling photo of his best friend and production partner, Emily Switek. Swallowing, he clicked the receive button and said, "Hey, Em."

She chattered for a few minutes, telling him what a great party the cast was having and asking if he was sure he wouldn't like to swing by, just for a few minutes.

"Hey," he said shortly, cutting her off. "Listen, I'm sorry to do this to you on such short notice but I'm heading out of town. Is there any way you and Elise can wrap everything up for me tomorrow? I have a couple of voice lessons I need to cancel for Tuesday and Thursday as well."

An exclamation of surprise, followed by assurance that they'd take care of everything, then the concerned and entirely expected question as to whether he was all right.

"No," he said honestly. He and Emily had known each other nearly ten years, ever since he came to town on a vocal performance scholarship to NYU and answered her ad for an off-campus roommate. They had seen each other through good times and bad and he could not bring himself to lie to her. "I'm . . . I'm really not okay. I broke up with Zach. The bastard has been cheating on me, Em. Apparently for months now. Tonight I just got home early enough to catch him in the act."

The last words came out choked and barely audible. Emily reacted with a long volley of creative cursing that would have reduced Zachary to a smoking pile of cinders if she could have aimed it at him, then her voice turned sympathetic and tender as she asked if he needed a place to stay for the night. She would be happy to kick everyone out and give him a quiet space and a shoulder to cry on for as long as he needed them.

Kurt could not help smiling a little at the offer. He knew she meant every word. "I appreciate that. I truly do, but right now, I . . . I just really need to get away for a while." She asked where he was going and as the cab pulled into the passenger unloading area at JFK, the answer suddenly came to him. "I'm heading for Ohio. I'm going home."
Burt to the Rescue

Chapter Summary

Burt gives Kurt some emotional support.

Kurt made his way to the nearest ticket agent. It was just after 11 pm, but JFK was always busy and he had to wait a few minutes for his turn.

"Yes, sir, how can I help you?" asked the man behind the desk, a balding fifty-something fellow with a genial but efficient manner about him that strongly reminded Kurt of his father. He tamped down the unexpected urge to start crying, knowing in that moment that his impulsive answer to Emily's question had been right on the money. He needed to go home.

"I want to go to Lima, Ohio," he said quietly. "But I don't know the quickest route so late. Usually I fly in the mornings and land in Dayton, but I'm kind of in a hurry to get there. Would Columbus or maybe Fort Wayne be better?"

The man flashed him a sympathetic look before lowering his eyes as he began typing busily into his computer, and Kurt suddenly became aware that he had never fixed his appearance after fighting with Zach. His shirt was wrinkled and partially unbuttoned and he had been running an agitated hand through his hair as he waited for his turn in line. Combine that with features that felt as if they had been frozen into an expression of shock, and it was no wonder he was attracting curious looks.

"I'm going home," he said, feeling an uncomfortable urge to explain. Self consciously buttoning and smoothing his shirt, he added, "To see my dad."

The agent just nodded and offered a him a warm smile. "Good for you. I have a son about your age myself and I don't see him nearly often enough." He laughed a little. "Of course, his mother would say that even if he came to visit twice a week!"

Kurt managed a small smile. "My step-mom is like that. She's always urging my brother and me to visit more. It'll be good to see her again. I wasn't able to get back for the holidays this past year, so it's been a long time."

He swallowed hard, the smile dropping along with the façade of polite normalcy as he remembered why it had been so long. He had not gone home for Thanksgiving due to work, and Christmas had been missed because Zachary's parents had invited them to Newark for the holiday. They had gone to Kurt's home the year before, and he had always tried to be fair about those things. There would be no need to worry about that from now on.

Kurt's heart gave a painful lurch at the realization that if his partner's infidelity had begun last summer, then it had already been an ongoing fact during those happy winter holidays. What if all of Zach's private shopping trips, supposedly hunting for the perfect gift, had been nothing but a handy excuse to slip away with someone else?

His gut clenched at the thought, knowing it was all too possible.

"Here we go," the ticket agent said, regaining his attention, "There are no more available flights to
Fort Wayne tonight, so your least expensive option looks to be Dayton, while the fastest by about six hours is Columbus. We have a red-eye leaving for Columbus from Gate 83 in just under an hour. Only about half-full, so you can have your pick of seats."

The cheery announcement did not improve Kurt's mood but he was thankful that he would not have a long delay. Six hours meant that he would arrive around 2am so transportation might be a little tricky. If he remembered correctly, the car rental place didn't open until 5, but once he had a vehicle it would only be another couple of hours until he reached Lima.

"I'll take Columbus then," he said, pulling out his credit card and I.D. "With no baggage to check."

The flight was right on time. Kurt took a window seat in the coach section near the rear of the plane. Hardly anyone chose the back on such an empty flight, so it didn't matter that he was in the cheap seats. He was alone and he could stare out at the passing stars and pretend that he was not recounting all of the special moments he had shared with Zachary, and second-guessing every one.

After six hours with no company except his own sad thoughts, Kurt was exhausted by the time he arrived in Columbus. It was 2:38 am according to the large clock that greeted him in the airport lobby and after a few steps, he just stopped, standing alone in the middle of a light crowd and staring at the Arrivals board, not knowing where to go. He had been awake for nearly 24 hours and he had been through a roller coaster of emotion in that time. He could barely think straight anymore. Driving in this state was out of the question, even if he was lucky enough to find a 24 hour rental car agency.

Maybe there would be a motel nearby where he could crash for a few hours. After all, it was not like anyone knew he was here.

"Kurt!"

He jumped at the sound of his name and looked around slowly. Was he hearing things? That had sounded just like…

"Kurt!"

He turned to look in the other direction and just gaped.

Like a dream, Burt Hummel parted the milling crowd of people and strode up to his son, laying both hands on Kurt's shoulders and giving them a concerned squeeze as he looked the confused young man square in the eyes and demanded, "Are you okay?"

His head shook 'no' and the tears that had been burning behind his eyes for the past several hours suddenly spilled over as the reality of that warm, solid, blessedly familiar touch convinced him that he was not hallucinating. "Dad," he cried, pulling the flannel-clad figure into his arms and holding on with all his might. "Oh, Dad."

Burt maneuvered them to a set of handy chairs, sitting him down and holding him close. There had been a time long ago when it would have embarrassed this man beyond words to be part of such an emotional scene, but the Burt Hummel of today did not bat an eye. He just held his boy tight and let him cry. "I know, son. Shhh, it's okay. I got you."

Kurt gave in to that secure embrace, never wanting to let go as sobs wrenched his chest, his tears soaking his father's coat while those strong, familiar arms held him close.

"It's lucky for that son-of-a-bitch that he's not within strangling distance," Burt muttered, stroking the
rumpled brown hair. "He's not even worth the bullet it would take to shoot him, but I'd damned well love to get my hands around his worthless throat. Maybe I'd just punch him out, piss on him, then light a damned match. How does that sound?"

The crude threats were oddly comforting and he managed a soggy laugh, snuffling and trying to regain some composure. "I don't think I want to visit you through a glass partition for the rest of my life, but I appreciate the thought. Dad, how did you know?"

"Your friend Emily called," he said. Em had visited Lima with him a couple of times when they were in college and still maintained friendly relations with Kurt's family. "She apologized for waking me, then told me that rotten little shit had broken your heart and you were on your way here. I thought you might need a ride home."

Kurt was so grateful that he could not even bring himself to feel annoyed. He had texted Em his flight number out of habit, they always tracked each other's flights, but it had never occurred to him that she would take that information straight to his father. "She shouldn't have," he said weakly. "You needed your sleep."

"I needed to make sure my son was all right," Burt countered firmly. "Your friend didn't give me many details, but if whatever happened was enough to send you on the first flight to Lima, it had to be pretty bad."

Dashing away a few more tears, he could only manage a soft, "Yeah."

Burt did not press him. "Let's get out of here," he said, tugging Kurt to his feet. "The luggage from your flight should be down by now, so--"

"I don't have any," he interrupted. Suddenly feeling foolish and ashamed for leaving New York without so much as a toothbrush, Kurt scratched his jaw and stared at the ugly tiled floor beneath his boots. "I . . . left in kind of a rush tonight. I didn't even know where I was going until I got to the airport."

Tucking a finger beneath his chin to break Kurt's gaze with the floor, Burt smiled at him. "You made the right choice, Kurt. I'm truly sorry that something like this had to be what brought you back, but it's good to have you home."

Unable to resist the need, Kurt hugged him tightly again as he choked out, "I missed you, Dad."

Burt just rubbed his back briskly and said, "Me too. I love you, kid. Now let's get you home."

The drive from Columbus to Lima was nearly two hours, but with almost no traffic to impede them, progress was smooth. The dark road ahead was almost hypnotic and Kurt resisted the urge to fall asleep with every ounce of stubbornness in his body. Sleep would mean leaving his poor dad alone with a long, dark, worried commute ahead of him, and he had already made one of those tonight. Plus, there was a possibility that Kurt would dream and he was not ready to face the live recap of Zachary's betrayal that he was sure awaited him in his nightmares.

So even though he was not ready to do so, he talked.

"Things have been kind of rocky with us lately," he blurted. "We haven't seen each other as much as usual and I've been so caught up in my show these last few weeks that I . . . Maybe he was right. Oh, God, how could I be so stupid that I would fail to notice that he was picking up guys right under my nose?"

"Kurt, this is not your fault," Burt said firmly, reaching over to grip his forearm. "Don't you start
thinking like that. So maybe you were a little naive, or too blinded by how much you loved the guy to see his faults. You wouldn't be the first and that doesn't make you stupid. It just means you're trusting and a hell of a lot better a person than he is."

"You think so?"

"I know so," he said. "You ever lie to him? Big lies, I mean. Or cheat on him?"

Kurt shook his head, not offended because he knew his father was making a point. "Never." He sighed, the sound filled with defeat. "Maybe I'm not stupid, but I'm certainly pathetic. I'm twenty-eight years old, I've had just five relationships in my entire life, and even though I've never cheated on a single one of them, somehow I've still managed to get dumped by four out of five. I mean, I guess technically I dumped Zach, but it feels like he dumped me the first time he ever stuffed his God-damned dick up some random guy's ass."

He flinched, expecting Burt to get uncomfortable or pretend he had not heard that all-too-graphic statement, but to his surprise the work-hardened fingers just squeezed his arm. "That's how it was, huh? Caught him with his pants down?"

"Pants and every other thing he should have been wearing. I decided to skip the party after our closing tonight. I surprised Zach doing a stranger in our bed, telling him to hurry up so that he could clean the place up before I got there." The tears started falling again, sliding down his cheeks raw and painful, like molten raindrops. "He wasn't even sorry! He seemed almost pleased to admit that he'd been cheating on me since last summer. Made it sound like my fault for not being more possessive. Apparently, I was just a convenience relationship; somebody with a nice apartment who'd give him room and board for the price of an occasional screw."

Burt's mouth firmed up tightly at that and Kurt instantly felt even more wretched. "Oh, Dad, I'm sorry. I shouldn't be saying things like this to you. I know you've always been uncomfortable with the details of my . . ."

"Stop," Burt said, cutting him off and handing him a tissue from a box tucked into the center console. "Kurt, I'm fine with everything you are. Don't let that asshole make you doubt yourself, or me. And don't misunderstand and think that I'm somehow upset with you. I always want you to feel that you can come to me with anything, no matter how old you get or how personal it is. I'm upset with him, Kurt, for doing this to you. I actually liked that disgusting little turd, welcomed him into my home and family, and it makes me sick that I trusted him with my son's heart only to have him betray that. So, no. You go ahead and say whatever you need to. I'm here to listen, whatever is on your mind."

Looking at him with a feeling of wonder, Kurt shook his head. "Even after all this time, you still manage to surprise me."

Burt smiled at him. "Well, we've both grown up a lot since you were sixteen and playing football games just to keep me happy. The fact that you've had sex with your boyfriend of two years is hardly shocking news. And, just so you know, a little cussing ain't gonna give me another heart attack."

A tiny grin broke through. "You might not say that if you'd heard me earlier tonight. I hardly ever lose my cool enough to swear but I think I dropped about a dozen F-bombs while I was yelling at Zach. I vaguely remember calling him a bastard and a slut, too, but that part may have just been in my head. It's all kind of a blur."

"Good for you," Burt said, satisfaction in his tone. "Though I kind of wish you'd put his balls through the uprights, just for old time's sake."
"I wasn't standing close enough," he admitted, making his father laugh.

Needing to distance himself a little, Kurt changed the subject, asking about the family and his old Lima friends, just to pass the time. Burt seemed to understand, for he answered readily, "Finn called yesterday. He's thinking about retiring from pro ball."

"After only six seasons?" Kurt said. His stepbrother, on the strength of a recommendation from Coach Beiste, had won a football scholarship to Ohio State after graduating McKinley. A few years of dedicated training and serious competition had done wonders to polish away Finn's weak spots and had gone on to be drafted by the NFL. Unfortunately, he had been traded three times in that short career, finally ending up with the second-string quarterback slot playing for his old home team, the Cincinnati Bengals. "He didn't get hurt, did he?"

"No, he's fine. Just not sure his heart's in the game. I figure he's getting sick of watching that jerk Trey Meisner blow the games week after week. I know I am! The coach won't put Finn into the game more than a few minutes each week. I won't be surprised if he takes another trade."

Kurt nodded. He had never become a major fan of football, but he had learned to follow the game during his brief stint as a Titan back in high school, and he had come to appreciate it for his family's sake. "He deserves to take the spotlight somewhere. And how are the girls?"

Burt laughed. "We just put a set of bunk beds in their room. I didn't think girls were supposed to like stuff like that, but they wouldn't give Carole and me any rest until we agreed. It's been an adventure so far."

Kurt smiled. His twin sisters had been a total surprise for the entire family when they were conceived. Finn and Kurt, both eighteen at the time, had been filled with a mixture of excitement over the idea of having their very own shared sibling, and revulsion at the realization that their parents – who were both in their mid-forties by then – were still able and, more importantly, inclined to do the deed that made a new sibling possible. At the boys' request, the baby girls had been named Christy for the late Christopher Hudson and Kathy for the late Katherine Hummel. Their parents had been happy to give their first spouses that honor.

"They're nine, Dad. I think all kids their age go through that phase," he said. "Even me, and you know how horrified I was by anything even vaguely tacky. The lure of sleeping five feet off the floor was too much to resist, though fortunately good taste prevailed after the first couple of years."

He did not mention the other reason he had given up those bunks. When he had finally faced the reality that the bottom bed would never be used, because at that age no parent would permit a boy-girl sleepover and none of the boys in his class had parents who were willing to let their sons stay with that 'strange' little Hummel boy. The memory of overhearing two mothers saying exactly that at a PTA meeting still stung years after the fact.

"So, who got the top bunk, Christy or Kathy?" he asked, shaking away his melancholy.

"Christy, though she tried to swap when she saw how high up she was." Burt chuckled. "They're getting used to it. So far she's only fallen off the bed once, when they were wrestling over some toy. And of course now that they don't share a bed anymore, they argue about whose bed the cat will sleep on."

Kurt snorted. "Like that's gonna be something they can decide for him. Cats go where they want to go. I'm actually surprised they didn't demand to take possession of Finn and my old rooms."

Burt smiled at him. "Sacred ground," he said, only half-joking. "Just because you guys never
actually lived together doesn't mean that they don't miss you, Kurt. They'll be real excited to see you."

"We're not going to tell them, are we?" he asked, suddenly embarrassed again. "That I got . . . that Zach . . . the reason we broke up?"

He felt like a ridiculous child as he stumbled over the question, as though he were only as old as his little sisters, but the thought of the entire family, and by extension every friend they would eventually share the news with, knowing that he had been used and dumped as casually as a sack of garbage made his stomach clench.

"All anyone needs to know is that you guys grew apart and split up," Burt soothed him. "Unless you want them to know more. It's your call."

The sick feeling receded a little. "Thanks," he breathed.

Burt nodded. Doing his best to keep things light, he caught Kurt up on those of his high school classmates still living in town. Although Kurt had attended McKinley for two years and Dalton Academy for two years, give or take a couple of months, his heart had always remained loyal to his friends from the original New Directions glee-club.

"Tina and Artie are still living here, happily married and breeding like rabbits. Five kids, at last count! Of course, I'm sure you know all about Mercedes."

Kurt nodded. They still talked and texted regularly. "I still can't believe she's teaching at McKinley. She couldn't wait to get out of that place! I almost fainted when she told me she'd accepted the position teaching sophomore English. I think she wants to take over Glee if Mister Schue ever retires."

"Well, I guess that school isn't the hell-hole it used to be. Not since Sylvester finally took the Principal job full time. She seems to have made her peace with the Glee kids after they won a couple of National trophies."

"Sue does love a nice shiny trophy," Kurt said with a smirk.

Burt snorted. "As long as it isn't bigger than the Cheerio trophies. I didn't often like that woman, but I can't deny that she put in more effort for you than any other teacher you ever had at that place, and she did know her stuff."

"Sue did a lot for me," he agreed. "At the time it was enough just to know that she wanted to, even if she failed. Still, I can't deny that switching to Dalton got me places." He smiled sourly, not feeling any of the usual pride and fondness for his current life.

Burt cleared his throat. "Yeah. Say, uh, you ever hear from any of those people? The Sparrows, or whatever they were called."

"Warblers, and if you mean Blaine, he and I still talk occasionally." Kurt sighed. "We didn't make it very far as boyfriends. Not even a year, but our friendship has never faltered. He got married last year to a guy named Mitchell, and they've just adopted a little girl together."

"Oh, good for them," Burt said, sounding a bit disappointed.

Kurt narrowed his eyes as he studied his father's too-innocent face. "You weren't thinking about trying to set me up with him to get my mind off of Zach, were you? Because I'm not ready to even think about dating right now."
Burt's expression was almost saintly. "Me? No, I just wondered if you were still friends that's all. Speaking of long lost friends, did you hear that Mike Chang moved back into town a few months back? His mom passed away last Christmas, I don't know if you knew that, and Mike has taken over the family business."

"No, I hadn't heard. That's a shame, she was a really nice lady. I'll have to drop by some time and give him my regards."

"Good idea," Burt said brightly. "You should spend some time with your friends. Remind yourself of all the good things in life. Follow the fork in the road, and don't let the assholes of the world drag you down."

Kurt made a face. "You sound like a fortune cookie."

"Must be hungry," he grunted. "Want to stop by Ruby's on the way home?"

At the mention of Lima's all-night diner, Kurt's stomach unexpectedly growled. He pressed a hand to it, surprised to have an appetite. He still felt wretched and exhausted, on the brink of bursting into tears again at any moment, and he suspected that he probably looked about as appealing as fresh road-kill, but he had not eaten since lunch the day before and a snack sounded nice.

"I could use some coffee," he admitted. "Maybe one of their special cinnamon rolls too, if they still have them."

"Most popular item on the menu," Burt assured him, giving his leg a pat. "What do you say?"

Not in any rush to lose his father's company to the solitude of his old bedroom, in spite of his fatigue, Kurt nodded. "Sounds great."
Heartache

There were no other customers in sight when Kurt and his father walked through the door of the small diner, but the place was bright and homey looking, with delicious odors of cinnamon, bacon, and freshly brewed coffee mingled temptingly in the air.

A man and woman, each wearing a bright red apron with the word "Ruby's" emblazoned on the front in bold white letters, had been sitting at a table by the kitchen and they looked up in anticipation at the jingle of the door. The woman rose at once and flashed them a bright smile. "Well, you folks are up bright and early today! Welcome to Ruby's. Can I get you some coffee?"

As she spoke, she was already gathering up menus and gesturing them to a cozy table by the window. The man just nodded pleasantly before heading into the back where he would no doubt be preparing their order.

"Coffee would be great, thank you," Kurt said, his tired body and decaffeinated bloodstream singing at the prospect. "My dad knows what I want to order, ma'am. May I please use your restroom?"

Clearly impressed by his good manners, which had drawn an approving smile from Burt as well, the lady beamed at him. "Of course you can, honey. Go right on through that little alcove back to the left."

"Thank you," he said again. In fact, he had already known where the facilities were located, having been to this place many times as a child, but he had felt a sudden powerful need to be gracious and speak to someone in a cordial manner. Like the ticket agent back in New York, Kurt found himself deriving an odd satisfaction from proving to himself that there were still emotionally considerate people left in the world.

A few minutes later, Kurt was washing his hands when he happened to look at the mirror. What he saw made him flinch. His shirt and slacks were wilted and hopelessly wrinkled, hanging on his frame as though his body had somehow withered since he first put them on. His complexion was pale and his cheeks splotchy, making the contrast of his puffy eyes, raw nose and overly red lips – he really thought he had beaten the bad habit of biting them – all the more stark. Fatigued circles ringed his eyes like bruises, his hair looked as though it had been styled by Frankenstein. The dark shadow on his jawline just seemed to emphasize his weariness.

Kurt caressed the stubble, for some reason recalling his first year out of college when he had experimented with growing a beard. Feeling quite proud of his brand new degree and the great maturity of his recent 23rd birthday, he had put away his razor and coaxed the whiskers to grow, thinking it might make him look old enough to stop being carded every time ordered a drink. Instead of the sleek elegance of his imagination, the beard had grown unevenly and had been a weird rusty color that looked more dirty than distinguished. He had shaved it off within a week.

Shaking off the woolgathering with a sigh, he took a minute to wash his face and press a cold paper towel against his aching eyes, finger combing his hair into a poor semblance of its usual order. It was the best he could do for now.

"You look a little better," Burt commented as he came back to their shared booth, proving that his effort had not been entirely in vain.

Kurt nodded, adding a little sugar to the cup of coffee sitting in front of him and taking a long sip. "The zombie look is very much in fashion this season," he quipped, offering his dad a weak smile.
Eyes traveling over the worn surface of the table, he raised his brows in surprise at the sight of a large bowl of fruit sitting between them. He had been expecting cinnamon rolls. As if conjured by the thought, their waitress appeared and set two of the large, gooey rolls in front of them with a triumphant smile, clearly proud of the restaurant's signature item.

"Looks great," Burt told her, shaking his head when she asked if they'd need anything else. The woman seemed to sense that her customers wanted to be left alone, for she set down the check and told them to just holler if they needed anything.

A curl of steam rose from the hot roll and Kurt inhaled deeply, closing his eyes at the wash of nostalgia that delicious smell brought. His father had ordered the pecan roll with frosting for himself and the classic cinnamon-raisin with light honey glaze for Kurt. "You remembered," he said, picking out a raisin and popping it into his mouth.

Burt nodded. "You don't forget the one thing your kid wanted for every Saturday breakfast until he hit his teens and decided he needed to switch to celery and crap like that."

A little smile lifted Kurt's lips at the memory. "I didn't become a low-carb fanatic until I was sixteen. Coach Sylvester told me I had hips like a pear and I got paranoid about putting on weight. Luckily, you married Carole the next year and I couldn't take watching Finn eat like a human garbage disposal while I was stuck with rabbit food. The bottomless pit probably saved me from an eating disorder. I still love Ruby's cinnamon rolls, though."

Words to the contrary, Kurt was absent-mindedly tearing his roll into a pile of gooey shreds, picking out the raisins and scooping the honey glaze into his mouth with a fingertip, but leaving the pastry. He nibbled a few pieces of fresh melon and a couple of strawberries from the fruit plate, pleased to see his father also eating the produce, but he had only taken one bite of his roll before realizing that he could barely choke it past the lump still clogging his throat.

"What am I going to do, Dad?" he asked quietly. "I can't just quit my life because my boyfriend turned out to be an asshole, but right now the thought of going back to the apartment we shared makes me feel sick. And what am I supposed to say to my friends after they find out? And they will find out. Much as I love Emily, telling her that Zach cheated on me probably wasn't my wisest move."

"How come?" Burt asked, patiently sipping his coffee, knowing from long experience that when Kurt was upset it was best just to let him talk it out.

Kurt snorted softly. "Because she's sure to tell Elise. That's her wife, and there's a reason why we nicknamed her 'Gossip Girl'. She doesn't mean any harm but she can't keep a secret longer than five minutes. I'd be surprised if everyone I know hasn't heard by now."

He sighed, giving up on the ruin of his cinnamon roll and pushing it away to wipe his sticky fingers on a napkin. He was not the least bit hungry any more, but he wrapped both hands around his coffee mug, willing the sting of the slightly too-hot surface to distract him from the deeper pain in his heart.

Burt reached out and captured his left wrist in a gentle grip. "Maybe that's not such a bad thing, everybody knowing. You said the jerk tried to make what happened out to be your fault, right? So if your friends spread the truth fast enough, everybody's gonna know that he's a liar not worth the honor of spit-shining your boots." The conviction in Burt's voice caused Kurt to choke up a little. "As for the rest, you're not ready to face your life right now? Then, don't. It's not like you live a nine-to-five schedule. You got the time and you're here now. Why not take a few weeks and treat yourself to a little vacation? Give yourself a chance to heal up. We'd love to have you, and I know that nothing made me feel better after losing your mom than seeing your face every day. This may be
different circumstances, but the principle is the same. You lost somebody you loved and you came to us for help. So let us be here for you."

The traitorous tear ducts would not be denied, spilling over again as Kurt twisted his hand up to capture his father's wrist in return. He could not speak, but the look in his eyes must have been enough, for Burt tightened his grasp affectionately.

"All right, then. Let me just pay for this pile of crumbs and we can get out of here. I'll bet you could use a little rest right about now."

Kurt just nodded, blowing his nose into a handy paper napkin.

They arrived at the Hummel home just after 5 am. Carole was waiting for them and she did not say a word before enveloping Kurt in a warm, motherly hug that nearly set him crying again. "Sorry," he mumbled, sniffling and knuckling the corners of his eyes. "I don't seem to have any self-control this morning."

"Don't worry about it. I'm not," she told him fondly, stroking his cheek. "You must be exhausted. Are you hungry?"

He shook his head. "Dad and I stopped at Ruby's." There was no need to tell her that he had pretty much ignored his food.

"All right, then. You just go right straight upstairs and take a nap. Sleep in for as long as you need to. There's no rush and I'll make sure the girls stay out of your room until you're ready to come down."

"We probably won't even tell them you're here until after school," Burt told him. "We usually keep your door shut to keep the cat off your stuff. For some reason, he loves your room. The minute that door opens, bam, he's in your window, or on your bed, or poking around in your closet."

Ignoring the prattling, which he knew was just his dad's way of pretending that everything was fine, Kurt hugged his parents again and trudged wearily up the stairs. They had moved to this house the winter after Dad and Carole got married, and though he had badly missed his old basement room for a while, he had grown to love this house and the warm family atmosphere that his old house had somehow lacked after his mother died.

He debated a shower, but the call of his old familiar bed was too strong. Closing his door against the possible invasion of little sisters and nosy felines, Kurt peeled off his outer clothes, and fell face first into the freshly laundered pillowcase, barely having time to drag the covers over his body before he was dead to the world.

A little after noon, he jerked up out of a nightmare in which he had been forced to watch Zachary have sex with a line of other men, who then ganged up on Kurt and threw him out the fourth floor window, laughing at his screams as he fell far below into a handy dumpster. His familiarity with the disgusting experience of being thrown away like literal trash had never left him after the early days of high school, adding a frightening sense of reality to the dream.

Kurt's hand automatically reached to his right, unconsciously seeking the warm reassurance of another body, but when he encountered only cold sheets the reality of what had happened crashed over him anew. Hugging a second pillow, he rolled onto his back and groaned pitifully. He felt like he had not slept at all, and he could not remember the last time he had been so empty.

None of the other times he had split up with a boyfriend had been like this, had they?

Blaine had been the first. They had been friends for several months in high school, then dated for a
short time. The romantic relationship had been loving without ever being particularly passionate. It had been safe and that was exactly what Kurt had needed at the time, but those two innocent, hand-holding teens had grown up, and what they had together was not something that could sustain them for long. As soon as they both accepted that, they had called it off. Well, technically Blaine had called it off. He had claimed that they were growing apart and that the coming long-distance relationship of Kurt's upcoming move to New York would be too much for them. It wasn't until a few weeks later that Kurt had realized that his apparent maturity was just an excuse to chase a boy he had gone goofy over. Some kid who worked at the local Target and liked to 'poke' him on Facebook. First GAP and then Target. Kurt snorted at the memory. Blaine apparently had a fetish for cheap menswear.

Happily, the two of them had eventually settled into their original dynamic of good friends. They had remained that way ever since.

Kurt's second relationship had been Jeremy. Not old enough to legally drink, but bravely seeking adventure Kurt had employed the time-honored tradition of a fake ID and gone to a gay nightclub, shocked when he had actually made it past the door check. He had stuck close to the bar and proceeded to get hammered on a series of yummy drinks provided by a series of equally yummy young men. He had begun singing along with the band, happily joining the throng of ass-groping, hip-thrusting strangers on the dance floor, his inhibitions disappearing as he became increasingly wasted.

The club had boasted a live band – one of those groups who sounded better with every shot of alcohol a customer consumed - and Jeremy was the bass player. He was older – 25 at the time – and he had struck up a conversation between sets after watching Kurt's amusing performance on the dance floor. He had later admitted that he had found himself worrying about the disturbingly innocent-looking, piss-drunk college boy. He had taken Kurt home to sleep off the evening and when Kurt had sobered up, he had been grateful and yet somehow a bit disappointed to realize that he had woken up in a strange man's bed but had not been taken advantage of. He felt like a disgrace to college guys everywhere. Jeremy had laughed when he said that out loud and teasingly asked if he wanted to just go ahead and have sex to make up for it now that he was sober. Kurt had surprised them both by saying yes.

In spite of his current misery, Kurt grinned at that memory, remembering how he had felt so daring and grown-up, impressed with himself for having seduced a rock star.

Never mind that most people in the city had no idea that the band even existed, or that he was the one who had actually been seduced. The reality of being desired by a man with experience and a fair share of admirers had been a source of great pride to a still very innocent 20-year-old. The two of them had spent six glorious months together before it occurred to them that they had very little in common outside of a major-league and seemingly unquenchable case of the hots. Eventually the other man had needed to move on and had let Kurt down as gently as he had originally picked him up. They had not spoken again afterwards, but once he got over the ego-bruising of being dumped, the memory of that time had taken on a deep fondness.

Kurt had applied and been accepted for an internship at a theatrical agency in the summer between his junior and senior years and concentrated solely on work until the job was complete. Then a few months before graduation he had met Andy. Sweet, sexy, funny, and as romantic as anyone could wish for. Kurt had been thoroughly smitten until he suddenly began to realize that everything about the man was painfully shallow. No real depth of emotion or intelligence, expressing no interests outside of whatever the people he was with wanted to do, and seemingly no personality of his own. The perfect compliment, romantic gesture, or witty joke was always at his command, but when it came right down to it, Kurt had been bored.
Emily and Mercedes, who had both teased Kurt endlessly but approvingly over his hot-and-heavy romance with Jeremy, had given "The Mannequin" a big thumbs-down. No one had been happier than his two best friends when Kurt had finally made up his mind to end things. For the first, and so far only time in his life Kurt had initiated a breakup, feeling like he was kicking a puppy when he tried to explain their lack of connection and made his boyfriend cry, but knowing in his heart that it was the only fair thing to do.

He had felt surprisingly free after that relationship ended, living happily single for a year before meeting Emmitt. Emmitt was younger than he was and practically a poster child for the dreams of Broadway stardom. He had arrogance and confidence enough to make those dreams feel attainable. And he definitely had the looks and talent. Kurt had just put out his shingle as a voice teacher, telling himself it was just for a little while until his acting career took off, and he had eagerly accepted the young man as one of his first three clients. They got along very well. It helped that Kurt was used to divas, so he had not minded a few affectations. Emmitt had a gorgeous baritone voice and acting chops that would eventually take him far. Kurt still heard of him from time to time, and back then he had found it intoxicating to imagine himself as Henry Higgins to the other man's Eliza Doolittle.

The personal relationship had started two months into their association, after Emmitt had won a role in his first musical. He had been excited and invited Kurt out for a night on the town to celebrate. The other man exuded confidence and ambition, he was as gay as a rainbow unicorn, and he had the face of an angel. Kurt had already fallen like a rock and he had needed little persuasion to end that evening in bed.

A little sneer tilted Kurt's lips as he remembered the overweening ego that had directed every move that Emmitt made. Even the sex had been regarded as if it were his due. Then, after just over a year together, Emmitt had dumped Kurt suddenly and without warning. He had just gotten his first big role on Broadway and had noted with marked disapproval that Kurt actually seemed to like living behind the scenes and that his own dreams of stardom had taken a backseat to helping other people achieve theirs. And Kurt could not deny that the observation was true.

Emmitt had felt no need to have a relationship "weighing down" his soaring ascent, and Kurt had been hurt and insulted by his attitude, but the pain had passed surprisingly fast once they were through. It had actually been something of a relief to lose the disturbing feeling that he had been dating Rachel Berry with a penis. He had often wondered if the sensation of being crushed under the heel of stardom was how Finn had felt before he finally broke up with Rachel for good.

Not that either of them had ever held Rachel's ambition against her. She was a good friend. Kurt still ran into her from time to time, but she had achieved her lifelong goal of being a Broadway star and never looked back. Her need for the spotlight in all aspects of life had put an eventual end to her and Finn. There was no room for a long distance relationship within her grand plan, and Finn had been happy with his life in Ohio. Rachel had moved on and proceeded, in true diva fashion, to marry and divorce twice in five years. She was currently living the good life in New York, dating a long string of admiring beaus who showered her with luxuries while they auditioned for the role of spouse #3. Kurt doubted any of them would win that role, or that Rachel would ever settle down as long as her career continued to consume her life, but in a way he loved her all the more for knowing exactly what she wanted, and not letting anyone stand in the way of her getting it.

Finn, by contrast, had happily married a sweet, small-town girl and become the father of a little boy, whom he had proudly named in honor of Uncle Kurt. The day of his birth had been one of the proudest of Kurt's life. It had made him seriously rethink his own priorities. Up to now, he had devoted himself to his career, making a success of it and gaining a solid reputation in the theater community. He had never attained personal stardom, but Kurt now understood himself well enough to know that it was not the spotlight that he craved. Deep down, he would always be the loving son
of a hard working, small-town mechanic. He had learned early on the pleasures of getting his hands dirty (metaphorically speaking) and helping others. What he had really wanted out of life was a satisfying career and an occasional taste of the good life. And he still hoped to find a personal relationship like his dad had found twice over, and like his brother now enjoyed. A true partnership filled with love and acceptance, and room to grow, someone who would love him for being exactly who he was.

Tears began sliding down Kurt's cheeks. He had told himself that Zachary was the fulfillment of those dearly-held dreams. He had never felt as intensely about any of those other boyfriends. They had just seemed so right together, so compatible, and Kurt had been sure they would spend the rest of their lives together. Zachary had become his foolish ideal of happily-ever-after. Someone to grow old with, to perhaps raise a family with, and to love for the rest of his life. It was absolutely soul-crushing to know now that he had been too caught up in that fantasy to realize his lover had not been anywhere close to feeling the same way about him.

Shifting onto his side, Kurt could no longer fight his misery. He been trying to tell himself that Zach was not worth such anguish, but his heart refused to listen. It was broken and there was nothing he could do except just let it bleed.

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A knock on the door woke Kurt again at sundown. Feeling heavy and listless, he dragged himself upright in the bed and rubbed at gritty eyes, cursing the headache that pounded behind them as he realized that he must have cried himself back to sleep earlier.

"Yes?" he croaked as the knock sounded for a second time.

The door opened wider and the light switched on, leaving Kurt squinting against the sudden brightness. His stepmother entered the room with a bundle in her hands. "Your father thought of that. I know they're not stylish, but he tried to get the right sizes. Until you have a chance to go shopping, maybe you can make do."

He accepted the bundle, knowing why she had mentioned style as soon as he realized what he was holding. A pair of plain blue Levi's, still stiffly folded from a store shelf, three unopened plastic packages containing T-shirts, briefs and socks, and one of his father's own plaid flannel work-shirts.

"There's a pack of disposable razors, some soap and shampoo, a new toothbrush and a few other things in the bathroom when you're ready for them," Carole added kindly.

Lifting the clothing, Kurt inhaled the scent of the flannel shirt. It smelled like familiar detergent with just a whiff of his dad's favorite aftershave. It smelled of comforting, soothing, and he smiled. No, they were not at all fashionable, but he tried to get the right sizes. Until you have a chance to go shopping, maybe you can make do."

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Suddenly a huge, golden fluff-ball interrupted them by leaping onto the bed and striding regally up Kurt's legs. The cat sat on his blanketed lap and proceeded to sniff at him for a moment. Then it fixed
him with an imperious green gaze, turned its back and leapt off the bed with a flip of the tail, flouncing back out of the room.

"I take it that was Crookshanks?" Kurt said, raising his eyebrow. His sisters had been given the kitten by another kid at school last Halloween and, being newly introduced to the timeless wonder of the Harry Potter novels, had promptly named it in honor of their favorite character's cat. Carole confirmed his guess and Kurt wryly decided, "Well, since it seems that I've already offended one family member this evening, maybe I'd better take a shower before I come down to dinner."

He wondered whether he ought to feel insulted when Carole just patted his shoulder and left him to it.
Siblings and Old Friends

Kurt made quick work of his shower. The soap, shampoo and conditioner that had been left for him were not his preferred brands, but they weren't the super cheap stuff either. He suspected Carole had purchased them. His dad would not have thought to buy conditioner and the soap was marked for sensitive skin. A bottle of mousse, a very good exfoliating solution and moisturizer, complete with swabs and cotton balls, were on the tile counter, also arguing in favor of Carole having done the shopping. The brand new package of deodorant was his father's brand, but one that Kurt had grown up using and still did.

It felt great to wash the last day and a half away, metaphorically as well as physically, and Kurt felt much lighter when he stepped out of the shower and wrapped a towel around his waist. A thorough tooth-brushing and the disposal of his accumulated stubble left him feeling almost human again.

He fluffed a second towel over his hair and wrestled the thick locks into submission, turning his head and eyeing his scalp in the mirror as he worked, as he habitually did. So far there were no signs that he might be following his dad's pattern of early balding. Burt had been only 25 when Kurt was born, but he had no memory of his dad ever possessing a full head of hair. By the time Burt was 30, he had looked pretty much the same as he did now, except that the short fringe around the sides and back had been darker. Kurt had always thought his father a handsome man and did not mind resembling him in subtle ways, but he maintained an avid hope that he had inherited his hairline from his mother's side of the family.

He smirked a little as he tore open the plastic packs of plain white underwear. His teenage self would have been horrified by such mundane basics, but as clean soft cotton settled against his skin the adult version was grateful just to have something new to change into. The board-stiff denim jeans were a couple of sizes too big, so Kurt reluctantly added the belt from his slacks. Who in their right mind paired a dark brown, stylishly-ribbed, Italian leather belt with plain, medium-blue Levis, after all? But frumpy and mismatched was far better than having his jeans fall down like clown-pants!

Kurt pulled on the flannel shirt his father had loaned him and rolled the sleeves to his elbows. It was huge on him. His dad had always been thicker-built than himself and he had put on a few pounds over the years, though thankfully his heart had never been healthier. Kurt had stopped growing at just under six feet tall, and maturity and hard work had added lean muscle without giving him much girth. With that in mind, he opted to leave the shirt unfastened and untucked. He considered the packet of white tube socks, then passed. It was just the family tonight. They would not care if he chose to go barefoot.

Kurt took a moment to place his dirty clothing in the laundry hamper, thankful that he had not been wearing any dry-clean-only items, then picked his slacks back out as he remembered that his wallet was still in one pocket. The item slipped out of his grasp and flopped onto the floor, flipping open as it landed. Kurt froze, staring down at the smiling photo of his lover that he had been carrying since last summer.

Since the 4th of July, to be exact.

A wash of rage surged over him as the date clicked, blocking out the immediate reaction of sorrow and loss. He had taken that picture himself, lovingly placing it where it would be the first thing he saw every time he opened his wallet.

Taken it on the very same day that his partner of eighteen months had started cheating on him.
The irony brought a bitter tang of bile to Kurt's throat as he ripped the picture out of his wallet and tore it into shreds, flinging the innocent leather billfold against the bathroom door so hard that it left a scuff mark on the wood. Determinedly, Kurt grabbed one of the matches that sat in a little holder for lighting the potpourri candles that Carole kept in every bathroom. Holding them over the sink for safety, Kurt lit each little scrap of that grinning infidel face on fire, feeling an immense satisfaction from each curled ash that fell.

"Take that, you unfaithful son of a bitch!" he muttered as he turned on the water and washed the last remains of Zachary down the drain.

Kurt rested his hands on either side of the sink, breathing hard. His body trembled and his stomach churned and for a moment, he felt sure that he was about to vomit, but then it faded. He was not foolish enough to think that the act of burning Zach in effigy meant that everything was fine, but the tiny act of vengeance had made him a little bit calmer. What his partner had done to him cut deeper than any wound he had ever received, and it would take a lot more than one day to recover from that, but it was a start.

His father's long-ago words echoed in his brain. "Nobody pushes the Hummels around." Meeting his large, sorrowful eyes in the mirror, he noticed that the dark black and green plaid of his dad's shirt had turned his eyes a shade of light bluish green, not unlike the elder Hummel. Deliberately firming his jaw, Kurt stood up straight and tall, right hand lifting to deliver a sideways flick to his hair. He nodded sharply, willing himself to believe in those words.

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Shrill matching shrieks of, "Kurt!" greeted him before he reached the bottom step. Kurt barely had time to brace himself as a pair of identical, brown-haired whirlwinds tackled him around the waist, hugging him tightly and jumping up and down so fast that he was forced to take a seat on the stairs just to keep from toppling over. "Kurt, oh, Kurt, you're home!"

He could not help laughing at this rapturous greeting, wrapping his arms around his two little sisters and hugging back as hard as he could. Not satisfied with this, the girl on the left released his body and flung her arms around his neck, planting a smacking kiss on his cheek. Kurt kissed her back. "It's so great to see you guys," he told them, giving the same treatment to the twin on his right. "Let me take a good look at you."

The girls had curly dark hair, slender noses, and the wide endearing grins of their mom and brother Finn, combined with beautiful bluish-green eyes, delicate features and light complexions that came from the Hummel side of the family tree. It had always baffled his parents how he could tell the girls apart at a glance, even when they were just infants, but he had never had the slightest difficulty. Stroking the cheek of Christy on his left and Kathy on his right, he said, "You're both so beautiful! And you've grown so much I can hardly believe it."

They beamed, hugging him tightly again. "We missed you!" they said in tandem.

Kurt's eyes sparkled with tears, but this time they were of the happy variety. He stood and draped an arm over each set of slender shoulders. "I missed you, too. Both of you. No, all of you. You have no idea how much."

Kathy grinned and held her hand up, thumb and index finger about three inches apart. "This much?"

Also grinning at the familiar family joke, Christy held her arms out wide. "Or this much?"

"Y'know, I think it was this much!" their father interrupted, walking in from the kitchen and holding
his own arms out to their full six foot spread, then squeezing all three of his children in a firm bear hug.

"Oh, I need to get in on this!" Carole exclaimed, matching her husband's embrace from the opposite side, completing the loving circle.

Kurt's face flushed with pleasure as they broke apart, the girls still clinging to his sides. "Too bad Finn's not here. He would be all over that."

Carole's face softened wistfully. "He sure would. It's been a long time since I've had all my babies under one roof."

Knowing full well that he was included in that statement, regardless of the fact that he had not been born to this woman, Kurt bent forward and kissed her. "I'll make sure to tell him all about it. After all, it's been awhile since I was the brother with something to gloat about, especially with Finn sending new pictures and progress reports on little Kurt every single week. He'll be writhing in jealousy when I tell him I've been hugging and kissing the three prettiest women in Lima."

His stepmother gave his chest a playful push while the girls just grinned. "You Hummel men! Always such charmers."

Burt chuckled. "I got nothing on this kid when it comes to sweet-talking. Never did have." Taking a good look at his son for the first time since he had come downstairs, Burt ruefully scratched his scalp and said, "Looks like I guessed a little too big."

"That's all right," he said quickly, anxious to let his father know that was grateful for trying. "They're comfortable and they're clean. Tonight that's all I could ask for."

"Well, okay, but just the same, warn me if you start feeling any uncontrollable urges to sing Mellencamp and make out with cheerleaders, okay?"

The girls burst into giggles as Kurt closed his eyes and whined, "Daaad!" They knew the story well. Although painful at the time, his ill-fated efforts at male-bonding had become a source of great amusement for the entire family over the years and a favorite embarrassing anecdote to be pulled out at get togethers. "Cut that out, or I'll tell them all about when you hit your mid-life crisis, went online and bought that horrible tou-"

"Hey, honey, isn't dinner about ready?" Burt said loudly, cutting him off mid-word, his cheeks turning an interesting shade of red.

Kurt's eyes sparkled as he exchanged a high-five with Carole, while the two girls exchanged puzzled looks and tried to figure out what their brother had almost revealed.

"It's ready now," Carole chuckled. Stroking Kurt's flannel covered bicep, she said, "I hope you're hungry. I fixed ham, mac'n'cheese and green beans, just the way you like them. And we have chocolate cream pie for dessert."

He nearly drooled. Having skipped most of the early-morning breakfast at Ruby's, he was well and truly famished by now. "Are you trying to fatten me up?"

"Nope, just spoil you a little," she admitted. "I thought you could use a smile after . . . well, I thought you deserved a nice homecoming meal. That's all."

In appreciation of her changing that sentence, Kurt squeezed her hand. "Thanks, Mom."
He had started to refer to her as 'Mom' when the twins were toddlers, just as Finn had started calling Burt 'Dad', not wanting to confuse the girls until they were old enough to understand the concept of step-families, but he still called her Carole more often than not. It surprised Kurt how easily the other name slipped out of his mouth now.

"You're welcome, sweetie." Clapping her hands briskly, she ordered, "Now come on. Let's eat before everything gets cold!"

The meal was pleasant. It was soothingly normal to hear all the everyday conversation about Dad's garage, the market where Carole worked, the latest updates Finn had sent on his family and his sisters' day at school. Their parents skillfully diverted the twins' attention away from their natural desire to pepper Kurt with questions and he was thankful.

Just as Carole brought out the pie, Kurt's phone buzzed. He automatically pulled it out and checked the caller I.D., smiling when he saw that it was Finn. He paused before answering, startled to see that he also had 17 messages waiting. They must have come in, unheard, while he slept the day away. Shaking his head, he clicked the Receive button.

"Hello, Brother," he said, alerting everyone else to the identity of his caller. "Still answering the siren song of your mother's cooking even from a hundred miles away, I see."

He smiled when Finn confusedly asked if his mother was visiting New York.

"No, silly. I'm home, in Lima. I just got in this morning. Hang on a second, I'll put you on speaker."

Hitting the correct button, he turned up the volume and set his phone down in the middle of the table. The girls, Burt and Carole all said hello and Finn's happy voice returned the greeting. "What's for dinner?" he asked, making everyone grin.

"We had ham," Kurt told him, "but we finished it. Now we're just about to cut into one of your mom's delicious chocolate cream pies. It looks amazing, too. All cool and creamy, with those cute little swirls of whipped cream decorating the top. She's cutting it up right now and you can smell the chocolate wafting up with every cut of the knife."

He winked at the girls and all three of them went, "Mmmm!" then burst out laughing when Finn whined, "Mom, make him stop!"

"Kurt," she scolded, laughing and setting a hearty triangle in front of him. "Be nice to your brother."

"I just wanted him to feel like he was with us," he claimed innocently.

Finn snorted over the phone. "Like it would do me any good. Zach's probably hogging the biggest piece already." The good mood and happy conversation screeched to an awkward and painful halt. After a moment of profound silence, Finn's voice said, "Hello? Kurt? Did I lose you? Hello!"

"No, I . . . I'm still here," he replied faintly, his voice sounding strange to his own ears. "Zachary is . . . That is, he isn't here. We . . . he . . . ."

Burt cut in as he continued to struggle. "They broke up last night. That's why Kurt's home. He needed a little distance and family support."

"Oh, man," Finn said quietly. "I'm sorry, Kurt. Are you okay?"

"Getting there," he managed.

There was another awkward pause, then Finn ventured, "What happened?"
Burt sighed and Carole shook her head. Finn had never been big on tact.

Unexpectedly, Christy answered her brother's question. "Zach went out with another boy so Kurt dumped his sorry ass. That's why none of us like him anymore."

"He's a scum-bag," Kathy added matter-of-factly, forking a large bite of chocolate pie into her mouth.

Three sets of wide eyes instantly fixed on the children, mouths gaping open. Christy blinked innocently. "That's what we overheard Daddy saying to Mom." Guiltily, she added, "I guess we weren't supposed to be listening. We just wanted to know why Kurt was home when it wasn't summertime or Christmas or anybody's birthday. Sorry, Mom."

"Sorry, Daddy," echoed her sister.

The parents looked extremely guilty when Kurt shot them an exasperated glare. Then he sighed. "Well, I guess it's just as well. Now at least we won't have to lie about it."

There was a moment of muffled background conversation from the phone, then Finn's voice came clearly over the speaker again. "You better make another pie, Mom. Julie and I are coming home on the first flight we can get tomorrow."

"Finn, no!" Kurt protested, shocked by the announcement. "You don't have to do that. You can't! What about your football team?"

He laughed, the mirth slightly manufactured-sounding as though he was deliberately trying to sound jovial. "Dude, you never did pay much attention to sports. This is the middle of March. Our season ended six weeks ago."

"Oh. Well, you still don't need to travel all this way just for me."

"Of course I do," he said quietly, the false humor replaced by sincere concern and a gravitas that Kurt had not heard from him in a long time. He was dead serious as he said, "I know how it feels, remember? You need your big bro, Bro. I'm coming."

Kurt could not argue with that. "Finn . . . thanks. I appreciate it."

"We'll see you all soon," he promised. "Keep that cat off my pillow!"

The girls laughed and said goodbye, promising to do their best. Everyone went back to their pie, a subtle air of excitement and happiness palpable from Burt and Carole as they contemplated the thought of having all of their children under one roof again. The twins chattered excitedly but Kurt just smiled and nodded absently, picking at his pie. It tasted delicious but he no longer had any appetite.

He was touched that Finn wanted to come, but the blunt reminder of why he needed to, why Kurt himself was here, had completely deflated Kurt's previous good mood. Blood rushed to his face, the very thought of being surrounded by adorable children and happy couples living their happy lives full of love and security and family comfort, suddenly made him feel like he could not breathe. The walls seemed to be closing in on him and his heart began to race.

Abruptly, he rose from his seat, cutting one of his surprised sisters off in mid-sentence. "I need some air," he gasped, grabbing his phone off the table and fleeing the dining room without a backward glance. He vaguely heard his father telling the family to give him a little time to himself and he was grateful.
Not bothering to put on a coat or borrow a pair of slippers against the cold late-winter air, Kurt burst outside, gulping in deep, desperate breaths. After a couple of minutes, his thundering heart calmed and his breathing slowed back down to normal. Not really feeling like going anywhere, he plopped down onto the wide stone steps of the front porch. "Shit." Was this going to happen every time somebody inconveniently brought up his ex-lover or reminded him that he was now alone? These terrible, gut-wrenching feelings of panic and overwhelming loss?

Kurt shook his head. He sure as hell hoped not. He was not sure he could handle it.

Not having anything else to do, but not ready to go back inside, he checked the long line of missed messages on his phone. Two each from Emily and Mercedes, five from assorted New York friends, one message from Rachel Berry, another from Artie and Tina Abrams and six separate messages from Zachary himself.

Kurt grimaced. Obviously the 'Gossip Girl' had done her thing. There was no other reason for so many people to be leaving him messages today. Rachel had probably heard what happened through the theater grapevine. She and Kurt had a lot of mutual friends. Hell, he had given voice lessons to half the cast of her current show! When she couldn't reach him, Rachel's first move would have been to grill Em and Mercedes, which would be how the Abrams had found out. Mercedes was still very close to both Artie and Tina. For all he knew, they might have called his dad and Carole to check up on him.

He listened to the messages, nodding when they all proved to be variations on, "Oh, my God. I can't believe it! Are you okay? Do you need anything?" At least it was comforting to hear so many of his friends taking his side. Apparently, Emily and Elise had barricaded themselves inside Kurt's apartment to make sure that its unwelcome former tenant did not try to take advantage of the free living space in Kurt's absence.

Emily's message made him smile. She had recovered Zachary's house key and described with relish her own wanton destruction of all of the former couple's shared bedding, assuring him that she would be replacing every piece with items that were finer and entirely louse-free as a homecoming gift. Since Kurt had never had any problems with pest-control, he understood her meaning perfectly.

Mercedes' message bluntly demanded to know if Zachary needed killing, or perhaps a nice slow castration, offering a dull knife to do either job with if Kurt was so inclined. It finished with an invitation, practically an order, to come by her place for a nice long talk. She had a guest room with his name on it, any time he wanted it.

Feeling certain that he would burst into tears if he tried to actually speak to any of his friends right now, Kurt sent a general text-message to all of them. He thanked them and assured them that he was managing. He added that he was staying in Lima for a couple of weeks to get his head on straight and that while he very much appreciated their concern, he did not feel like talking just yet.

Kurt did send a second short but personal message to his each of his two best girlfriends, telling Emily that blue was still his favorite color and Egyptian cotton was always nice, and asking Mercedes how she felt about scissors. They would love that.

His mouth thinned to a grim line as he listened to the series of messages from Zachary. He did not even know why he bothered. The sound of his voice was like salt in an open wound and the words just made him angry. There were apologies, entreaties, promises to change, all of which Kurt knew were nothing but panic over being kicked out of his cozy living arrangement, and quite a bit of misplaced resentment, as if Kurt owed it to him to understand and forgive his "errors in judgment". Each call ended with a plea to call him and the words, "I love you."
Barely resisting the urge to scream, but tamping it down for his family's sake, Kurt dialed the number of his apartment building and in an impeccably polite manner, informed the desk clerk that Zachary Carson had moved out and to please make certain that all of his mail was refused from today forward, and that he was not allowed back inside Kurt's apartment under any circumstances. It was a secure building and Kurt had been paying rent there for a long time. He was also on good terms with all of the regular front desk and building security people, but knew that Zachary was not. He had never seen any need for making friends with people whose lives did not directly affect his own, something Kurt now realized he should have paid more attention to. It might have told him a lot. A shame that love really was so damned blind.

After a brief pause to update the desk records, Kurt was briskly assured that it would be taken care of immediately. They wished each other well and hung up. He took a moment to text the simple message, 'F.U. & GOODBYE' to Zach, then shut his phone off and put it in his shirt pocket.

Kurt sighed, actually feeling worse for having done something so terribly final, cutting his former lover off from their shared life once and for all. Now he had no plans, nothing to look forward to, and nothing to do with his time except mourn what he had lost.

It was cold out here. Kurt vaguely wished he had put on his coat, but he could not be bothered to go and get it. His toes were cold, too. He studied them absently, flexing the long digits and musing that they really could use a pedicure.

He was unsure how long he had been sitting there, vaguely studying his cold, bare feet and contemplating the unfairness of the universe at large when a man's voice interrupted his woolgathering. "Kurt? Kurt Hummel?" He looked up, startled, and the other man smiled brightly. "I thought that was you!"

Kurt blinked. Standing there, taller, broader-shouldered, and disconcertingly more adult-looking than Kurt remembered him, was Mike Chang. "Mike," he said, a hint of question in his tone. "I'd heard you were back in town. How are you?"

"Fine," he said happily. "Man, I haven't seen you in . . . what? Ten years?"

Kurt nodded. "Just about. Not since I came back to McKinley to see all of you guys graduate."
Remembering something his father had said earlier, he offered, "I was really sorry to hear about your mom."

"Thanks. She had been sick a long time. My sister and I both miss her but it's good to know that she's out of pain. I like to think that she's off somewhere having adventures with Dad again. She was never really the same after he passed away."

"I'm sorry," he repeated, not knowing what else to say.

He sighed sorrowfully, then shook it away. "Let's talk about something more cheerful. What brings you back to Lima? Finally have enough of wild parties and big city living?"

Kurt grimaced. "Hardly, and that subject doesn't exactly qualify as cheerful. I just had a bad break-up and needed somewhere to get my feet back under me again. I'm not staying long."

He was not sure why he said that. They were practically strangers now, past high school connection or not. It was not like they had ever been best-buddies back in the old days, either, though he had always been rather fond of the quiet Asian boy.

Mike winced. "Sorry to hear that. I've been thrown off the hamster-wheel a few times myself and I
know how painful it can be."

Smiling at the odd turn of phrase, Kurt asked, "You finally find the right one?"

Dark eyes twinkling as though he was sharing a fun secret, he said, "Not yet, but I'm keeping my eyes open!" Before Kurt could think of a reply, Mike checked his watch and sighed. "Damn, I need to get going. I'm expecting a late business call at home tonight. Say, how long will you be in town? We should get together some evening and catch up."

Kurt was a little startled when he heard himself say, "That would be great. I'll be around for a couple of weeks, at least."

"Terrific!" Mike grinned, suddenly looking very much like the 17 year old from Kurt's memory. "Swing by the store some time this week. I'll take you out for a drink, a meal and a good long session of do-you-remembers."

He smiled. "That sounds nice. Dad told me you'd taken over your parents' business."

Mike nodded. "Not sure if I'll keep it, though. Lynne is more cut out for that shop-keeper stuff than I ever was. That's my sister, if you don't remember."

He smiled. "That sounds nice. Dad told me you'd taken over your parents' business."

The Chang family had owned a shoe-store for over forty years. Mr. Chang had always been happy to sell any of his son's glee club members merchandise at a cut-rate price, and their selection had always been good, making Kurt Hummel one of his very best customers. Mike used to help his family out on weekends and Kurt had talked to him more often at the shop than at school, where Mike had practically taken a vow of silence. Just the same, it came as a shock that his old friend still remembered his shoe-size after all these years.

"You have a good memory," he said with a rueful smile, "but I wear a 12. Unfortunately, I gained that last half inch when I had my final growth-spurt. Do you know how hard it is to find really cute shoes in a size 12?"

The other man laughed. Kicking up a large, loafer-clad foot, he said, "As a matter of fact, I do." He started to walk away, calling over his shoulder, "Swing by, I'll set you up! It was good to see you again, Kurt."

"You, too," he agreed. It had been nice, unexpectedly so.

Suddenly, Kurt shivered. It was time to go inside. As he entered the pleasantly warm foyer, he found his father, hand poised to grab a coat.

"I was just about to go outside and get you," Burt told him. "It's cold tonight and you've been out there for an hour. Be lucky if you don't catch pneumonia. Come on inside and warm up for awhile."

He smiled, allowing himself to be fussed over and drawn inside the comfortable family room. He did not miss the appraising look his father was shooting him. "I'm okay, Dad. I just needed a little space. I'm sorry for running out like that."

Burt squeezed his shoulder. "It's fine, I get it. You want a beer?" Kurt shook his head. "Suit yourself. Say, who were you talking to just now? I started to walk outside but I noticed you weren't alone."

Kurt brushed a hand through his hair, still feeling a little puzzled by the warm, unexpected conversation. "Mike Chang. He just happened to walk by and recognize me and we spent a few
minutes chatting. He wants to get together and catch up."

Much to his puzzlement, Burt practically beamed at this news. "You don't say!"

"Uh, yeah. I'll probably wait until Finn gets here. They were good friends in school. I'm sure they'll want a chance to talk. Maybe I'll ask Artie and Tina and Mercedes to join us. Make a party out of it." Kurt shook his head. He did not even know what he was saying. A party was the last thing he wanted right now, but words just kept flying out of his mouth unchecked tonight.

"That sounds like fun. Might be just what you need, but there's no need to invite a whole crowd if you don't feel up to it," Burt said, patting his shoulder again as he moved away into the kitchen.

The twins were sitting on the couch watching TV, waiting eagerly for their brother's attention. "Hi, Kurt!"

"Ladies."

"I'm sorry if we upset you before," Kathy said earnestly.

Christy nodded. "We didn't mean to, honest!"

"I know. It wasn't your fault. I'm just feeling a little sensitive right now," he admitted. "Don't take it personally."

They both hugged him. "We won't."

Kurt smiled. He had always derived enjoyment from his sisters' habit of speaking in unison. "Isn't it getting pretty close to your bed time?" Ignoring their groaned denial, he added, "I was thinking that, if it is, you might enjoy a bedtime story from your big brother. Or are you guys too old for that now?"

"No way!" Kathy blurted, already grabbing his arm to tug him toward the stairs. "We'll never be too old for that."

"Never, ever!" Christy agreed, grabbing his other arm.

Exchanging an amused glance with his parents over their heads, he said, "In that case, why don't you guys run up and get yourselves washed and changed for bed and I'll join you in a few minutes. You can pick out a good book for me."

"Cool!" they chorused, charging up the stairs like a herd of elephants.

"They really have missed you," Carole said with a fond smile.

He smiled. "I've missed them too. I think they're just what the doctor ordered." He stretched, grimacing when that old familiar kink pulled at his neck. "And once I've got them down for the night, I think I'll go back to bed myself. I feel bad. I haven't seen nearly enough of you two and I know I slept through most of the day, but somehow I still feel exhausted."

"It's the stress," his father said wisely. "Emotional stress will kick your ass just as hard as the physical kind, maybe worse because it's harder to get away from. Don't worry about us, Kurt. We'll have plenty of time to catch up when you're feeling better. You just do what you need to do."

A powerful surge of love washed over him at those understanding words. He would never know how he had lucked into receiving the best dad in the entire world, but he most definitely had. Going
to him, Kurt hugged his father tightly. Offering the same to Carole, he said, "You two really are the best, you know that?"

Kissing him on the cheek, Carole said, "I put a set of your dad's pajamas on your bed."

"Thanks." He interrupted himself with a deep yawn. "Wow, maybe I'd better get up there before the girls get cheated out of their story. Good night, Carole. Good night, Dad."

Borrowing the bathroom in his parents' master suite, Kurt got ready for bed, exchanging his jeans for the lower half of the pajama set. The T-shirt would do for a top. He went to the twins' room and knocked, receiving an immediate invitation to enter. They were already on their beds, waiting for him with shiny-clean faces and matching nightgowns, the book of Disney fairy tales that had once been his own favorite was waiting on the small, straight backed chair that went with the vanity table Kurt had given them for their seventh birthday.

He took a seat and made himself as comfortable as possible on the undersized piece of furniture, smiling as he caressed the book's well-worn cover. "What would you like to hear?" After a little squabbling, Sleeping Beauty was deemed a good choice and the book was opened to the correct page. Kurt had hardly started the story before they were joined by Crookshanks, who wasted no time in helping himself to Kurt's lap, regardless of the large storybook in his hands. The big golden cat curled into a ball, clearly intending to stay awhile.

"Crooky wants to hear the story too," Kathy told him with a grin. "Sleeping Beauty is his favorite."

"It is a good one," Kurt agreed, stomach shaking with suppressed laughter as the feline smugly began to purr. "This was my favorite when I was little, too. My mom used to read it to me."

Turning the book so they could see the illustrations, he began the familiar story. Kurt had read this book so many times as a child that he barely even needed the text. He just narrated, turning the pages at the appropriate times. When the story drew to a close, with Phillip and Aurora dancing their magical waltz in a haze of pink and blue magical clouds, Kurt sighed.

"Are you sad, Kurt?" Christy asked him, head hanging over the edge of her bunk.

Kurt gave her a half-hearted smile. "I'm afraid I am. When I was a little boy, I used to watch this movie all the time," he said, skimming his fingers over the picture of the happy couple. "Then one day when I was about five or six I asked my mom if princes only ever came for girls. Because, you see, on some level I knew even then that I would grow up to love a boy instead of a girl. I wanted to believe that there might be a handsome prince out there somewhere who would feel the same way and come rescue me from being alone. Somebody who would love me and make me happy, like Mom and Dad did for each other."

"And live happy ever after?" Kathy whispered.

Kurt nodded. "Yeah. My mom assured me that someday it would happen and I really, honestly believed that it had." He sighed. "I guess I'm too old for fairy tales now."

Christy shook her head firmly. "No, you're not. Zachary wasn't a prince. He was just a nasty old frog. Your prince is still out there somewhere, waiting to find you."

Surprised by the certainty in her voice, he said, "I thought you liked Zach."

"I didn't," Kathy chimed in, wrinkling her cute little nose. "His smiles were always fake."

"He was a frog," Christy repeated seriously. "He looked like a prince because you loved him but his
Kurt was flabbergasted. He had never even suspected that his sisters did not like Zach. "You never said anything."

"Mom and Daddy always made us be polite," Kathy told him, rolling her eyes. "He was a grown-up, so Daddy said we had to be respectful to him, even though we didn't really want him here."

He did not know what to think. He had always been closely attuned to these girls, he should have seen what was going on but he had missed that as surely as he had missed the signs of Zachary's infidelity. Apparently love was not only blind . . . it was stupid! "I think you should go to sleep now," he said faintly, pushing the cat out of his lap and standing up to kiss his sisters goodnight. "I'll see you in the morning."

"Goodnight, Kurt. We love you!" they chimed.

"I love you, too," he replied sincerely. Shaking his head, he shut off the light, leaving the door cracked open for Crookshanks. He went back to his own room and got into bed but the sleepy feeling he had been fighting when he came upstairs had vanished. He now felt wide awake.
Kurt's family helps him deal with his feelings.

_Kurt was drowning in quicksand. Hot, heavy, barely allowing him to breathe as it sucked him inch by inch toward oblivion. He struggled and fought, trying to grab hold of a rope that was dangling above his head, just out of reach._

_To his left, sitting on the edge of the deathtrap, taking notes on a pad as he calmly watched the show, sat Zachary._

_"Help me!" Kurt begged. "Please give me your hand! Save me!"

_The other man brushed a hand through his perfect blond curls then studied his fingernails, brushing a speck of sand off his impeccable white clothing. An incredulous part of Kurt's mind noted that he was dressed in an absurd velvet doublet and hose combination, like some sort of ghostly Romeo. He appeared to be thinking the request over._

_Pressure squeezed Kurt's middle, crushing his lungs as he sank another few inches and desperately gasped, "Zach, please!"

_His heart felt equally crushed when cold blue eyes fastened on him and the other man smiled. It was a perfect smile full of straight white teeth, but it sent a shiver through Kurt that was at direct odds with the scorching sand around him. "I'm sorry, Kurt, but these clothes are brand new. I'll get dirty if I come any closer and I have a date tonight. You know how it is."_ 

_As the burning soil filled Kurt's open mouth, cutting off his scream of protest, his eyes watched in horror as another figure, shorter and darker-skinned, clad in a dark copy of Zachary's own outfit walked up and kissed him deeply. Both of them seemed totally oblivious to the man suffering right in front of their eyes._

_Just before the sand closed over Kurt's head, cutting off his vision, there was a flash of sickly green light and the two kissing men suddenly transformed into a pair of slimy, disgusting toads and hopped away._

_"Ugh!" Kurt exclaimed, jolting awake with a cry of revulsion and gasping a deep desperate breath. He still felt hot and unable to move, and for a terrible moment, pure panic coursed through him. Then the reality of the soft mattress beneath his body and the dim morning sunlight shining around the edge of his window curtains broke through the cobwebby terror in his brain and he realized that he had been having a nightmare._

_One of the sources of warmth suddenly wiggled and Kurt breathed a sigh of relief, wrapping his arm around the small body and hugging it tight against him, suddenly thankful beyond words for the reality of a willing human touch. Some time during the night, his sisters and their cat had decided to invade his bed. One twin was spooned up against his back with her arm draped around his middle and the other was snuggled into his chest with a hand resting on his neck. Crookshanks had taken ownership of Kurt's hip and thigh, radiating heat like a small purring electric blanket._
The images from his dream slowly faded and Kurt realized that he had a different but unfortunately very real problem. He was trapped. It was a decided improvement over the nightmare, but he was incredibly uncomfortable. His left arm had been pinned underneath his sister’s body for so long it had fallen asleep, he was entirely too warm, and as the minutes ticked by he became increasingly aware of the urgent pressure in his bladder.

Wondering how he was going to get out of this situation, he tried shaking the child that was suctioned to his chest. In the mostly dark room he could not tell which sister was which. "Hey! Wake up!" he whispered sharply. No response. He tried again, a little louder this time. "C'mon, Sis. It's time to get up."

She just mumbled something and burrowed closer.

Hoping he would have better luck with the other twin, Kurt leaned back, expecting her to instinctively move away from the threat of being squashed. Instead, the girl just shoved back, tightening her grip around his ribs and snoring in his ear for an added bonus.

"Crap," he muttered. Looking down at the cat, whose green eyes were open to slits and watching him with a disconcertingly amused expression, he said, "I don't suppose you'd like to help things along, would you?"

The annoying animal just yawned and stretched one impressively-clawed paw toward Kurt's face before tucking his head back down and making himself comfortable again.

"I figured you'd say that," Kurt grumbled.

An amused chuckle captured his attention. He had not even noticed his father standing in the doorway, grinning at the scene. "Need some help there, son?"

"Please," he agreed quickly. "If I don't get out of here soon, we're all going to be reliving what happened when I was eight, and I don't think any of us needs that trauma."

Understanding his meaning at once - for a few weeks after his mother died, Kurt had gone through an unfortunate phase of bedwetting - Burt came closer and patted him on the shoulder in remembered sympathy. He started with the cat, tossing it off the bed with little regard for the animal's squeak of insult, then untangling the closest twin from around Kurt's neck.

"Thanks," he said, carefully prying the other girl's arm off his waist. She had a hell of a grip for a nine-year-old.

"No problem. I saw your door open and figured Shanks had probably snuck in here to cuddle. Wasn't expecting all three of them." Burt laughed again, picking up one daughter and cradling her securely against his chest as Kurt used the newly gained freedom to scoot out from under the blankets.

Not waiting to see whether his father would put the girl back in his bed or transport her back to her own, Kurt hurried to take care of his personal business. When he returned a few minutes later, feeling much better, his light had been switched on and the bed was empty except for Crookshanks. The cat had taken advantage of the warm empty space and curled right back into the middle of Kurt's mattress.

"Oh, help yourself by all means," Kurt grumbled, feeling more amused than annoyed by the blissfully sleeping animal. "Don't mind me."

Burt came back in and shook his head at the sight. "That cat's a pain in the ass, but he ain't dumb."
"You put the girls back to bed?"

"Yeah, they've still got some time before they need to get up for school. I'm heading into work early today, since I went in late yesterday."

Kurt scrubbed a hand through his pillow rumpled hair, feeling silly that he had failed to notice that his dad was already dressed for the day ahead. "I don't suppose you could use an extra hand?" His shoulders lifted in a shrug when his dad looked surprised. "I know it's been a few years, but I'm sure I can still remember how to rotate tires and do an oil-change."

"You sure? Carole will be home today, and Finn and his family are coming later," Burt reminded him. "He called back last night after he realized that driving would be faster. They should be here around noon."

"Oh," he said, trying not to feel dejected at the notion of hanging around the house all day with nothing to do but think. "Right. I guess it would be kind of rude if I wasn't here to greet them. I mean, considering."

Burt Hummel was not the most nuanced man on the planet, but he knew his firstborn well enough to correctly interpret the lack of enthusiasm. "On the other hand, with two of us working we'd get done twice as fast and I'd have a perfect excuse to play a little afternoon hooky. Spend some time with my boys."

A smile lifted Kurt's features, and his eyes became brighter. "Really?"

"Why not? What's the point of being the boss if you can't give yourself an extra day off when you feel like it, right?"

"Right," he agreed happily. It was not that Kurt didn't love his stepmother and sisters, or that he was not looking forward to seeing Finn and his family, but there was something about his father that Kurt still found more comforting than anything else in the world. Right now, he needed that sense of security. "I'll go grab a shower and be ready as soon as I can."

Burt nodded, patting him on the back in wordless understanding.

As his father began to walk away, Kurt said, "Wait! Dad, do you know if I still have that old steamer trunk down in the basement?"

Puzzled by the question, Burt scratched his head. "Far as I know you never took it away, so it should still be there."

"Great!"

Pushing past his bemused parent, Kurt padded downstairs and then turned on the basement light and descended another level. This basement was nothing like the one he had once claimed for his own room, but it had been carpeted since the family had originally moved into this house. The three sad, naked light bulbs that had originally hung from the ceiling had been replaced by neat fluorescent track lighting. This made it easy to search through the collection of boxes and bikes, board games and stored Christmas decorations that lived down here, until Kurt found what he was looking for.

During Kurt's sophomore and early junior years in high school, he and Mercedes Jones had appointed themselves prop master for the dozens of outfits their glee club had put together to wear for performances. He had taken charge of the boys' wardrobe and she had taken the girls'. Most of the items had been turned over Mr. Schuester when Kurt had left McKinley for Dalton Academy, but his personal collection of costumes had remained.
"Ah, hah," he said in satisfaction as he spotted the trunk he wanted hiding beneath an old dollhouse that his sisters had outgrown. Shifting the toy carefully to one side, Kurt opened the container and pawed through the contents. He had remembered this stash in the middle of the night and hoped that some of the old clothes and shoes might still fit.

Most of his fellow students had had no appreciation for fashion, whining if they had to wear anything fancier than jeans, T-shirts and plain, button-down shirts. Kurt had hated that plebian attitude at the time, but he was grateful for it now. Some things were just so simple that they would never go out of fashion.

He smiled when he came across a pair of dark blue jeans from sophomore year that had been loose and unfortunately long on him. He had actually been forced to roll the cuffs, which had offended his sense of style mightily at the time, but which would prove advantageous now.

Picking out a bright red T-shirt to go with the jeans, he kept searching.

"Yes!" he crowed, coming upon the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. His old black and white Converse. They had been a costume staple of New Directions, and with any luck, they would still fit reasonably well. Kurt checked his watch. He had been down here for almost 20 minutes. Better get moving before Dad decided to leave without him.

Racing back upstairs, Kurt took a quick shower and got organized for the day. He was happy to find that the clothes did fit, though the T-shirt was a lot tighter than he remembered. The sneakers also pinched his toes but not unbearably. At least they would be more appropriate for a morning in a tire store than his expensive leather boots.

On his way toward the stairs, Kurt impulsively diverted into his sisters' room and gave them each a kiss on the cheek. He had a feeling that this morning's nightmare would have been a lot worse without the subconscious comfort of their presence.

Christy's eyes blinked heavily when she felt the soft touch on her face. "Daddy?"

"No, honey, it's Kurt," he whispered.

"Mmm," she hummed, smiling angelically and closing her eyes again as she mumbled, "You're home."

Kurt smiled and gave one of her curls a little tug to get her attention again. "I'm home, but I'm going to work with Daddy this morning so don't get upset when I'm not here to have breakfast with you guys, okay? Tell Kathy for me."

"Kay," she sighed, already asleep.

Hoping she would remember, he crept out of the room and down the stairs. Carole was up by now too, still in her bathrobe and slippers but busily moving around the kitchen, dishing eggs and toast onto plates. Burt was reading the morning paper over a cup of coffee. Carole smiled at Kurt.

"Morning, sweetie. Oh, I see you found your old clothes. Burt said you'd gone down to the basement. She shook her head. "I had no idea those would still fit. You make me a little jealous!"

He laughed. "There's no way those super-skinny jeans I loved so much at sixteen still fit me, but I found a couple of things that will do for now. Dad agreed to babysit me at the garage this morning, but after Finn and Julie get here I may need to steal my big sister away for a day of retail therapy."

"I'm sure Finn will be thrilled," she said with a laugh, setting the plates on the table and going back for two cups of coffee, which she set in Kurt's place and her own before sitting down. "As long as
you don't invite him to join you."

Burt smiled into his cup as he took a long sip. "Can't blame him. It's a little like watching one of those extreme sports things. The rules are confusing and you just know somebody's gonna get hurt."

"It only seems that way because you refuse to learn how to play the game properly," Kurt told him with a raise of his eyebrow. "Fortunately, you and Finn both married sensible women who weren't afraid of a little adventure."

"Lucky for me," Burt agreed, picking up his wife's hand and giving it a kiss.

That strange, empty feeling swept over Kurt again while witnessing the casually loving gesture. When they first got together, Kurt and Zach had had rituals like that. Breakfast had been one of them. He had always been an early riser, but Zachary had usually joined him for coffee before going back to bed. He liked to say good morning by wrapping his arms around Kurt's shoulders and pressing a kiss to the patch of skin behind his ear. Kurt would hug his forearms and then turn to plant a kiss against the adorable dimple on his boyfriend's chin. It had been something private and sweet, just between themselves and not for the eyes of the outside world.

He wondered when they had stopped doing that. At some point, he had started drinking his coffee in solitude, telling himself that it was because his partner had been up late working on some article. He could not remember the last time Zach had even bothered to say good morning to him.

Other memories swept through Kurt's mind, making him feel sad as he realized just how many of those important moments had slowly disappeared from his life over the last year. Holding hands while they watched TV together. Synchronizing their schedules to meet for lunch in the park or a drink at some cozy little café. The cute and sometimes naughty little text messages Zachary used to send him when he knew Kurt would be in the middle of a production meeting, which Kurt would repay by leaving suggestive notes tucked inside his partner's laptop or notebook. Teasing Zach awake with kisses that turned into long, glorious bouts of lovemaking in the middle of the night. Sometimes, just snuggling up to him and reveling in the sensation of being held by loving arms.

At some point, all of that had stopped. Kurt had tried, but the other man always seemed to have his hands full, or his day booked, or to be claiming the need for an early night. He had stopped waking up when Kurt kissed him, just rolling away and going back to his own private dreams. Dreams that had probably been filled with other faces. Other hands. Other lips.

Kurt suddenly jumped about a foot when he felt a touch on his wrist. He looked up to find Carole sitting right next to him. He had not even seen her move. It was even more of a shock to realize that his father was no longer at the table.

"He went out to start the truck," she said kindly, following his gaze. "You were a little lost in thought, there."

He picked up his fork and started shoveling eggs into his mouth as a distraction, grimacing when he discovered that they had grown cold. He put the fork back down and tried the toast instead. He did not care if that was warm or not. Sneaking a glance at Carole's face, he said, "Exactly how long was I daydreaming?"

"I'm not sure. Five or ten minutes, I guess. Burt was talking to you and you were just staring off into space. I asked him to give us a moment alone."

Kurt blushed hotly. How embarrassing.
"Your father was not the first man I ever dated after Christopher died," Carole told him abruptly.

Kurt looked up, startled by the words. Finn had told him once about his mother dating some lawn care guy who had taught Finn how to sing, but otherwise this had been a closed subject. Kurt had assumed that Carole had been single the rest of the time. Which was a very childish point of view, now that he thought about it.

"There weren't many men in my life, and none that were half as good as your dad, but a few times I did try to make a new life for myself. I still loved Finn's father, but he was gone and I was lonely. I also wasn't sure if I was capable of raising a son all alone. The problem was that I ended up dating guys more for what I hoped they could be than for what they actually were." She shook her head. "I became so disillusioned after a while that I pretty much retreated from any form of social life. It was just me and Finn, and I was convinced that it always would be."

"And then you met Dad."

Carole smiled tenderly and corrected him. "No, then I met you. That sweet young man who always said hello to me at parent-teacher nights, or stopped to chat whenever he ran into me while we were each doing our weekly grocery shopping. Then you introduced me to your dad and my whole life changed." She reached out and squeezed his hand. "I know you had your own reasons for introducing us, but the fact that you trusted me with the man you loved more than anyone else in the entire world . . . That was huge for me. I don't know if I've ever told you how honored I felt by that."

Touched but a little confused, he said, "I'm glad, but why are you telling me now?"

"Because you helped me to believe that there were still good, decent men out there, Kurt. Men like your father, and men like you, even as young as you were then. You are such a wonderful person and you deserve so much more than to be shoved aside for petty, selfish reasons. Zachary is a fool, Kurt, a blind, self-centered jackass who wasn't smart enough to appreciate that he'd already found the best thing that could ever happen to him."

Kurt gulped. He had not expected that at all.

"Thanks, Carole." He smiled. "And just so you know, your daughters agree with you. They told me in no uncertain terms last night that my ex-boyfriend is a warty old frog and that Prince Charming is still out there somewhere."

Carole laughed with him, leaning closer for a hug. "They're smart girls."

"Just like their mom," he said, holding on tight. Dashing at his nose, he gave up on the cold breakfast and stood. "I better get going. Dad's waiting."

"I'll see you when you get home," she told him, as easily if they had just been discussing the weather.

Kurt headed for the door and then paused. "You didn't like him either, did you?"

Calmly taking a sip of coffee, she just smiled and said, "Have a good day, sweetie."

Kurt grabbed his coat and walked outside, shutting the front door behind him. Carole had given him a lot to think about.
Tuesdays were rarely the most booming business-days at Hummel Tires & Lube and this one was proving to be no exception. Only three cars had come in so far, two oil changes and a tire rotation, but Kurt was happy that he had joined his dad anyway. Burt had scheduled two of his mechanics to come in at ten o'clock, so for the first couple of hours they had the shop to themselves and had discovered to their mutual satisfaction that they still worked together in perfect harmony, sharing easy silences and occasional spurts of laughter-filled conversation about nothing in particular.

Being at the garage felt comfortable and fun and this was one activity that held no unwelcome memories of Zach. The other man had been uninterested in cars, caring only whether they would start when he turned the key and stop when he hit the brakes. Anything more was someone else's concern. Kurt, on the other hand, had grown up in this very shop, eagerly asking questions and pestering his dad to let him help from the time he was first allowed to enter the wide double doors and see what went on inside. He had never had any genuine desire to become a mechanic, the young Kurt's dreams had always revolved around stages and spotlights, but by the time he was 14 years old, he could capably do everything from changing an oil filter to stripping and rebuilding an engine.

"Hey, anybody know where I can find the Hummels?"

Kurt and Burt pulled their heads out from under the hood of a green Ford Taurus and grinned broadly at the familiar voice.

"Finn!" Kurt shouted, carefully holding his greasy hands away from his grinning brother's clean shirt as he threw both arms around Finn's neck and returned the hearty bear-hug that he lifted him right off the ground. "You're early!"

"I got a little antsy this morning. Couldn't sleep and I was driving Julie crazy, so she let us get an early start. She managed to get a couple extra days off from the hospital so she and little Kurt are back at the house with Mom," he said, putting his brother down but keeping an arm wrapped around his shoulders as he shook hands with Burt. "It's good to see you guys."

"You too, son," Burt returned warmly. "Glad to hear Julie was able to get away."

Finn's wife was a nurse at Good Samaritan hospital in Cincinnati and her schedule was typically demanding.

"Yeah, it was great luck that they had some extra people available right now. She needs to get back for the weekend shift, but she was worried about Kurt and wasn't about to let me come down here all alone. You okay, man?" he asked solemnly, worried brown eyes studying Kurt's face.

Kurt shrugged one shoulder as he concentrated on using the rag he'd had tucked into his back pocket to remove grease from his hands. He could not bring himself to meet Finn's gaze. "More or less. Being home is helping. So is working. You know how it goes."

Finn looked around the quiet garage, taking in the familiar sights. "Yeah. This place was always your X-Box, wasn't it?"

He nodded, knowing exactly what his brother meant. When Finn had been betrayed by his first girlfriend he had played video games until he damn near wore out the cartridges. He had done the same thing every time he split with Rachel Berry – and it seemed to Kurt that those two had hooked up and broken up more often than lovers on a soap opera – and again after ending things with two
subsequent girlfriends. Video games were Finn's panacea for a broken heart. Working on cars was Kurt's. "I guess so. I always know what's supposed to go where when it comes to these. How to make them run smoothly and perform the way they're supposed to. Guess I'm not as good when it comes to relationships."

Burt gently squeezed his neck. "That's 'cause people don't come with an instruction manual, kid."

Glancing around the nearly-empty space, he suggested, "Why don't you two take off and get caught up? I can finish this up and handle whatever else comes along until Ray and Morgan show up."

"You sure?" Kurt asked, reluctant to leave this safe and comforting space.

"Go on," Burt said, waving them away. "The guys will be by pretty soon and I'll meet you two back at the house for lunch."

Finn beamed. "Awesome. C'mon, Kurt. I'll buy you coffee or something."

Kurt unzipped his borrowed coverall and put it back in the supply room, pausing to wash his hands more thoroughly before pulling on his coat and saying goodbye to his father.

"I don't really feel like coffee. I don't suppose you'd be interested in just taking a walk?" he asked as they started toward Finn's waiting car. "It's been over a year since I've been back in town. I'd kind of like to see the sights."

They shared a grin at that. Lima was not as small as it had been when they were boys, but it was still a long way from a tourist-attraction. "Sure," Finn agreed amiably, switching direction and meandering along next to his brother.

It was a nice day out. Chilly but not too cold, and the sun was starting to peek through the light clouds overhead. Finn was not pushing him to talk and Kurt relaxed a bit, enjoying the rare pleasure of his company. He studied the taller man out of the corner of his eye. Finn Hudson at 28 still looked very much the same as the adorably dumb jock who had been Kurt's first crush back in high school. There were a few laugh-lines around the eyes and mouth, a lot more muscle broadening his shoulders, but Kurt could still sense the giving and innocent nature that had always characterized him.

"Like riding a bike, huh?" Finn said out of nowhere.

Kurt's brow furrowed. "Excuse me?"

"Fixing cars," he elaborated. "You guys looked like a well oiled machine. No pun intended. So, I was just saying that for you, mechanic stuff must be kind of like riding a bike. Something you never forget."

"Oh. Yes," Kurt replied. Then he laughed. "Although, for me, fixing a car is fortunately not at all like riding a bike."

At Finn's questioning look, he explained, "I let Emily Switek rope me into participating in the annual Five Boro Bike Tour last spring." He shook his head. "Not a smart move on my part. I had somehow assumed that since I had been pretty good at riding a bike as a kid and was in good physical shape from work outs and dancing, that the event would be a piece of cake."

Finn was already grinning. "Not so much?"

"I felt like I was seven again and my training wheels had just been removed," he admitted. "I finally got the hang of it once Em stopped mocking me long enough to give out a few pointers, but she had
conveniently neglected to mention that the ride was a long one. Forty two freaking miles! I could barely close my legs for the next two days, never mind sitting or standing up fast."

Laughter burst from Finn's mouth. "In light of recent events, I'll spare you the joke that just popped inside my head."

Kurt tried and failed not to smile back. "I doubt you'd come up with anything that all my dear friends in New York didn't already think of. I thought my ass would never recover and I was walking so funny that Zach couldn't even look at me without bursting out laughing." The name had no sooner crossed Kurt's lips than his good mood abruptly fizzled. He sighed, making an impatient gesture with his hands as he dashed them across his eyes, feeling a sudden prickle of tears out of nowhere. "Damn it!"

Finn patted him on the shoulder. "It's okay, Kurt. It's hard for you to even think about him right now, I know, but it'll get better with time."

The words 'How would you know?' were on the tip of Kurt's tongue, just waiting to be snapped out, when he abruptly remembered that Finn actually did know.

"If how I feel right now is anything like how you felt when you found out about Quinn and Puck, I owe you a major apology," he said quietly. "Looking back, I realize that I wasn't nearly as sympathetic as I could've been."

"It's cool," Finn said, brushing the matter aside. "The memory of that still stings a little, even now, but we all moved past it a long time ago and to be honest I think . . . no, I know that Quinn had it worse than I did. Even when I thought I'd messed up, my mom was still there for me and having my son now makes me realize how much those two both must have suffered. I can't even imagine how it would feel to have to give my kid away for adoption."

Kurt sighed. "We were all kids then, growing up and making mistakes. We were too young to know that some mistakes last forever."

"Maybe so, but Zach is thirty, he doesn't have that excuse," Finn stated bluntly, reaching over and draping an arm across his brother's rigid shoulder line. "How did you find out he was messing around?"

A little surprised by the question, having assumed that his father would have given Finn all the details during their phone conversation last night, he said, "Caught him. Walked in from work two nights ago and there he was, buried to the balls in some stranger, right in our own bed."

"No way! Why that miserable, fucking . . . asshole!" Finn spat, after struggling a moment to find a proper epithet, his large hands clenching into fists. "I'm gonna kill him!"

"Get in line," Kurt said wryly. "I think Dad wants first dibs on the job. I personally don't ever want to lay eyes on Zachary again. Apparently that other guy he was with was just the latest in a long string of illicit affairs. And I never suspected a thing. How is that even possible? Why couldn't I see what was happening, Finn?"

He choked on another rush of the seemingly ever-ready tears, ducking his head when a few of them slipped past his control and spilled down his cheeks. He snuffled and dashed them away with his coat-sleeve. There did not appear to be a lot of people out and about today, but he was not eager to make a public spectacle of himself on the streets of Lima.

Finn just pulled him a little closer, giving him one of those funny, manly 'bro' hugs that Kurt had
always found amusing for some reason. Today, he found it oddly comforting. "Pretty sure nobody ever sees it coming," he said with a grimace. "Why would they? Unless you're the kind of person who thinks it's okay to cheat on the person who loves you, you don't really consider that anyone would do that to you. It took me a long time to realize that trusting the wrong person doesn't mean that you're stupid. It just means that you made a bad choice. All you can do is pick up the pieces and start over."

Kurt gently elbowed his step-brother in the ribs. "Since when are you so wise and all-knowing?"

He grinned. "Like I said, I know how you feel. Besides, you're strong. Seriously, dude, one of the strongest guys I know."

"That's quite a statement, considering that most of the guys you know could flatten me with a flick of their pinky," Kurt snorted, trying to get his equilibrium back through the familiar use of sarcasm.

Finn laughed. "I'm not kidding, Kurt. You may be a little on the puny side, but you've got a set of fucking titanium bowling balls for gonads."

Kurt's mouth dropped open, not at all sure how to take such a . . . compliment? "Really," he said flatly.

"Totally! You stand by your friends. You protect the people you love. You always snap back, no matter how bad things get, or how much somebody hurts you. Look at the way you handled living in this town with all the stupid people who thought you were wrong to be gay, including me at one time. You stayed true to yourself, held your head high, and basically told us all that we could accept you for who you were, or go screw ourselves. Knowing you made me, and maybe a lot of other guys, better people in spite of ourselves. That takes major nads, man. And if you could handle that, you can definitely handle this."

"You think so?" he asked hopefully. He could feel his cheeks burning. Finn had not felt motivated to say this many nice things to him all at once since their parents' wedding, over a decade ago.

"Totally. You'll have some hot dude on your arm within a month, and that dick-wad Zachary will be kicking his own ass for years for letting you get away."

Kurt gave the taller man a quick squeeze around the waist. "I'm not sure I believe that, but it's nice to know someone does."

Finn smiled. "You don't believe me? Remember when you broke up with that Warbler dude back in high school, and then spent a whole week holed up in your bedroom crying into your pillow and playing God-awful love songs loud enough to wake the dead? And then a whole other week telling everybody that none of us understood the, and I quote, "beautiful tragedy of a budding young romance cut off in its prime."

Kurt winced. "Oh, my God. Tell me I didn't really say that."

"You did. To anybody who would listen," Finn told him with a chuckle. "I was getting seriously annoyed, and kinda worried about you. But then one day you got over the blues and decided that you were okay, just like that. You and he decided to be friends and all was forgiven."

Kurt covered his hot face with both hands. "I remember now. It was summertime. Mercedes finally got sick of listening to me whine, so she dragged me down to the public pool to 'scope the hotties' with her. I didn't want to go, but then I got distracted by a couple of abs-of-steel types who were entertaining themselves with a diving contest. I . . ." He paused, remembering who he was talking to.
"Well, let's just say that I decided I was ready to move on. That had been the part of Blaine's break-up speech that pissed me off, you know. Him saying that we had grown apart and were ready to move on to something new. It really annoyed me that he was right."

Finn smiled. "You survived that breakup, and a few others that came after, and you're a wiser person now. This situation hurts a hell of a lot more than any of those because Zach betrayed you. I totally get that." As they reached the end of a block, where a red light impeded their progress, Finn turned and looked his brother straight in the eye. "But you didn't do anything wrong here, Kurt. It's hard to forgive somebody who betrays you, but if you want my opinion he's not worth the effort of even trying. Just blast him and move on to the next level."

"The next . . . level?" Kurt repeated. He had been absorbing the speech just fine until that last bit.

"You know. Like when you get to the twelfth level of 'Demon Wars' and there's that big ogre thing with the mace that shoots poison darts? It looks like there's no way to get past him and you keep getting shot over and over and you're, like, staggering to your death? Your guy is just about to run out of life and you figure the game is over and you've lost again, but then you suddenly figure out that you can aim your laser rifle at the rocks and bring the ceiling down on his head. The ogre is dead and you go to the next level and there's a really cool treasure waiting."

Realizing that he had just had his love life compared to a video game, and that Finn's analogy was not altogether unlike their nine year old sisters' fairy-tale frog theory, Kurt started to laugh. Dad had been going on all morning about how an engine had to have just the right combination of parts to run smoothly and how one cheap or ill-fitting part could wreck the entire thing. He had just nodded and said, "Uh huh," a lot, but now he realized that his dad had probably been trying to present his own version of a relationship allegory.

At least Carole's attempt had involved actual human beings!

"Thank you, Finn," he said warmly. "I really do appreciate that and I promise I'll give it some thought."

"Cool," he said, beaming with self-satisfaction. "You want to go back to the car now?"

Kurt laughed again. "All right, we might as . . ." He paused mid-sentence, realizing that they were standing just half a block away from Chang's Shoes. "Actually, would you mind a quick stop first? These old sneakers are crushing my toes."

Finn had learned long ago to be wary whenever Kurt proposed a shopping trip, but his eyes lit up when he saw where his brother was looking. "Mom told me that Mike was back in town. You think he might be in?"

"Let's find out," Kurt said, striding towards the shop.

Maybe it was just a desire to recapture that oddly warm moment that had occurred between them last night, but Kurt suddenly found himself strangely eager to see the other man again.

To the satisfaction of both brothers, Mike was indeed manning the shop today. He looked up at the sound of the bell and grinned brightly. "Finn!" he greeted, stepping forward with open arms to capture the taller man in a back thumping hug, then wrapping both hands around Kurt's extended hand for a warm shake. "It's so good to see you both again. When I ran into Kurt last night, he didn't mention that both of you were visiting."

"Finn wasn't here yet," Kurt cut in. "He just got in and we were about to head back for lunch with
the family. I talked him into letting me stop in for a little shopping first."

He nodded, smiling happily. "Glad you did. I've got some new things in that you might like. Give us a minute, Finn?"

The tall quarterback grinned and gestured them forward. "Be my guest. Just don't let Kurt try on every shoe in the store. Mom won't be happy if we miss lunch."

"You got it," he laughed. Leading Kurt into the back where the shoes in his size were stocked, Mike pointed out a few items. "These are the newest ones. I'm not sure what you're looking for, but we have a lot of different styles to choose from."

"I could use several different pairs, to be honest, but I'll wait on that until I have a chance to do some clothes shopping. Right now, I'm just looking to replace these," Kurt said, gesturing down at the well-worn black and white sneakers. "Believe it or not, these are my New Directions chucks from sophomore year. I found them in the basement this morning."

"No way! Those are in good shape, all things considered! I wore mine down to shreds."

Mike grinned and that odd warm feeling coursed through Kurt's belly again, making him smile back. He took off his coat and struck a playful pose, one hand on his hip. "I am full glee club retro today. These are my 'Don't Stop Believing' jeans, my 'True Colors' T-shirt and my general all-purpose Converse. And everything still fits . . . more or less."

"I'm impressed!" Mike laughed. "You look good. In fact, you make those old Directions look absolutely new again," His dark eyes sparkling with enjoyment of the repartee.

"Why, thank you, sir," Kurt joked back, taking a silly half-bow. Suddenly, he froze. His blue eyes widened as he realized that he was flirting, and not very damned subtly either. Was this some kind of rebound desperation instinct? Trick the first straight guy you meet into paying you compliments and then maybe you won't have to remember that the gay ones seem to think that you're chopped liver? Grabbing the first pair of sneakers his hand touched, he averted his gaze and stammered, "I-I-I'll try these on. For the size . . . for my size . . . see if they fit."

Mike looked puzzled by the sudden shift in Kurt's mood, but nodded politely. "They should fit but I'm not sure they're your color. Especially with blue jeans and a red shirt. Back in the day, you would have berated Mercedes up, down and sideways for wearing burnt orange and lime green together." He shrugged. "I mostly stock that shoe because the kids are all nuts for mix and match stuff these days."

Kurt was glad he could not see his own rapidly heating face at this moment. Mike was right. The shoe in his hand was beyond ugly. Even just holding it on his lap, in direct line of sight with his clothing, was making him feel a little nauseous. Terrific. So now Mike probably not only thought he had become some inappropriately flirtatious nut job, he must think that Kurt's fashion-sense had met a tragic and tacky death as well.

"You're right," he said. "I must have grabbed the wrong box. I wanted the pair next to these."

Praying that there had been something marginally less revolting in close proximity, he breathed a sigh of silent relief when Mike pulled out a pair of red and black classic Nikes. "These?" He smiled when Kurt nodded. "That makes more sense. Let me just put those others back."

"Thank you," Kurt replied smoothly, quickly lacing the sneakers and kicking off his old pair. The new shoes were actually quite comfortable, he decided as he stood up and took a few steps. "Would
you recommend these for someone who does a lot of walking, or are they more for sports?"

He did not really care, but he wanted to keep Mike talking for a little while longer, anxious to correct the unfortunate impression he must have made a moment ago.

"Either really. They're shock absorbent, great for high-impact activities like basketball or aerobics, but these are much better for long distance walking. They have firmer ankle and arch support," he said, handing over another pair, white with dark blue accents.

Kurt liked the second pair better on sight and when he switched the red pair for the blue he nodded. "They feel good." He examined the reflection of his feet in the little mirror attached to the footstool. "Look good, too. I think I'll take them."

"Great," Mike said. He smiled. "That was easy. I don't remember you ever choosing a pair after only three tries. Want to wear them out of the store?"

"Yes, please, and I'm not quite as picky as I used to be," he said, storing his old Converse in the shoebox and handing the Nikes back to Mike. "Maybe that's been my problem lately. New York has plenty of selection but all the good ones seem to be back in Ohio."

Mike stroked his lower lip as he asked, "We're not talking about shoes anymore, are we?"

Kurt closed his eyes and sighed. He was doing it again. Pinching the bridge of his nose, he said, "No. Please forgive me for saying that if it was inappropriate. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

"You didn't," he said, surprising Kurt. "You haven't seen me in quite a few years, but you still remember me as someone who could take a joke, I hope."

He nodded, relieved. "Yes. Somehow when I'm talking with you, it doesn't feel like ten years have gone by. I half expect you to break into a pop-and-lock dance, or start extolling the virtues of Asian cooking."

The other man threw his head back and laughed. "Oh God. I'd forgotten my all-things-Asian phase! Man, poor Tina was ready to brain me with a wok the time I took her to my mom's favorite Chinese restaurant and made her order the chicken feet."

Kurt laughed too, though his nose wrinkled in revulsion. "Yeah, she didn't stop complaining about that for a week. So, you're not into that anymore?"

"Nah, I just did it to please my parents. They were really into honoring our Asian heritage and doing things that would uphold the family pride. You know, manly warrior-like things like football." He shook his head ruefully. "That's why I went out for the team instead of joining the jazz-tap-ballet club during my freshman year like I wanted to. As you may remember, that was the one club in school that was rated even lower than Glee on the popularity scale."

Kurt snorted. "I remember. The jocks were convinced that dance class was a one-way ticket on the HomoExpress. Thank goodness I wasn't much of a dancer before I joined Glee. Just having me in close proximity would have given those kids a lifetime guarantee of Slushie facials if I'd joined them. Stupid, considering that there were no other gay students attending McKinley at that time. Not counting closet cases."

A strange smile tilted Mike's lips. "Not everyone is brave enough to come out in high school. Some people need a few years to ease into the idea. Or to ease their families into it. You were lucky."
"With my dad, you mean?" Kurt said, looking up as he finished tying his new shoes. "You're right, I was definitely lucky to have him. I still consider myself the luckiest man on earth to have had somebody like him for a father."

"He's a great guy," Mike agreed amiably.

Kurt smiled and stood up. Feeling that he had managed to get past the embarrassment of their first few minutes, he picked up his shoe box. "I guess I'm set. Let me just pay for these and I'll get out of your way. At least until I get my other shopping finished and come back."

"Looking forward to it," he said lightly. "And have you given any more thought to my invitation of dinner and drinks; a chance to catch up?"

A happy feeling shivered through Kurt's body. He had assumed that was just a bit of friendly nonsense, like telling someone you'll have to get together 'one of these days' with no plans to actually do so. "We should do it, and I'm sure Finn and Mercedes would love to join us. Maybe Artie and Tina as well, if that wouldn't be awkward for you."

Was he imagining things or did Mike look a little disappointed?

"Not that I'm suggesting you pay for all those people!" he added hastily. "I'd be happy to cover them since I'm the one proposing a party. I just thought it'd be nice to see everyone while we're all in town. A sort of mini glee club reunion. That would be fun, wouldn't it?" Damn it. He was running off at the mouth again, babbling brainlessly, and he had no idea why.

Mike nodded. "It would be a lot of fun to see everybody again. You're right, we should do that. Let's ask Finn."

Relieved that he had not stuck his foot in his mouth, Kurt followed the other man back to the front of the store where Finn was flipping through a small brochure and looking bored to death. "Found what I needed," he announced, lifting a foot for his brother's inspection.

"Nice," Finn obliged, eagerly setting his brochure back in the rack next to the register. "We should really get going. Everybody's waiting. Sorry we didn't get a chance to talk more," he said, switching his attention to Mike.

Mike waved away the comment as he rang up Kurt's order and waited for the charge to go through. "There'll be time, unless you're heading right back. Kurt and I were just discussing the possibility of a Glee get together some night while he's in town. Me, Kurt, Mercedes, Tina, Artie and you, if you're available."

Finn grinned brightly. "That sounds awesome, man! Can we do it before Friday? My wife took a couple of days off from work, but we'll need to get back before the weekend."

"We're only talking about a dinner," Kurt said. "I'm sure we can probably schedule something between now and Thursday that will work for everyone. Maybe it'll give Mercedes an excuse not to give her students any homework that day."

As the brothers walked back toward the garage, Finn filling him in on all the latest news of his three year old, Kurt found his attention splitting. Half of him was listening with interest to the stories about his beloved nephew, while the other half kept flitting back to his awkward but pleasant conversation with Mike. The years had treated the other man very well. He seemed so much more comfortable and self-confident now than the boy he had once been. It would be very pleasant to catch up with him in more depth.
And the others too, of course! It would be good to see all of them. Not just Mike.

Striding along on his brand new shoes, Kurt mused with satisfaction that they were very comfortable; a great improvement over his old pair. That must be the reason he felt so much lighter and happier now than when he and Finn had first entered the store. He had always been a firm believer in the benefits of retail therapy.
Surprises

After a rapturous reunion with his sister-in-law and little nephew, whom Kurt had not seen since he hosted them overnight at his home during an 'away' game between the Cincinnati Bengals and the New York Jets last November, Kurt had devoted Tuesday afternoon to the enjoyable tasks of shopping for a replacement wardrobe and planning the New Directions get-together. He had always had a knack for such things and this gave him the perfect distraction from thinking about the wreck of his personal life.

Thursday turned out to be the only free night in everyone's schedule, but Mercedes made Kurt promise on pain of death that he would come by McKinley that day and pick her up so they could enjoy a bit of private BFF time before meeting the others for dinner. It was a promise he had been more than happy to give.

Artie and Tina had put him on speaker-phone to talk at the same time and Kurt could not help smiling at the constant racket of childish voices babbling in the background. Those two had reignited their old high school romance during the summer before college, getting married before graduation and proceeding to have a baby almost immediately. The first of an eventual five. Kurt was not sure how they had managed it without having a nervous breakdown, but somehow they had both managed to graduate high in their classes and, with some help from their parents, become excellent parents. The second and third Abrams children were twins, giving them something in common with Kurt's family, who had grown close to the young couple and their brood once they had made the decision to return to Lima.

Burt and Carole had come to the rescue as they overheard Kurt's half of the conversation, offering to host the Abrams kids for an evening. They were generally a well-behaved bunch, who seemed to have inherited their parents' laid-back nature. They had no doubt benefited from having stay at home parents - Artie having found work as a digital film editor, and Tina having stumbled into the surprising field of cartoon voice-overs - but Kurt and Finn had both been a little dubious. Two healthy but still middle-aged adults versus eight rambunctious young children, three of them under the age of four, did not seem like fair odds. Luckily, Julie Hudson had declared that she was willing to stay home and help her in-laws while Finn and Kurt enjoyed this rare time with their old friends.

The guys had still been a little unsure, not wanting to take advantage, but Burt, Carole and Julie had insisted and soon the plan was set.

Kurt had made a second visit to the shoe store, intending to bring Mike up to speed and give himself a chance to buy a few more pairs of new shoes to match his brand new clothing, but unfortunately his timing was bad. Mike's sister, Lynne Chang-Lee had taken over the shop by evening and while she was very sweet and had happily chatted with Kurt for several minutes before supplying him with her brother's phone number, Kurt had left feeling oddly disappointed.

After spending most of Wednesday with his family, Kurt had finally given Emily a call and assured her that he was alive and recovering. He had also gotten reassurance that all of his voice-lessons had been cancelled for the foreseeable future and that his apartment was still empty. No one had seen Zach since his eviction and Em had been happy to report that none of their friends were eager to offer the other man house room after the way he had treated Kurt.

He had spoken with Rachel Berry for a few minutes after hanging up with Emily. He had hoped Rachel might be free for a quick trip to Ohio, but unfortunately she was booked solid for at least the next month. Kurt had been a bit surprised when his old friend had dropped her self-centered diva persona and spoken warmly and sincerely to him, expressing sympathy over his situation. She had
wished him well and Kurt had ended the call with the most peculiar feeling that he had just received a hug.

Those two calls had left him unsure how to feel. According to Emily and Rachel, his New York friends had all been disgusted over Zach's behavior. Kurt had been aware that he was well liked and respected within his circle, but he had just assumed that sympathy would be split between them. It was touching and a little stunning to discover how many friends had jumped in on his side with no hesitations. It seemed that 'the roving reporter' as Em had snarkily dubbed Zach, had done very little to endear himself to anyone during their time together.

Kurt was deeply thankful for the support but, at the same time, even more embarrassed to realize how profoundly foolish he had been. He had prided himself on being a smart man and a good judge of character, and for the most part he believed that was still true, but when it came down to matters of the heart he was obviously still just as naïve as the 16-year-old social reject who had once helplessly fallen for Finn Hudson, building a perfect, completely impossible fantasy-world around the first popular guy who had ever been nice to him.

He seemed to have made a lifelong habit out of falling for men who could not return his feelings.

That was the worst part of this current situation. In spite of all the evidence that Zachary had been selfish, ill mannered, and completely unworthy of his devotion, Kurt could not simply erase his feelings for the man. He had been in love, and even the discovery that he had been alone in feeling that way did not make the emotion any less real, or his grief over losing it any less profound.

He had been dreaming about Zachary every night, but Wednesday night was worse than usual. For hours, Kurt alternated between restless tossing and turning and brief periods of sleep that only resulted in nightmares. He finally fell into a deep sleep around two o'clock in the morning, only to wake up just two hours later in a state of painful arousal following a dream of vividly remembered passion. The realization that the touch his body ached for was no longer real, no longer his to claim and hadn't been for some time, broke his heart all over again.

Fortunately, Kurt had remembered to shut his bedroom door, so not even the cat was around to witness the helpless bout of tears his dream provoked. It felt like ages before they finally stopped and Kurt knew that there was no point in attempting more sleep. He got up and took a shower, turning the water on cold and letting it shock the lingering memories and empty passion out of his system, washing the evidence of his useless tears down the drain.

Today felt as though all the progress he had been making over the last few days had just vanished. The face reflected in the bathroom mirror looked haggard and Kurt felt bone-tired and emotionally fragile all over again. Needing to escape his thoughts for a while, Kurt pulled on a pair of sweat pants, one of the plain white T-Shirts his father had bought and his new sneakers. Jogging was a habit he had picked up in college. It was not his favorite activity but the steady, mindless motion of running soothed his jumbled thoughts and tangled feelings better than anything else he had ever tried. Well, with the exception of belting out show tunes on an empty theater stage, but as empty stages were hard to come by in Lima, this would have to do.

Knowing Finn would not mind, he borrowed the iPod that Finn had left on the hall table. These things had come a long way since Kurt had bought his first one. The new models could hold unlimited amounts of music, picking up computer downloads, radio stations and satellite feeds. Finn still had a preference for the classics and today that suited Kurt. He left the tuner where it was as he crept quietly out of the house and chose a direction at random.

The streets of Lima were mostly empty this early in the day. A newspaper deliverer, a couple of tired looking drivers that Kurt assumed were ending night shifts somewhere, three or four fellow joggers...
or dedicated dog walkers, and that was all. The emptiness was welcome.

For the first few minutes, he could barely force his limbs into more than a plodding walk, but soon he managed to pick up the pace. It felt good to have nothing to concentrate on but the path under his feet, the steady beat of his own heart and the rush of blood warming his muscles. As his body woke up, he moved a little bit faster and a little bit smoother, eventually jogging steadily in time with the music filling his ears. A mixture of rock and pop artists from the past forty years kept him company as he ran, the music and motion slowly working together to drive away the effects of Kurt's restless night.

A smile drifted over his lips when "Don't Stop Believin'" started playing, followed by the old bubblegum pop song, "Teenage Dream".

If there could possibly be any better combination of songs to represent starting over and embracing new and better things for Kurt, he could not imagine what they would be. The smile grew as he let himself remember the excitement and hope he had felt at the birth of New Directions, and the sweet wonder of being openly flirted with by another boy for the very first time in his life.

Soft laughter burst out of nowhere when Kurt suddenly recalled how much Zach had loathed this kind of music. He would gripe and whine about artistic integrity until Kurt wanted to smack him. Turning up the volume as another song came on, Kurt started singing along.

Singing while jogging was not the world's easiest thing to do, and the fact that he could not hear himself clearly over the earphones all but guaranteed that he was so far off key that he was disgracing every single music teacher and student he had ever had, but just for once Kurt would not care. It felt too good to just let loose.

After a few minutes, Kurt suddenly became aware that he was no longer alone. Yanking one bud – now blasting classic Lady Gaga – out of his ear, Kurt turned his head and found himself staring wide-eyed at a grinning Mike Chang. The other man was dressed in sleek black track pants and a pale yellow tank top, so tight and thin that it clung to his body like a second skin and caused Kurt to gulp. It appeared that 'The Abs' (always mentally capitalized out of sheer awesomeness), were still very much a part of Mike's physique.

"Oh, um . . . hi."

"Hello. Mind if I run with you for awhile?"

Kurt gulped again. "No, no of course not. I, uh, I don't suppose there's any chance you could pretend that you didn't hear that horrible noise I was making just now, could you?" he asked hopefully. He could feel his face burning and hoped the other man would take it for exertion rather than embarrassment.

"It wasn't that bad," he replied diplomatically. "Sounded like you were having fun, actually."

Kurt nodded, brushing a hand through his sweaty hair and wondering why, just once, he could not manage to run into this man when he was looking attractively neat and put together. Then, he wondered why he cared.

"I didn't know you liked running," Mike commented, making a vague gesture at the quiet town around them. "Or early mornings. Though, I suppose it's not fair to judge you on a single month of football practice when we were teenagers."

Surprised, Kurt snorted a laugh. "I couldn't sleep this morning and thought a little exercise might help
me relax. I've been a little . . . tense, lately."

He nodded, clearly understanding what Kurt was not saying. "Circumstances have a way of making us do funny things. One time I broke up with somebody and almost ate myself into a junk-food coma."

"You?" he said, unable to stop his eyes from sweeping appreciatively up and down that lean, muscular form. "I don't believe it."

Mike held up his right hand. "I swear it's true. I personally kept Pizza Hut and Dunkin' Donuts in good financial shape for about three months. It wasn't a pretty sight. Fortunately, I got myself back on track before it went too far. Started doing yoga, and running, and dancing again to get back in shape. Even tried Martial Arts before deciding that I wasn't cut out to be the next Bruce Lee."

Still not sure he believed a word of this, especially with that playful sparkle glinting at him from Mike's deep brown eyes, Kurt found himself laughing. "I can't even imagine the woman who could drive you to doughnuts."

A strangely amused expression flickered over Mike's face. "Neither can I, actually."

"And what exactly does that mean?" Kurt asked, shutting off his music as the two of them began to slow down.

"Oh, nothing. Just that it wasn't a woman," he said with a casual shrug.

Kurt's brain stuttered to a halt, though somehow his body kept moving steadily. "You . . . it . . . what?"

"Ah, I see the ol' gaydar never did kick in for you," Mike said, chuckling. "I couldn't decide whether you were really flirting with me at the store the other day, or just being friendly. Guess that answers that question!"

Too astounded to play it cool, Kurt blurted, "You're gay?"

"Yep," he said calmly. "And before you ask, I first began to suspect when we were in high school but I denied it until about a year after graduation."

Kurt shook his head sharply. "Wow. That's a pity, you know? I used to think you were kind of cute."

He wanted to pull the words back as soon as he uttered them, but Mike just laughed and said, "Ditto."

"Wait. You thought I was cute?" he blurted.

Mike blushed a bit, making Kurt feel strangely proud. "Of course. I was shy, not blind. Plus, I'd been questioning myself for a while by then," he admitted. "Those few weeks with you on the football team were the first time I'd ever really considered that it might not be the end of the world if the things I thought I was feeling turned out to be real."

"How so?" he asked curiously, slowing back down to a walk and then dropping to sit on a handy bus bench.

Mike followed suit, taking the silent invitation to sit down next to him. Leaning forward to dangle his loosely crossed hands between his knees, he looked over one well-muscled shoulder at Kurt. "I've told you that my parents had a very strict ideal of what their only son should be like?"
"Right. Well, that extended to pretty much every aspect of life. I knew from the time I was in diapers that my parents expected me to one day run the family business, marry a nice Asian girl and produce a big brood of nice Asian babies. I was supposed to grow up proud, strong, and straight – in every sense of that word - upholding all the traditions of my proud and noble ancestors." He looked at the ground and huffed. "The fact that I secretly wanted to dance, sing and chase boys was something I knew would not impress them."

"You did a good job covering," Kurt told him with a small shrug. "I never suspected a thing."

He sat up, settling against the back of the bench and pulling one leg up to wrap his hands comfortably around the ankle. "You weren't supposed to. I wanted to thank you, though, Kurt."

"For what?"

"When you taught the football players to do that 'Single Ladies' dance, you changed my life. I'd never worked up the nerve to dance outside my own bedroom before that, too afraid of what my parents and the other jocks would think of me, but after we actually managed to win that game and make dancing seem sort of cool, I talked my folks into letting me join Glee. Told them it was because I wanted to broaden my extra-curriculars so I'd be more appealing to colleges, which they liked, but the truth was that I had never felt so free before. Just watching you, seeing you act so proud and unafraid of being who you were; I wanted to spend more time with you and figure out if maybe I could do the same."

Vaguely disappointed to realize that it had not been his personal appeal but the freedom he seemed to represent, Kurt nodded. "That's a little ironic, considering that it wasn't until after I played football that I finally found the guts to come out to my dad."

Mike sighed and scrubbed at his hair. "I didn't know that. That's funny. I guess we all come to self realization by different paths. Long story, short, I fell in love with glee club, tried and failed to live up to my family's expectation by dating Tina, and finally confessed to her that I thought I might be gay after you'd been driven out of the school by that douche-bag Karofsky. She kept my secret and I just kept my head down and pretended to be what I wasn't until after graduation."

The words that the other man was not saying came through loud and clear and Kurt put a hand out to touch his arm. "You weren't a coward for not coming out earlier, you know, especially in that time and place. To be honest, if it hadn't been so unfortunately obvious to everyone that I was gay, I would have waited myself. Being endlessly abused and ridiculed for something you can't help isn't the kind of added pressure any teenager needs. I'm not sorry that I came out when I did, in the end it made me a stronger person, but I do understand why you couldn't."

"Thanks. I appreciate that. Hey, you want some coffee? I'll buy."

Kurt looked around, following his friend's gaze to a little coffee shop on the corner. He was not familiar with the place. Apparently it had sprung up some time in the last year. "That'd be great, thank you." He smiled and asked teasingly, "Any chance I could talk you out of a pastry to go along with it? After all, I did offer to pay for dinner tonight."

"Very true. Be my guest," he agreed with a laugh.

The two men got their food and drinks and chose a table at the back of the shop, conveniently placed beneath a heating vent. Now that they had stopped moving, the chilly winter air was proving to be a bit much for the light clothing they both wore. As they ate, they caught up on the highlights of the
last ten years.

Mike had opted out of going to college, leaving home and becoming something of a jack of all trades as he traveled around the country. "Every few months, I would move on to something else," he explained. "I loved the freedom of traveling from place to place, trying new things and meeting new people. I fell in love a few times, got my heart broken once or twice, but basically still haven't ever met anyone that I wanted to settle down and stay with for the rest of my life. As for the jobs, you name it. I have a bartending license, I worked as a waiter and occasional performer at a dinner theater, took a gig as a seasonal farm worker, spent a few months as a construction flagger, worked security a couple of times for concerts. Let's see, what else? Oh, I worked in a mechanic's shop for a while."

"Really?" Kurt said, immediately interested.

"I thought you'd like that," he commented with a smile, "but I should confess that I kind of sucked at it. I actually flooded someone's engine while trying to change their oil one time."

Kurt burst out laughing. "Oh, no! How did you manage that?"

"I'm not sure to this day, which is probably why that job didn't last," he admitted. "Let's see, what else? I worked as a dance instructor, which I really loved, but then I made the mistake of trying out for one of those dance competition shows and kind of lost my confidence when I didn't make it. After that, I switched gears and started driving a truck. Only did that a few months. Paid great but it was boring as hell. After that, I came back east again and started taking classes in massage therapy."

Kurt laughed. "Sounds like you've led quite an adventurous life! When was that last one?"

"Right after my dad passed. I was feeling major rebellion against expectations, I guess," he said with a shake of his head. Mike's parents had been older, their first child nearly grown when their second had come along, and as a result he had always felt a greater degree of pressure to live up to their wishes while growing up. "I got my license and it was a good job that I really enjoyed, but there was a lot of competition for clients so I had to find something else to pay the bills. So now here I am, selling shoes back in my old home town."

"You should come to New York," Kurt said without thinking. "It may have been a few years, but if you're half as good a dancer and choreographer now as you were back in high school, I know a few productions that could use some help. Or, you could just do what I do and contract individual lessons."

Mike took a bite of a blueberry muffin, looking as though he was seriously considering the idea. "I've thought about living in New York. Seems like my kind of place."

A feeling of elation filled Kurt. "You'd love it there! There are so many people, so much variety of cultures and lifestyles. It knocks you right off your feet at first, but it's so amazing that you just can't get enough after awhile."

He grinned. "Sounds fun. Know anybody in the city who might be able to give me a recommendation?"

"I may know a few people who know a few people," Kurt said coyly, then laughed. "You know I'd be happy to help. It'd be great to have another one of my old friends in town."

"Another?"

Kurt snorted into his coffee cup. "Rachel? Surely, you haven't fallen so far out of the loop in your
quest to try every single job known to man that you've missed the meteoric rise of McKinley High School's favorite diva."

A bright laugh burst from Mike's lips, drawing smiles from a couple of other patrons in the coffee shop. "I haven't, but I didn't know you guys were still friends. Scratch that; I didn't know you had ever been friends."

"We became close after I transferred to Dalton," he admitted, "and somehow we've maintained that friendship for all these years."

"That's great," he said sincerely. "As for me and New York, I'll have to give it some thought. I'm not quite sure I'm ready to compete with a bunch of rising young talent fresh out of their teens."

Realizing that he had been all set to become very pushy, an unfortunate trait that sometimes overcame Kurt when excitement got the better of him, he backed off. "Well, you have my phone number now, so don't be afraid to use it." Wiping his lips on a napkin, he checked his watch. "I need to get going. I promised my sisters I'd take them to school this morning and I need to get cleaned up. With eight people sharing the house, hot water is hard to come by."

"I understand," he said. Holding out his hand, he shook Kurt's firmly. "I'll see you tonight. Breadsticks at 6pm, right?"

"Right, I'll be sure to save you a seat."

Mike gave him a playful wink. "Right next to yours, I hope."

Kurt laughed and waved goodbye. As he left the café and put his headphones back in, he wondered if Mike had intended for that last comment to seem as flirtatious as it had.

Breaking into a light jog, he headed back towards home. It would not occur to him until several hours later that he had not given Zachary another thought since the moment he ran into Mike Chang.
Kurt entered the halls of William McKinley High School and was instantly struck by a strange blend of unfamiliarity and déjà vu. It was not an unexpected reaction, really. He had spent a third of his life in this place during his mid-teens and though the colors, dimensions and bright school-spirit posters that littered the place had not really changed, his perspective had.

These halls were full of ghosts. Happy memories of strutting proudly in hand-made fashion that all but dared the other students to notice him. Exchanging daily gossip with his best girl friends, Mercedes and Tina. Long days that began with Glee club and ended with Cheerios. Those memories were all mixed together with darker recollections of bullying, taunting, Slushies to the face, and endless strings of creative abuse.

He drew a deep breath, forcing his shoulders not to hunch and his hands not to clench. He was a grown man now and all of that was behind him. Even if WMHS was still populated by Slushie throwers and locker shovers, it was unlikely that any student would dare to assault an adult. Even the most brutish jocks from Kurt's teen years would have drawn the line at that.

It was early yet. Classes got out at 3:30 and it was only a quarter past now. Knowing he was too early to disturb Mercedes, he had not been able to resist the temptation of looking around his old school for a few minutes. However, even in the unruly days of Principal Figgins', a certain degree of safety protocol had been maintained. All visitors were required to report to the office to state their business and receive a visitor's badge.

So Kurt turned left and made his way past the Guidance Counselor's office, oddly startled to see a dark skinned man in a sport jacket sitting behind the desk instead of the ginger-haired, adorably dressed Ms Pillsbury. He wasn't sure why he felt surprised. Naturally the school staff would have undergone some changes over the past 10 years.

Shaking his head, he continued toward the main office. A smile lifted his lips when he heard the familiar strident bellow of Sue Sylvester berating some poor student for letting their grades fall below the acceptable standard for Cheerios membership. Apparently, some things remained constant at this school, after all.

The outer office was being manned by a teenager in Cheerios red and white, who winced at the sound of something bashing against the blinds in the Principal's office. Less than a second later, a boy with frantic eyes, also dressed in the familiar uniform, came scuttling out of the lion's den clutching his books to his chest.

"Jenny! How many times have I told you to red-flag the file of anyone on my squad whose grade average falls below the standard?" Sue's voice roared. "What if the academic review board had seen that kid's scores? Do you know how fast they could cut our budget if they felt any of our students were too lazy and stupid to-" She paused in her tirade as she strode into the open and noticed that they had a visitor.

Kurt barely managed to keep a straight face. Her hair was lighter than he remembered it, though he almost did not dare suppose that there might be threads of gray mixed in with the blonde, and there were a few more lines around her tightly pursed lips and suspiciously squinted eyes. Otherwise she looked exactly the same. A six foot tall pillar of intimidation wrapped in a fitted navy tracksuit. He was amused to note the addition of a pearl necklace to the ensemble. Apparently, Sue had made one concession to the formality of holding the school's top office.
"I'm not a member of the school board, if that's what you're thinking," he said lightly, looking his old coach square in the eyes, one corner of his lips and a single eyebrow lifting in an amused smirk. "I'm here to visit Mercedes Jones and, if he's available, Will Schuester."

The young receptionist pulled out a visitor's log at once, her pen poised over the first blank line. "Yes, sir. May I have your name?"

"Porcelain," Sue said slowly, licking her lower lip and nodding as she placed his identity. He smiled more fully, holding her sharp gaze. "Actually, I go by Kurt these days." Addressing the girl behind the desk, he added, "Kurt Hummel. H-U-M-M-E-L."

Sue Sylvester came forward, her expression relaxing a bit as she held out a hand for him to shake. He did so, keeping his grip firm and trying not to show how astonished he was by the gesture. "I kept track of you for a few years after you left this school, Lady Face. I always knew that what happened here wasn't going to break you. No student who joins my squad halfway through the school year, then hauls himself and his teammates to a first place victory at Nationals was going to let his life be destroyed by one silly death threat."

"That would have let him win, wouldn't it?" Kurt said evenly, nodding as he accepted the visitor's slip, somehow not surprised that she still recalled the circumstances of his transfer. He was tempted to object to her classification of the death threat as 'silly'. It had been truly terrifying at the time. But considering how often he remembered Sue exchanging threats of bodily harm with other teachers, it probably did seem like nothing to her. "I may have had to change schools, but if there's one lesson I learned from you, Coach, it was that no one else has the right to tell me who I am, even if I am too fabulous to handle."

He jumped slightly when she barked a laugh, thumping him on the shoulder. "I always knew you were one of the smart ones, even as I worried that your intelligence would be sucked into oblivion by the poisonous exposure to cheap hair gel and mindless show tunes."

Kurt laughed, unable to help himself. "I must have escaped just in time. It was good to see you again, Ms. Sylvester."

She gave him a sharp nod of acknowledgment, "Kurt." Then she turned her back and resumed her rant about academic standards for Cheerios, the words following him out into the hallway. Kurt felt like he had earned some kind of long-overdue reward from the brief contact.

Sue Sylvester had finally called him by his real name.

Checking his watch, Kurt saw that he still had a few minutes. Unable to resist taking a peek at the choir room, Kurt made his way around to the opposite side of the school. When the sound of singing met his ears a delighted grin stretched across his face. He had not known what time the group met now and had not dared to hope he might catch them at practice.

Stopping outside of the open door, Kurt stood just out of sight, drinking in the familiar sight of William Schuester, a bit grayer then he remembered but still full of endless enthusiasm, trying to demonstrate a step-ball-change for a few of his less graceful students. The rest of the class ignored the lesson in favor of entertaining themselves by creating harmonies to a current pop song on the opposite side of the room.

Kurt silently counted, impressed to see that 35 kids were in the club this year. Evidently, choir kids were no longer the dregs of society at McKinley.
"All right, I think you've got it now," Schuester encouraged his little group of dancers. "Okay everybody, let's take that number from the top."

"Who's that?" interrupted a blonde-haired, vacant eyed girl in a Cheerio uniform who reminded Kurt irresistibly of Brittany Pierce.

The teacher turned around, his eyes widening with shock when the man lurking in the hallway came inside the room. "Oh my . . . gosh," he said slowly, laughing as he came forward and wrapped his arms around the visitor. "Kurt Hummel?"

"In the flesh," he said cheerfully, returning the embrace. "It's good to see you, Mr. Shue."

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm back in Lima for a couple of weeks, visiting the family. I'm meeting Mercedes after her last class lets out, but since I got here a few minutes early I thought it might be fun to swing by and say hello."

"I'm so glad you did," Schuester gushed, clapping a hand on his shoulder, leaving it there as he turned around to face the curious choir. Kurt remembered how startled he had been by the teacher's touchy-feely nature when they had first met, far more used to males who avoided any and all unnecessary contact with him. Even when he had officially come out, Shue had never treated him differently. That was something Kurt had always been grateful for.

Turning to the class, Shue said, "Guys, I'd like you to meet a former student of mine and a founding member of New Directions, Kurt Hummel."

A generally ambivalent chorus of hellos greeted him and Kurt gave them a simple wave of his hand. A red-headed Cheerio in the front row raked him slowly up and down with interested eyes, giving Kurt a disturbing flashback to Santana Lopez at her predatory best. He barely held back the almost irresistible urge to look down and make certain that all of his buttons and zippers were fastened.

The girl smirked and said, "You don't look old enough to be one the original members of this group. Weren't there dinosaurs still roaming the earth back then?"

"Actually we'd evolved to the level of Neanderthals by that time," he shot back, "but fortunately most of them were on the football team."

The other kids laughed at his snappy comeback.

"What part did you sing?" asked a small stocky boy.

Shue answered in his stead, "We could fit Kurt in almost anywhere. He was the best counter-tenor this group ever had."

"You've had more than one?" Kurt asked, honestly curious as he knew his vocal range was quite unusual, but his question drew a second unintentional laugh from the class.

One of the boys said, "What's a counter-tenor?"

"It's kind of like soprano, but for male voices," he explained simply. The truth was that his was a very specific and rare voice type, but the average listener tended to hear those ringing high notes and automatically think 'soprano'. Kurt was used to it by now and, given his limited time here today, felt no need to elaborate. "That's probably why I've always been drawn to Broadway above anything else."
"Were you any good?" asked a peppy looking brunette, casting a critical look over the neatly dressed stranger, as though she thought that his sharply-creased gray slacks and casually dressy sapphire silk shirt might reveal some deeply meaningful information about him.

Kurt struggled not to smile at her blatant appraisal, remembering when he used to judge people in exactly the same manner. Fortunately, he knew that he was impeccably stylish this afternoon, all the way from his neat black boots to his artistically tousled hair. "If I can say so without sounding full of myself, I was very good. Rachel Berry once claimed that I was her only real competition."

There was a collective reaction from several students, mostly girls, at this playful bit of name-dropping. This time Kurt did smile. He had been curious to see if there were any Broadway fans in the class, positive that Will Schuester would still be singing the praises of his successful protégé at every opportunity.

"Of course, I didn't sing leading parts very much in those days," he added, subtly eyeing a trio of beefy looking boys in letterman jackets as he tossed out, "that was usually Finn Hudson's job."

To his amusement, this second bombshell had the football players sitting up and taking notice. "Whoa, you were in that New Directions?" a brawny black jock exclaimed. Nudging the guy next to him, he said, "He means Hudson who plays pro ball for the Bengals. Me and my dad saw him play last Christmas!"

"That's right," Shue confirmed proudly. "Finn also has a terrific singing voice. In fact, that entire glee club was absolutely bursting with talent. Every member was so talented in different ways that it sometimes literally took my breath away. And Kurt was one of the best of the group, something I didn't appreciate nearly enough when he was here."

Recognizing that his former teacher was offering a long overdue apology for all of the times he had ignored Kurt's contribution just because the style of his voice did not quite fit his personal ideal of a lead singer, Kurt nodded. "Thanks, Mr. Shue."

"If you're so good, why don't you show us?" the Santana-like girl interrupted, drawing murmurs of agreement from her group. Smirking at Kurt, she said, "Or are you not up to it at your age?"

Shue held up a hand. "Now, guys, let's not be rude. I'm sure our guest didn't come here expecting to put on a show."

Some of the kids groaned while others rolled their eyes and Kurt was again transported back to the days he had spent in this room. The same carelessly demanding nature of talented and somewhat arrogant teenagers that had defined his own glee club experience was here. He thought back to that lonely boy who had longed for the chance to shine, wanting to show everyone that what made him special was not a bad, scary thing, but something that could be celebrated and enjoyed, if only they could get past the idea that it was wrong to be different from everyone else.

He bit is lip, considering. Shue and his current club had nothing whatsoever to do with the situation that had brought Kurt back to Lima, but this might afford him an unexpected opportunity to blow off a little steam. Sing out his problems just as he had been trained to do in this very room years ago.

"Actually, I wouldn't mind," he interrupted. "Is there any chance we could use the auditorium for a few minutes? I always did enjoy performing on a stage and it's been awhile since I had a good chance to show off."

He laughed as he spoke and his former teacher grinned, looking like a child who had unexpectedly found a giant-sized candy bar in his Halloween bucket.
Shue rubbed his hands together. "I think that could be arranged."

Curious, and eager for any excuse to escape the classroom, the kids willingly trooped after the two men as they walked to the auditorium. Schuester unlocked the door and they filed inside, Kurt hopping up the side steps that led to the stage. The control board was still in the same place it had always been and Shue helpfully gave Kurt some stage light to work under.

Without thinking, he turned toward the piano, startled to see the same blond, stone-faced pianist who had always seemed to appear whenever Kurt's own class had felt the need to burst into song a dozen years ago. Disconcertingly, he still looked exactly the same, right down to his black coat and round, wire rimmed glasses.

"Oh," he said in surprise. "It's nice to see you again. Can you give me 'I Know the Truth'?"

He did not even have to specify the key. With the almost psychic talent that had always characterized his playing, the man just nodded and began the opening bars to the song.

Kurt looked down as he softly began to sing the lyrics, allowing the poignant melody to wash over him. His own recent experience colored the sad words with deep emotional resonance.

*How have I come to this?*
 How did I slip and fall?
 How did I throw half a lifetime away,
 Without any thought at all?

He lifted his chin, walking closer to the audience and sweeping his gaze over them, lifting a hand as though pleading with them to understand how he felt.

*This should have been my time*
 It's over, it never began
 I closed my eyes to so much for so long
 Now I no longer can
 I tried to blame it on fortune
 Some kind of shift in a star
 But I know the truth and it haunts me
 It's flown just a little too far
 I know the truth and it mocks me
 I know the truth and it shocks me
 It's flown just a little too far

Sweeping back from the end of the stage, Kurt began to move restlessly, his voice lowering with the change in key, and better allowing the humiliation he felt over having been so thoroughly blinded to his boyfriend's behavior to echo through every word.

*Why do I want him still?*
 Why when there's nothing there?
 How to go on with the rest of my life,
 To pretend I don't care?

As the tempo picked up, Kurt let the grief and anger that had been tearing his soul apart for the last four days to pour out onto the stage, laying himself emotionally bare to his audience.

*This should have been my time*
 It's over, it never began
I closed my eyes to so much for so long
And I no longer can.
I tried to blame it on fortune
Some kind of twist in my fate
But I know the truth and it haunts me
I learned it a little too late

His voice softened again, becoming slightly less powerful and marginally less perfect in pitch and inflection as the reality of what he was singing overwhelmed him.

Oh, I know the truth and it mocks me
I know the truth and it shocks me
I learned it a little too late
Too late

The final note sailed out over the small audience, echoing through the empty auditorium with pure, aching honesty. Kurt opened his eyes, which had drifted closed on the final stanza, and swallowed, a bit stunned by his own emotional outpouring.

Mr. Schuester ended the silence as he started to clap and the sound seemed to wake his students from their stunned reaction. The entire group leapt to its feet, whooping and clapping for their guest performer. Shaking himself from the musical trance he had fallen into, Kurt blushed with pleasure and took a bow. Another round of applause sounded from the back of the auditorium and Kurt shaded his eyes, trying to see who it was.

The figure approached, a big grin lighting her face and the students called out, "Hi, Ms. Jones."

"Hey, guys. I went looking for you when you didn't come meet me," she said, looking up at Kurt. "I should have known I'd find you in here showing off for the glee club. The second I heard your voice, I knew that couldn't be anyone but my Kurt."

"Mercedes," he laughed, crouching down and hopping from the stage without bothering to use the stairs. Capturing his best friend in a tight hug, he let that wonderfully familiar embrace soothe away a little bit more of his heartache and the terrible vulnerability of having displayed his inner pain for a room full of strangers. "I'm sorry, between the music and the soundproofing here in the auditorium; I guess we missed the last bell. It's so good to see you!"

Mercedes pulled away after a moment and brushed a lock of hair out of his eyes. "I've missed you, baby. You really needed to do that, didn't you?" she said, too quietly for any of the curiously observing students. "Feel better?"

"I actually do," he admitted. Smiling at Will Schuester, who had come close enough to overhear, he nodded. "Thanks, Mr. Shue. Mercedes is right. You have no idea how badly I needed to do that."

Shue gave him a penetrating stare, and then nodded. "After watching you just now I think I have a pretty good idea, actually. That was amazing, Kurt. Truly. Your voice is even more beautiful than I remember it."

He ducked his head; oddly shy at this unexpected praise from his old teacher. "I've been giving voice lessons for the last five years. I guess it was bound to have some personal benefit," he said with a shrug that tried badly to convey nonchalance. From the continued sympathy in the other man's eyes, he was sure he not managed it. Turning back to Mercedes, he said, "We should probably get going. Thank you again, Mr. Shue. Thanks, you guys. It was nice meeting all of you."
The glee club reluctantly said goodbye and Kurt was startled when a couple of their more obviously dramatic members jumped up and hugged him before he could leave.

Mercedes chuckled, tugging on his arm. "Come on, Judy Garland. Let's get out of here before the munchkins start asking for your autograph."

He laughed and threw an arm around her, waving one last farewell as he went.

Chapter End Notes

The song Kurt sings is "I Know the Truth" from Aida.
Old Friends and New Possibilities

Kurt followed Mercedes to her home and they spent an hour curled up on opposite ends of her comfy sofa, catching up with the same wonderful sense of ease that they had always shared. Finally, however, Mercedes got around to the subject her best friend had been avoiding.

"Tell me about you and Zach," she demanded, scooting closer and capturing his left hand in both of hers, not allowing him to look away. Her eyes were filled with compassion, but it was clear that she had no intention of backing off until she had the full story. "I know the general outline. That you walked in and found your boyfriend in the arms of another guy, so you kicked his ass to the curb. I'm proud of you for that, but it doesn't really tell me what happened. Last time I came to visit, you two seemed so happy together."

Kurt sighed, his face somber and sad as he admitted, "Seemed was apparently the operative word. I was happy with him, but . . ." He sighed. "I was completely oblivious to the fact that my partner of two years had been screwing other men since last summer. Apparently, he decided that because I wasn't flying into a jealous rage every time another guy smiled at him, our relationship wasn't worth saving. Except that instead of telling me that his feelings had changed, he decided it would be a fun idea to get his kicks with other people while letting me provide him with board, room and a warm bed every night."

Mercedes immediately pulled him into a comforting hug, rocking and making shushing noises, though Kurt was not actually making a sound. He hugged back, appreciating the offered solace.

"Why couldn't he have just talked to me, Mercedes?" he quietly asked into her neck. "I may have been overdoing work these last few months, between my clients and the theatre, but I wasn’t so busy that he couldn't have told me that he felt taken for granted, or low on my priority list, or whatever the hell his issue was. And if he didn't want me anymore, if he had realized that I wasn't the person he wanted to be with, couldn't he have found five lousy minutes to just tell me that?"

His friend's grip tightened at the disconsolate words. "Oh, baby, I wish I had the answer to that. Some people are just cowards and users, much as I hate to give him that much of an excuse. He had a good thing going, from his point of view, and you were too stuck in dreamland to see it."

Kurt pulled back, startled and a little insulted. "I was what?"

Mercedes' eyes were compassionate but steady. "You're a romantic, Kurt. You always have been, but I need you to be honest with yourself. Look underneath all of that hurt and anger and betrayal. Did you really never suspect that you guys had a problem? Did you see any changes in his behavior or feel a difference in the way he treated you? Cause I can tell you right now that while Zachary Carson may be clever and charming, and have a way with words, he's not as smart as you are, and he's not as strong as you, and he sure as hell isn't as good with people. Could he really play you that badly for that long, or were you just too afraid to open your eyes and admit the truth?"

He froze, looking inward and letting her questions seep in past the shields of defensiveness and self pity. For days he had been asking himself, 'How could he have done this to me?' and 'Why didn't I see what was happening?' without even considering that perhaps he simply had not wanted to.

"I didn't know," he said finally, "but . . . I think I may have suspected, deep down. I was remembering the other day all the little things that Zach and I used to do together. Not big things, you know, just special couple moments we used to have so many of, that simply dropped away without my being really aware. But it all happened so gradually that . . . I didn’t . . ."
"I get it," she said gently, embracing him again as the tears finally started to slide down his cheeks.

Now that she had started him talking, Kurt could not seem to stop. "The night . . . that night, I had gone home planning to take some time off and invite Zachary to go on a romantic vacation somewhere, to rekindle our spark. I was convinced that we had both been working too hard, and were taking each other for granted, and that some time alone would fix things. I knew if I didn't do something right away, I might lose him. The possibility that I already had never even crossed my mind."

The words were growing muffled and a little indistinct as his breath hitched and his tears picked up speed, but Mercedes did not try to stop him, knowing it would do him good to get everything out in the open.

"He said . . . he told me when we were fighting that he'd seen the way I am with chorus-boys. That he figured I was s-s-screwing them all and he might as well get his share. But I never did that, Mercedes! Never. Guys do h-h-hit on me sometimes, but I always tell them that I have a boyfriend, or just that I'm not interested. I've never once taken the offer." He whimpered, sounding less like a man than like a wounded animal, even to his own ears. "Maybe I should have. Apparently, I had nothing to lose by fucking around."

At this, Mercedes did stop him. Brushing his tears away, she cupped his face and gave him a stern look. "Don't you even say a thing like that, Kurt Hummel. You know why you didn't see what was happening? Because you're a good, decent man who knows how to treat other people. You want to see the best in everyone, and sometimes that makes you a little blind to what they're really like, but that's not a bad thing, or a stupid way to be. It's honest and loving and it makes you the person that I've been proud to have as my best friend for the last twelve years."

He swallowed, resting his hands on her wrists. He made no attempt to push her away, instead drawing strength from that honest, loving touch.

Leaning close, Mercedes kissed his damp cheeks and trembling eyelids. "I'm sorry I was harsh with you just now, honey. I didn't want to be, but you have a way of turning things back around on yourself and I knew that if somebody didn't force you to see this situation, and that man, for what they really were, sooner or later you'd convince yourself that you did something to drive him away."

"Maybe," he admitted.

"No maybe about it. You'd try to make this your fault. Let the fact that you're too good a person to see someone you loved as a dishonest, disloyal, self-involved jerk. So instead you tear your heart apart and destroy your self-esteem."

Kurt grimaced. "You make me sound like a martyr."

She looked him in the eye and smiled ruefully. "I hate to say it, but sometimes you are. But, Kurt, I thought Zach was a good guy too and it pisses me off like you wouldn't believe that I didn't see through him. Now you got to promise me that you'll keep your eyes open. There's a good man out there waiting for you, Kurt. As soon as you find him, you snap that beautiful guy right up and make him yours."

Kurt smiled. "I'll do my best, though if all this wasn't my fault, then it certainly wasn't yours." He grabbed a tissue from a handy box next to the sofa and blew his nose, using another to dab away the remains of his tears. "As for finding someone new, why is it that everybody from my baby sisters to my best friend seems to think that I should jump right back into the dating pool? I've heard at least four different variations on the old 'if the horse bucks you off, get right back in the saddle' trope."
Mercedes patted his hands. "We just want you happy, and the fact is that you're not truly happy for long on your own. Every time you’ve been single for more than a few months you got depressed with all the happy couples and started convincing yourself you’d die alone."

He made a face. “So what you’re saying is that I’m a drama queen.”

“Don’t feel bad. It’s an unspoken membership requirement to be part of New Directions.”

Startled by the straight-faced comment, Kurt laughed.

Mercedes grinned in response. “As far as starting over, it sounds you've already been single for months now, even if you didn't know it. Why should you allow that fool to have even one more day of your life?”

"You don't think it would make me seem sort of shallow if I was checking somebody out this soon?"

"Not at all," she said firmly. "Hell, if I'd waited for my man to get over himself and make the first move he'd still be writing horrible poems to his ex-girlfriend and I'd be collecting cats by now."

Kurt chortled. "And how is David?"

"Still as uptight and stiff as a rich, upscale, preppy boy is supposed to be," she said frankly, her brown eyes twinkling, "but every bit as sweet and mushy as a melted marshmallow when this lady turns up the heat."

He nodded, happy to hear that. He had run into his old Dalton Academy chum David Wainwright at a cocktail party in New York and introduced him to Mercedes, who had been out visiting. David had just broken up with his fiancée at the time, but the two of them had hit it off and Kurt had been happy to arrange for plenty of 'innocent' get togethers while both of his friends were in town. To his delight, Mercedes had proven to be exactly the tonic that the other man's broken heart needed to heal. After dating for nearly three years, they had finally formalized their engagement this past Christmas.

"I was a little surprised I didn't see him," Kurt commented, glancing around the apartment, which showed clear sign of dual inhabitance.

"He's got that big law conference in Chicago this week," she said, rolling her eyes. "I was invited to go, but those things are about as exciting as watching paint dry for those of us who don't know a Corpus from a Delicti."

Kurt laughed. "I don't blame you, and selfishly," he reached out and took her hand, "I'm glad you stayed home this year."

"So am I," she said sincerely. Then a shrewd smile flickered across her full lips. "So, to get back to our previous discussion, is there somebody you've been thinking about checking out a little more closely already?"

He gaped, too startled to cover as he said, "How did you know?"

Mercedes clapped her hands when Kurt slapped a hand over his own mouth. "It was just something about the way you looked when you asked that question. Who is it? Do I know him, or is he someone in New York?"

An exasperated sigh gusted from Kurt's lungs. He could already feel the heat in his traitorous cheeks giving him away. "Here, but I'm not sure if I should say any more than that. I only just found out he was gay, so I have no idea if it's something he's open about."
Intrigued, Mercedes tapped her lips. "Well, that cuts down on the possibilities. Sure you don't want to give me another hint?"

"I'd rather not," he admitted. "Like I said, I only just found out and my interest was probably just piqued because I'm on the rebound or something. A few minutes of friendly conversation over a cup of coffee isn't exactly the stuff of true love and eternal devotion."

She grinned. "No, but it's a good start. And even if it's not, you could do worse than a strings-free roll through the sheets before you head back to the Big Apple."

"Mercedes!"

"Oh, c'mon, you deserve to have a little more fun out of life! Sometimes nothing heals a broken heart better than a little happy slappy with a cute guy."

Laughing now, he protested again, "Mercedes!"

Her eyes sparkled. "What? You really telling me you'd turn down a little somethin'-somethin' if a guy with a cute butt invites you to critique the firmness of his . . . mattress?"

Flustered, most particularly because his brain was flashing back to Mike Chang's revealing jogging shirt and sweaty, well-defined muscles, he said, "How do you know he'd have a cute butt?"

"Kurt, this is you we're talking about," she replied sagely. "You've always had a weakness for three things in a guy: good cheekbones, beautiful hair, and tight buns."

He would have protested that somewhat shallow assessment, except that it was 100% true and they both knew it. Just about every guy he'd ever had a crush on had fit that description. Kurt realized that when it came to Mike, he'd always been more focused on his abs than his ass, but he had looked often enough to know that there was definitely nothing to complain about back there.

"Okay, so I have a type," he admitted. "That doesn't mean I'm going to pounce on the next guy that meets those standards."

"Suit yourself," she teased. "Just keep your options open, that's all I ask."

"Advice noted." He glanced at his watch. "I'd better get going. The Abrams will be bringing their kids over to the house soon and I'd like to help Dad and Carole marshal their defenses while there's still time. See you at dinner?"

"I'll be there," she said, accepting his helping hand up and following it straight into another firm, heartfelt hug. "I'm glad you came by."

"So am I. Thank you for everything, Mercedes. Talking to you really helped."

She smiled up into his eyes. "That's what I'm here for. And you can call me anytime you need me, you know that."

"I know." And he really did. "I'll see you in a while."

~*~*~*~*~

By the time Kurt reached the house, the Abrams children had already arrived. The plan had been for the kids to be dropped off while there was still time for the younger adults to get in a little play time and hopefully wear them out a bit. Then they would be fed dinner along with Kurt's sisters and
nephew, and have a few hours with them before their parents came to get them. It had been decided that the grown-ups would benefit more from having the home-field advantage. It would also give Artie and Tina a little free time to get ready for their evening out.

Delighted screams met Kurt’s ears as he opened the front door and he laughed to see Finn making a classic double-bicep pose, with one of the Hummel twins hanging from each arm and the oldest Abrams son with his arms around his neck, clinging to his back like a human cape.

"Me! Me!" screeched the other children. All except the 8-month old boy, who just watched the activity with waving arms and delighted screams. Burt grabbed the youngest Abrams daughter by the waist and hoisted her high onto his shoulders. She was clearly delighted, holding her arms out and laughing at suddenly being the tallest person in the room.

The remaining three kids, Artie and Tina’s five year old twins, and Finn’s three year old son, all jumped up and down crying for their turns.

Noting his brother’s red face and wondering how long he’d been at this, Kurt came to the rescue, diving straight in to kneel down and allow his nephew and the twin boy and girl to climb him in much the same way that his sisters were doing with Finn. Bracing his arms tightly, he checked to make sure there weren’t any furnishings, babies or cats in the way and then carefully spun all three children.

The boys cheered with excitement, while the little girl begged him to go faster. Trying not to get dizzy by keeping his eyes firmly fixed on a point on the wall, a trick Artie had taught him years ago when the glee club was learning how to dance in wheel-chairs, Kurt obeyed the request.

He kept going until he ran out of breath and started to lose his balance, collapsing to the carpeted floor under a pile of giggling children. The baby, finding him suddenly within reach, likewise pounced on him. Kurt yelped a giggling protest when the other children, who had been set down by Burt and Finn, all responded to the lure of a downed adult and joined the dog-pile.

The other men chuckled at his predicament and plowed in, tickling and mock-wrestling the children until a laughing Carole finally came to the rescue with a suggestion that the kids all go out in the back yard and play until dinner-time since it was still a nice day out.

"Ugh. Thank you, Carole," Kurt groaned, panting and red-faced, but still grinning like a madman. He winced as one child unexpectedly shoved a knee into his gut in their haste to scramble up and follow the others outside.

Burt and Finn each grabbed a hand, hoisting him to his feet and brushing him off. "Dude, you got home just in time," Finn said, tucking his t-shirt back in and tugging at the disarranged button-down he had worn with it. "I was about to go down for the count."

"My pleasure," Kurt said, rubbing at his offended stomach. "How long have they been here?"

"About half an hour," Burt told him. "Finn started the muscle-man routine about five minutes before you got here."

Finn shrugged, wincing a little and rubbing his shoulder. "Little Kurt loves that game. I figured the others would too. I didn't think about how much harder it would be with nine-year-olds."

"Especially three kids at a time," his brother agreed, smiling.

"I gotta say, Kurt, you were holding your own pretty good for a guy who doesn't have any kids of his own," Burt commented.
Kurt tried not to feel offended at that. His father was not chiding him for a lack of grandchildren, but somehow the words stung anyway. He wanted children of his own some day, even if nobody was aware of that fact but him. "My neighbors have three. I babysit for them sometimes," he said simply.

"It's almost time to leave for dinner," Finn interrupted, his stomach giving a growl and reminding him of priorities. "You want to drive, or you want me to?"

"I will. You might as well have tonight to relax, considering that you'll be driving all the way back to Cincinnati tomorrow."

"Cool," he agreed.

~*~*~*~*~

When they got to Breadsticks, they saw that Artie, Tina, and Mercedes had already arrived. The restaurant had seated their group at a table in the back, where there was extra room to accommodate Artie’s wheelchair. He had upgraded to a much fancier model than the one he had used during high school. It had large wheels that could be operated manually but also came with an optional power pack for motorized use. The mechanic in Kurt could not resist the urge to check out it out in detail, and Artie was more than happy to show off the features.

“This baby can really fly when I need it to,” he said proudly, “and with the kids running around, it’s really useful to have a free hand sometimes.”

“I’ll bet,” Kurt said, then he and Finn launched into a dramatic rehash of their play time back at the house that soon had the whole group laughing.

He had deliberately left the seat between himself and Tina open, hoping that Mike would appreciate the gesture, even if he only took it as a joke based on this morning’s delightfully flirty chat.

As the minutes ticked by and everyone talked and caught up with one another, Kurt found himself glancing around the room, hoping that the other man had not had a last-minute change of heart. After all, it had been Kurt's idea to turn their do-you-remember dinner into a party.

He jumped when Tina touched his arm and said, "Are you okay, Kurt?"

Blinking, he looked at her, feeling guilty when he realized he had been ignoring everyone's conversation for at least a couple of minutes in favor of staring toward the front of the restaurant. “I’m fine,” he said, manufacturing a quick smile.

They kept up through email and social media, but it had been several years since he had last seen her face to face, and he really had missed his old friend. Tina had grown lovelier and a bit stouter through the years, her once long black hair now cut in an adorable bob with reddish-blond streaks running through it. Her sunny smile and bright inquisitive eyes were exactly still the same and Kurt found himself relaxing a bit more.

"Sorry I was spacing out.” He covered his lapse by saying, “I got a little swept up in nostalgia for a minute. A lot of important moments in my life have happened in this restaurant."

"Like what?" Artie asked, speaking around an enormous chomp of a breadstick. His hair was also shorter these days and the huge glasses he had favored in his youth had been abandoned in favor of corrective laser surgery. He had become handsomer with added maturity and the lack of glasses showed his big blue eyes off to good effect.

"This is where my dad used to bring me for birthday dinners every year when I was growing up,"
Kurt said, shaking his head a little at the memory of those awkward but well-meant celebrations, where Burt never quite knew what to say or do without the help of his late wife. "And this is where Finn and my dad met for the first time. Our first trial run as a would-be family."

Finn laughed. "I remember. That didn't go so well, unfortunately. Burt and I spent the whole evening talking about sports and Kurt looked like he was trying to light us both on fire with his eyes."

"Yes, well, a night of amateur ESPN didn't exactly fit into my plans at the time," he acknowledged with a slightly embarrassed smile. "Anyway, this restaurant was also the sight of my first date. Though I wasn't quite sure if it was a date at the time. Mercedes came along as an unwilling chaperone, Blaine kept calling it a 'friendly get-together', and I was afraid that he saw me as someone who needed a balloon and a pat on the head, when what I really wanted was my first goodnight kiss."

The others chuckled. Mercedes broke in with an animated and badly exaggerated retelling of an evening where the two boys had spent the entire evening trying to out-gear one another. Kurt just smiled. He supposed he had been a little out of control, gushing about Broadway, LGBT rights, and Vogue magazine, but it had been his first evening out with another openly gay boy and he had been excited, and maybe just a little bit eager to show off in front of his best friend.

A surreptitious glance at his watch showed that it was nearly 6:30 already. The waitress had already brought them drinks and inquired twice about whether they were ready to order. "Maybe he's not coming," he said aloud, drawing the others' attention to him. "Mike. He told me he'd be here by six. I hope he hasn't had a flat tire or something."

"It is getting kind of late," Artie agreed, glancing at his watch. "Anyone have his number? We should probably…"

Just then, they were interrupted as Mike himself breezed into the room. "Hey, guys. Sorry I'm late. My sister was supposed to close up the store for me tonight but she had a little emergency at home. Nothing serious," he explained, kissing the ladies on the cheek and shaking hands with Finn and Artie before taking the empty chair next to Kurt. "Glad you saved me a seat! You all order yet?"

"No, we waited for you," Tina told him, casting a casually interested look over Mike's proximity to Kurt. There was plenty of room but he was sitting as close to Kurt as if he thought their entire old glee club might be showing up for dinner. Mike had also not shaken Kurt's hand, as if he felt that gesture was already too formal to bother with. As her eyes passed over Kurt's happily flushed face, her eyebrows quirked.

"Thanks, I appreciate it. I already know what I want to order so we can start any time," he replied, waving a hand to signal the waitress who was hopefully eyeing their table.

Once everyone had ordered their dinners and the conversation began to flow again, Mike happily caught up with his old friends, but he did not mention the morning jog and coffee date he had shared with Kurt. Kurt felt a little disappointed, but reasoned that perhaps he did not want to answer the questions that might arise from that. It might be that he still was not comfortably out, at least not while living in Lima among his old friends and neighbors.

If that was true, then Kurt had probably been just imagining the flirting. Rebound instinct, just like he had told Mercedes.

Nobody attempted to interrogate Kurt about his relationship collapse, though he knew they were all aware of it. They just offered a simple but sincere, 'Sorry things didn't work out for you guys,' and, 'Are you doing okay?' After which they had left him alone. If there was no other sign of the
advanced maturity of these old friends of his, that would have been enough. The versions of them that Kurt had befriended at age 16 would have parsed and analyzed a juicy breakup story to death, with little thought for the amount of pain it caused.

"Does anyone have any updates on our missing New Directions?" Mercedes asked after a bit, when the food had been served and the conversation hit a natural lull while everybody dug in.

"I spoke to Rachel yesterday and she sends her regrets that she couldn't get away," Kurt said. "She's been invited to a charity dinner hosted by one of the theater guild bigwigs tonight." The group chuckled, understanding perfectly. It was a source of both pride and amusement to them all that their self important school friend had realized her dream of making the big time on Broadway. "And as you know, I dropped by McKinley this afternoon to say hello to Mr. Schuster," he added, regaling them with a story of his meeting with the new glee club students and their oddly familiar behavior.

"He didn’t just sing," Mercedes added when he casually ended with a mention of having been asked to perform a song for the group. "He talked Shue into letting him demonstrate what theatrical performance really means on the auditorium stage and, as I'm sure you would expect, he totally brought the house down. I think he inspired a few brand new dreams of stardom today. Kind of reminded me of the way we all were that time Shue brought in April Rhodes to sing for us."

This comparison set off another spate of do-you-remembers that lasted all the way through to dessert.

"I had a message from Brittany last week," Mike said, drawing interest from all sides. "You probably already know that she and Santana Lopez finally made it official a couple of years ago. They live in Chicago now and run their own dance studio. I worked there for a little while and it was a lot of fun."

"That's really cool. I lost track of those two after graduation," Finn said, looking pleased for them. "I do know that Puck joined the Marine Corps. I thought it would last about five minutes, but he’d finally found a life that really suited him and decided to make a career of it, even if he has been busted three times for sleeping with officer’s wives."

Kurt snorted. "Sounds like he hasn't changed a bit. Well, everybody has something they're good at, I guess. It's nice to know Puck found his niche."

"What about Sam and Quinn?" Tina asked, looking from face to face. "I know Quinn got into an Ivy League school, but I never heard from either of them after everyone went their separate ways."

Finn said, "I didn't keep in contact with Quinn, but Sam and I are still buddies. He moved to Nashville and tried to be a country music star, but instead he ended up becoming a graphic artist of all things. He designs album covers and stuff now. Guess it pays pretty good, but I never would have guessed that’s what he’d end up doing." He shrugged, more interested in his chocolate cake than a the career path of his old school chum.

“I would,” Kurt mused. “Sam was actually a really good portrait artist.”

Mercedes agreed, “He used to make macaroni sculptures and do graphic paintings of sci-fi landscapes on his computer too. I’m glad he found a good way to use his talents.” She laughed, a bit ruefully. "I was gonna be the next Aretha Franklin, but the business side of the record business turned me off of that dream fast. If you don’t look a certain way, or sound a certain way, or kiss enough ass to make someone pay attention to you, you might as well be singing into your hairbrush in the bathroom mirror for all the attention anyone pays. Mr. Shue always made it sound so easy for everyone to become a star.”
She shook her head and Artie gave her hand a squeeze, recognizing and sharing the regret of a road that had not simply gone untaken, but been barred by a series of roadblocks too big to overcome.

“But what the hell,” she continued, shaking off the moment of melancholy. “I went and got a B.A. in English Lit and a Masters in education instead, I love what I do, and my church and the Lima Community Theater still get the benefit of these golden pipes on the regular.”

Seeing her good mood restored, Tina offered, “Well if you ever want to try some voiceover work, I could give you a recommendation. It’s way more fun than I ever realized, a great schedule, and a really good stress reliever. You can’t hold on to a bad mood after you’ve spent a couple of hours in a recording booth shrieking battle noises at the top of your lungs. ‘Ah!’, ‘Uhnh!’, ‘Eeergh!’”

Everybody laughed at her dramatic demonstration, complete with funny faces.

“I heard that Quinn finished a medical residency at a hospital in Michigan last year,” Artie said. “She’s an OB-GYN now. We got one of those ‘year in the life’ Christmas cards from her last winter. She’s also engaged to somebody she met as an intern and the two of them are planning to open their own practice.”

"That’s nice," Mike said warmly. "And it doesn't surprise me a whole lot. She was always one of the smartest kids in our class and she became very driven after she had that baby in sophomore year."

Taking the last bite of his cake in one enormous forkful, Finn garbled, "How 'bout you, Mike? Any little baby Changs running around that we should know about?"

"Not so far," he said with a smile. "I hope to one day, but of course it'll be a little more complicated for me. Not a lot of places want to adopt kids out to a single guy with a spotty job history, and I can't afford surrogacy at this point, even if I could find somebody who would approve a bachelor. It’s funny how much tougher it is, even these days, to get approval to be a single parent."

"How come you have to go through all that?" Artie asked, but then he blushed as he realized that he was asking a rather personal question. "Tina and I got lucky that my paralysis didn't come with any physical complications toward having kids. Is . . . your problem something like that?"

Mike's bright laugh rang out, making them all smile. "No, but I guess Tina never told you why she and I really broke up."

Artie shook his head, looking a little uncomfortable; as if he wasn't sure he really wanted to know the answer.

Kurt held his breath. Hope rose up inside of him with a force that startled him. This was absurd! He should not be getting his hopes up so soon after a painful breakup, no matter what Mercedes thought. Not for a guy he barely knew anymore.

Just the same, his heart gave a little leap when Mike said with a twinkle of mischief in his eye, "She didn't want to go on being my beard."

Conversation screeched to a halt. Mercedes frowned thoughtfully but she did not look at Mike. She looked straight at Kurt and he knew that she had just put two and two together.

"Mike and I ran into each other this morning," he found himself saying, "and I don't think I've ever been so surprised in my life as when he told me that my "Single Ladies" awesomeness all those years ago really did recruit one for my team, just like Puck was so afraid it would."

Mike laughed and the others joined in a moment later. "That's true," he said. "He didn't turn me of
course, but Kurt definitely opened my eyes to the possibilities. Matt Rutherford actually joined the glee club with me just so I'd quit blathering about how awesome that dance had been. He still teases me about that."

"So, you two are still friends?" Kurt asked, hoping to deflect the conversation.

"Oh, yeah, we talk a couple times a week on average," he said with a smile. "He and I have been best friends since we were ten and he figured out the truth even before I did. He’s good at that, taking little clues and forming the big picture. That’s why he became a lawyer, I guess."

Finn nodded. "Matt was smart. Silent, but really smart. How come you never told the rest of us about being gay, man?" he asked curiously, not ready to let go of the subject. "We'd have been cool with it. Maybe not everybody in school, but definitely the kids in Glee."

"I just wasn't ready yet. Especially after Kurt left McKinley."

He turned to Kurt, giving him an admiring look. "I still don't know how you found the guts to be the only out kid at school for so long. I don’t think many people appreciated just how brave you really were, but I knew. I just couldn't find the nerve to take over that role after you left. You were incredibly brave."

Kurt shrugged, masking his pleasure at the compliment by taking a sip of his iced tea. "It wasn't like I had much choice. As for being brave, I liked who I was and didn’t want to hide it just because some jerks couldn’t handle it. And like I told you this morning, I don’t blame you for making sure you knew what you really wanted before you decided to come out. It's not easy, especially if you aren't sure your parents will accept you. But I’m glad you had Tina and Matt to confide in."

"Wait," Artie said, turning to his wife. "You've known all along, all these years, and you never said anything to me?"

"It wasn't my secret to share, honey. I'd have told you if it was."

Looking apologetically at her old boyfriend, Tina said, "And after you graduated, my life got busy and never really slowed down. I honestly kind of forgot. No offense."

"None taken," he said. "The important thing is, I eventually decided to be true to myself and honest with everyone else. Found some love, lost some love, been generally content with my life over the years, and I've been happily single for over a year now."

"That's a long time," Finn commented. Suddenly an excited light filled his eyes and he blurted, "Hey, Kurt's single now too!"

Kurt barely resisted the urge to thump his head against the table in sheer embarrassment. It did not help that Mercedes' warm, merry chortle immediately followed the statement.

Mike's eyes sparkled. "You don't say."

"Yeah!" Finn said, enthusiastically oblivious to his brother's head-shaking. "His last boyfriend was a complete douche. Kurt’s worth a hundred of him and he's a totally cool and giving person. And we all know you're really cool too. An awesome guy like you would be a total improvement over-"

"I'm sure he gets the point, Finn!" Kurt said loudly, breaking into the embarrassing sales-pitch. "This isn't a dating service."

Noting the irritation on Kurt’s face and seeming to realize that his attempt was humiliating rather than helping, Finn ducked his head. "Sorry, Bro." He smiled sheepishly at Mike. "You too."

Mike chuckled and took a sip of his drink. "You know, you really haven't changed a bit, Finn."
Taking that for forgiveness, Finn just smiled and started asking Mercedes about the students and staff at WMHS. Artie and Tina, eager to make up for his blunder, also jumped into the conversation, leaving Kurt and Mike a moment to talk.

"I'm so sorry about that," Kurt mumbled under cover of the surrounding babble.

"No problem. He means well," Mike replied, equally low. "And honestly, if it wouldn't be completely out of line to ask somebody out less than a week after they've broken up with another guy, I might have let him keep talking. Sounded like he was about to sing my praises and save me a lot of work."

Kurt again experienced that weird feeling that his brain had stuttered. Mike could not possibly have meant that the way it sounded. Could he? Afraid to jump to conclusions, he said, "How do you know it's been less than a week?"

A slice of pink cut across Mike's cheekbone. "I, uh, might have called Tina and asked for some information after we had coffee this morning. Not that I wanted to use it or anything!"

Kurt could not stop the little smile that darted across his lips. "Oh. So, you don't want to ask me out?"

Mike blinked. "Well, I . . ."

"Because I have it on very good authority that the best way to get over a nasty breakup is to erase bad memories with good ones," he continued, taking a sip of his tea and then deliberately licking a stray droplet off his lower lip just to see if it would get a reaction.

Sure enough, Mike's eyes followed the motion and he copied it with a mesmerized expression. "Can I call you tomorrow?"

Kurt just nodded his head slightly and was rewarded with a smile from Mike and a quick, surreptitious squeeze of his hand underneath the table.

As Mike turned away from him and began a lively discussion with Finn over about his plans for the next football season, Kurt joined the ladies and Artie in discussing the contents of Artie's latest film project.

The six friends chattered and laughed together as the evening progressed and a warm tingle filled Kurt's entire body every time he met Mike Chang's eyes.

He could not remember the last time he had looked forward so much to a simple phone call.
Flashbacks and Distractions

"I'm going to miss you, you big lug," Kurt said, hugging his brother tightly as Finn's long arms wrapped around his body. "Thank you so much for coming. I can't tell you how much I appreciate it."

"Any time, little bro," he replied, making Kurt laugh. There were not more than a couple of months between their ages, but Finn had always taken great satisfaction in reminding Kurt that he was the 'big' brother. He broke the hug but kept his hands on Kurt's shoulders for a moment as he asked him, "You going to be okay?"

He nodded. "I think so. It's going to take some time to get all the way there, but coming home to Lima was the right thing to do. I needed you all, more than I even realized."

Finn beamed. "Any time. In fact, call me when you go back to New York. If you need help getting back at the douche, just let me know. I'll round up some of my buddies from the football team. We'll come scare the ever lovin' crap out of him."

A sudden vision filled Kurt's mind; Zachary Carson surrounded by a ring of gigantic and extremely unfriendly defensive linemen. He would be pissing his designer couture out of pure terror. The thought was so funny that he burst out laughing, hugging his brother again. "Don't tempt me."

Turning to his sister-in-law, Kurt gave the petite blonde woman a tight hug. "Thank you for coming, Jules. It's been great to see you."

She kissed his cheek. "You too, and what Finn said goes for me too. You need any help at all, you just give me a call and I'll be on the first plane to New York. You be well, okay?"

"I will," he said, smiling. He would never know how Finn, with his early attraction to pushy, strong-willed divas had lucked into a sweet, giving, down-to-earth woman who loved him – and his family by extension – with fierce devotion. "I love you, sis."

Three-year-old Kurt Hudson was waiting in Burt's arms, a sad look in his brown eyes as he rested his head on his grandfather's shoulder, watching the farewell. Kurt came over to them and held out his arms. "Do I get a hug goodbye?"

He shook his head. "Stay."

Kurt smiled and gently pulled his nephew into his arms. Thin arms and legs wrapped around his body, holding tight. This little boy had been named for him, but he was unmistakably Finn Hudson's child. As tall as his tender age as the average first grader, he had the same curly hair, brown eyes and sweet smile as his father.

"But if you stay here, what will your parents do? Mommy has to go back to work and your daddy will be really lonely without you to babysit him."

The child giggled, then asked, "Kurt stay with Daddy?"

Not quite sure which of them the child was referring to since he was currently in the phase of using his own name in place of proper pronouns, Kurt bounced him a little and said, "That's right, you're going with your dad. I can't go, though. I need to stay here and spend a little more time with my dad before I go back to New York."
He mulled that over. "Grandpa Burt?"

"That's right," he said, pleased that the boy had made the connection.

A small hand pressed against Kurt's chest, surprising him when the child declared with certainty, "Grandpa Burt fix the owie."

Kurt glanced at his equally startled looking father. After watching his grandfather fix a car on his last visit, Little Kurt had become firmly attached to the idea that the older man could repair anything in the entire world, from broken toys to skinned knees to – apparently – broken hearts. It was a belief that Kurt himself had once held, and if he was honest about it, a part of him still did. "You're right. He's already given me a patch-job. I just need to stay here with him and Grandma Carole until I'm fixed up enough to go home."

The boy smiled and gave his uncle the previously declined hug. In his little mind, a solution had been reached. It was now okay that Uncle Kurt was staying behind and he was leaving, because they would both be with their parents and everything would be all right. "I love you."

"I love you too, little guy. You have a good trip home. Try not to drive your poor dad crazy asking questions."

He grinned and both round cheeks popped cute little dimples. "We sing."

Julie laughed. "They will, too. All the way home. I think my son knows every '80s pop song ever recorded by now."

Another quick round of hugs and the Hudsons were on their way. Carole sighed wistfully as she watched the car drive away. Kurt hugged her shoulders as he led her back inside the house. "It's been nice having everyone here, hasn't it?"

"It sure has," she agreed. Stretching up, she kissed Kurt on the cheek. "But at least I still have one of my boys to spoil for a few more days. In fact, seeing as I took the day off from the store, I have all afternoon to fix you something really special for dinner. What do you think we should have?"

"You don't have to go to any special trouble for me," he protested. "Anything you fix will be fine."

"No, no, it has to be something you really like. I don't get the opportunity to feed you very often and you're practically skin and bones," she insisted.

Kurt could not help but laugh. He was trim but hardly skeletal. That did not seem to stop his beloved stepmother from trying to fatten him up every time he came home for any length of time, however. And the truth was, he had not had very much appetite these last few days, depriving her of her usual opportunities to spoil him.

Carole's eyes lit up. "Oh, I know! How about that spinach lasagna you love so much? Even the girls enjoy that, in spite of their usual aversion toward anything resembling a vegetable."

He could not answer. Suddenly it felt as though his lungs had stopped working and a hand was squeezing his heart. Kurt stepped back from Carole, feeling dizzy and sick. At the simple mention of that dish, he could almost smell it, and the memory of the last night his apartment had been filled with that scent hit him like a freight train.

Burt reached out to lay a hand on his son's arm, light-blue eyes narrowing with concern. "Kurt? Son, you okay? Maybe you better sit down for a minute. You're looking a little pale."
Kurt's stomach lurched. Breaking away from his parents' concerned touch, he bolted for the downstairs bathroom. He dropped to his knees, so choked with a sudden wash of anger and sorrow that he felt sure he was about to be sick. His memory helpfully supplied him with a replay of that terrible final scene with Zachary.

Zach and the stranger whispering and groaning in obscene pleasure. His boyfriend standing naked and unashamed; the other man lurking behind him, ironically wearing the expression of guilt that Zach could not be bothered with. The soft piano concerto that had filled the air, providing bizarrely calm background music for angry voices. The once tantalizing smell of Kurt's favorite dish; the payoff for continuing to be a naïve and trusting fool.

Acid bile choked him with dry heaves as his worried father knelt by his side, rubbing Kurt's back in firm circles. It was humiliating, and yet at the same time, intensely comforting.

Finally, Kurt coughed a couple of times, flushed the toilet and sat back on the floor, panting. Carole wet a wash cloth and filled a glass with cold water, handing both to Burt and allowing him to clean away the evidence of tears and sickness as Kurt shakily accepted the glass, rinsed and spat a couple of times. His stomach was calming down slowly as he drank the water in tiny sips.

"God, I'm so sorry," he said, his voice rough and embarrassed. Slumping against the wall, he hung his head. "Damn it, it isn't fair. If I didn't do anything wrong, why am I the one who's suffering? Cause I know he sure as hell isn't sitting around being tortured by an overly graphic imagination."

Squeezing the back of his neck, Burt asked, "What does this have to do with him?"

Casting an apologetic glance at Carole, Kurt said, "Lasagna. He was fixing spinach lasagna that night. For me I assume, to distract me from asking what he'd been doing with his evening. The smell of it was everywhere. I've been doing my best not to think about that night in any detail, but somehow when you mentioned it, that was all I could think about. I don't know what happened, but suddenly I felt like I couldn't breathe. I'm really sorry."

"Oh, sweetie," she sighed, dropping to one knee and pulling his head forward to gently kiss his hair. "I'm the one who's sorry. I had no idea."

"I know. How could you? It wasn't your fault. I certainly had no idea that the mere mention of dinner could cause an emotional flashback." He snorted, the sarcasm in his words directed inward. "I mean, seriously. Who the hell gets physically sick over a breakup?"

Burt patted his back. "Probably a lot of people. You okay now? Gonna throw up any more?"

"I sure hope not," he said.

"All right, then. Let's get you upstairs. A little nap and you'll be right as rain."

He let them help him to his feet. His head hurt and his stomach was aching. "You think so?"

Burt shrugged. "Couldn't hurt."

Unable to deny that, Kurt nodded and allowed his concerned parents to escort him to the stairs, where he waved them off. "Thanks. I'm okay now."

He did not feel like napping, but lingering embarrassment and the urge to escape the worry in their eyes sent him up to his room anyway. Kicking off his shoes, he flopped down on the bed and stared up at the ceiling, one hand absently rubbing his abdomen. He could not have said how long he lay there, studying the patterns in the pale blue paint and torturing himself.
Damn it, his relationship was over! Why couldn't he just let it go? Zach had cheated on him and they broke up. Kurt was certain that he was not shedding any tears over the loss, much less having dramatic flashbacks over it.

It made him feel angry and annoyed with himself. Five days ago his life had been turned upside down and he had been overwhelmed ever since with feelings of loss, regret, and self-doubt. Now he was moving on to rage. How could that lousy bastard have treated him this way? How could he have wrapped up his heart, his head, and his entire life in somebody who was capable of using the person who loved them and then just throwing them away like nothing?

Kurt got off the bed in one smooth motion, walking into the bathroom to brush his teeth. He devoted great dedication to the task, flossing, rinsing, brushing everything twice over and gargling mouthwash, wanting to get rid of the lingering vestiges of sickness but also trying to scrub away the memories that had caused it.

He shivered, his skin crawling too, feeling dirty in spite of the fact that he had taken his morning shower not two hours ago. He considered taking another one, but knew that it would not do any good. This soiled feeling was not external. It could not be scrubbed off with a little soap and water.

A sigh heaved from his lungs. Intellectually, he understood what this was, and that not all of it was related to Zach. It was too similar to the way he used to feel back in high school after a long day of slurs and dumpsters, pee balloons, and other more general abuse from the endless parade of homophobes and bullies. He knew the feelings of rejection and disdain, the betrayal of trust, all too well. How often had he gone home as a kid, fighting back tears he was too proud to let fall? How often had he slunk away from sight to clean away the after-effects of abuse that he did not want his father to know about? He had felt dirty and ashamed through no fault of his own as he tried to comfort himself with long showers and exfoliating moisturizers, shakily trying to convince that sad-eyed boy in the mirror that he was better than those who had hurt him. Trying to believe that one day he would escape it all by going on to a bigger and better life.

He supposed that was why this had all hit him so hard. He had never truly dealt with those feelings, at least not in the sense of spilling his guts to a therapist or whatever, but he had escaped them. He had moved on to better things, but apparently some problems just stuck with you. Being grown up and successful did not make you any more desirable in the eyes of those around you. They did not make you into someone who could be easily loved.

Rinsing his mouth one last time, Kurt put up his toothbrush and studied his face critically in the mirror. His features were more angular now than they had been as a boy, less baby faced, but still with the same wide, full-lipped mouth, sharp straight nose and expressive eyes with their changing facets of color that everyone always seemed to find so fascinating. His brows were heavy but well groomed beneath a broad forehead and a mane of thick chestnut hair, no threads of gray to be found anywhere.

He was handsome, he thought critically, and a good person, which was far more important. Okay, so maybe he was a bit of a drama-queen sometimes, and there were days when he could be a little demanding, a little fussy and impatient, a little bit bitchy. Everyone had flaws. But for the most part he was a decent, caring, likeable man. Wasn't he?

He sighed, remembering what Mercedes had also said about his tendency toward self-blame. She was right. It was not easy to believe in his own worth considering how casually he had been cheated on, but he refused to dismiss all of the good friends who did love and support him. Not for the sake of one selfish bastard.

Turning off the light, Kurt returned to his bedroom but he felt restless and irritated, needing to do
something to get his mind off all of this. The problem was, he could not think of anything he wanted to do. Letting his parents worry and fuss over him was decidedly unappealing. He did not feel like getting coffee, or watching television, or going shopping. He could go running again, but at this time of day half of Lima would be out and about. His friends would all be at work right now and working at the garage would feel weird without Dad.

So what did that leave?

The phone in his pocket began to buzz and Kurt jumped, eagerly fumbling the device out of his pocket. A smile lifted his lips when he saw the number he had most recently added to his files.

"You remembered!" he greeted, sitting down on the bed.

A laugh sounded from the other end. "Would you think badly of me if I told you I'd been willing the clock towards afternoon just so I wouldn't seem too eager to call?"

Warmth rushed through Kurt. "Not at all. I'm glad you did. Finn and his family left a little while ago and I was really wishing for something to do. One bad thing about visiting Lima after living in New York is that there aren't nearly as many distractions as I'm used to."

Mike seemed to pick up on the unspoken meaning. "You needing one today? A distraction?"

"Unfortunately, my memory starts doing bad things to me when I give it too much space in my brain," he said, laughing a little to cover up the unfortunate truth of that statement. "Kind of makes me wish I could go kick footballs. Coach Beiste used to let me take a sack of practice balls out and kick away all my frustrations, which was funny because I never played for her."

"She was cool like that," Mike remembered fondly. He paused for a moment, thinking, then said, "How do you feel about kick-boxing?"

Kurt made an unimpressed sound. "I don't think so. Non-contact sports are more my style, in spite of the football thing."

"Dancing?" he tried again.

Kurt paused, then said, "I'm not totally out of practice. I'm sure I'm still not as good as you, but nobody's ever been maimed in the attempt."

He could hear the smile in Mike’s voice as he said, "In that case, how about you come over to my place and join me in a little dance practice? I inherited the house when my mom died and I've refinshed the studio she and Dad let me build here before I left home."

"You're there now?" Kurt asked, oddly intrigued by the idea.

"Yep. I gave myself the day off. What do you say?"

Kurt nibbled his lip. "Nothing fancy?"

"Well, just a little fancy," he joked. "Maybe some Kelly and O'Connor just to work the bugs out?"

At this, Kurt had to laugh. Mike was the only guy in his high school glee club, either of them, who had seemed able to appreciate the brilliance of the classic movie musical, "Singing in the Rain."

"I don't have any tap shoes."

"Hey, you're talking to the proud owner of the second-largest shoe store in all of Lima," he teased
back. "And I've got taps to spare. Come on over. Just wear something you can move around in
easily. I'm assuming you won't mind getting a little hot and sweaty with me?"

A surge of something that was most definitely not as casual and innocent as the question deserved
shot through Kurt's body and he blushed hotly, cursing Mercedes’ sly taunts about what he should
do with his free time. He was very grateful that Mike could not see him through the phone. "I'll be
there in twenty minutes."

"Great! I'll see you then."

Kurt hung up the call and fell back on his bed, groaning into his hands. Less than an hour ago he had
been heaving his guts up and berating himself for not being worthy of love, and now his imagination
was taunting him with less than innocent thoughts about Mike Chang.

"What the hell is wrong with me?" he sighed.
Kurt’s father looked doubtful when he came downstairs wearing a pair of loose fitting pants and a fitted blue muscle shirt, asking to borrow Burt’s truck as he declared his intention to meet Mike Chang for a de-stressing workout.

"You sure you’re up to that?” Burt asked, observing him closely. "You seemed pretty sick earlier. Maybe you should stick close to home until you’re sure you're okay."

"I'm fine, Dad," he objected, self consciously brushing a hand over his midsection. "I just need to get out for awhile and do something that will take my mind off everything. Mike invited me to . . ." He stopped, feeling halfway between amused and embarrassed.

"To do what?” Burt asked, looking as if he was a little bit afraid to hear the answer.

"Dance," he admitted, shrugging one shoulder. "Tap, specifically. Apparently Mike has a small studio set up at his house. It sounds weird, I guess, but I think it might be exactly what I need. Something fun that has no connection with Zach. He never showed any real interest in that side of my life, outside of attending premieres and closings when he needed a write-up for some newspaper."

The bitterness he felt over that fact was clear. It had never bothered Kurt when they were together. He had written it off as being the same as his own lack of interest in basketball, which his partner had been crazy for, but now he could not help wondering if those handy assignments had not been just another way for Zach to conveniently use their relationship for his own benefit. Kurt had made it a point to attend a few basketball games and learn enough about the sport that he could follow along and converse intelligently on the subject, just as he had done for Finn and football, but his boyfriend had never shown the same consideration for Kurt’s passions.

The more he thought about it, the more Kurt was beginning to wonder just how much they'd really had in common. They had similar tastes in food and fashion, and a strong mutual physical attraction - at least initially - but had there really been much else? They had not even cared for the same movies or music. Kurt had found the 'opposites attract' aspect charming at the time, but now he could not help wondering if they had not been just a little too opposite.

Surprising him a little, the announcement of what he planned to do with his day brought a smile to his father’s face. "Sounds great. Reminds me of when you were 10 years old and you begged me to sign you up for tap lessons,” he said, eyes twinkling at the memory. "You were obsessed with all those old Hollywood musicals from the ’50s and you were sure you would be the next Fred Astaire."

"Gene Kelly," he corrected, smiling sheepishly. "I liked the shiny shoes and the sound of the taps, but I really just wanted to learn how to do that cool airplane spin thing he used to do in all his movies. Unfortunately, the teacher wouldn't let us move past the basics and I lost interest."

Burt snorted. "Lucky for me. You broke two lamps and a vase by swinging your arms around practicing that move in the living room. I wouldn't let you do it at home anymore, so you started coming down to the garage where you could wear your tap shoes and listen to the sound on the cement."

"I suppose I should apologize," he said with a laugh. "I must have driven you crazy that summer."

"Just a little," Burt said ruefully, "but at least I never had to wonder where you were. I could hear
you no matter what I was doing."

The two Hummels shared a fond smile. It was strange how many of the things that had separated them during Kurt's childhood now drew them together as adults.

"All right, you go on," Burt said, tossing him the keys. "Have a good time, but if you start feeling sick you be sure and tell him you need a break."

Burt stared at him sternly and Kurt nodded. "I will, don't worry."

Carole appeared from the kitchen with a sandwich and an apple in her hands. "Take these with you. It's not good for a person to exercise on a totally empty stomach."

Smiling fondly, Kurt put on his jacket, accepted the items and kissed her cheek. "Thank you, Mom. I'll see you guys later."

~#~#~#~#~#~

When he reached Mike's house, still familiar from a few parties and after-hours Glee practices when they were teens, Kurt was feeling nervous. Every time he and Mike saw each other lately, a natural flirtatiousness seemed to overtake them. It made him feel good, it was nice to have someone make the effort, but he was not quite sure he was ready for anything more.

Mike opened the door with a broad smile when he knocked. "Right on time. Here, let me take that," he offered, helping Kurt out of his jacket and hanging it up in a small open closet. "Would you like something to eat before we start?"

Kurt could not help smiling. Mike sounded nervous too, and strangely it make him feel better. "No, thank you. Carole shoved a snack into my hands as I was leaving the house. I'm more interested in seeing this studio of yours."

The other man relaxed a bit. Leading Kurt inside, they moved to the right, passing through a kitchen and into a large wood-floored room next to it. "Mom and Dad never had much use for a formal dining room, but it had hardwood floors so I used to practice my dances for glee-club in there and eventually they let me move out the furniture and just make it my own," he said, waving his hand at the studio. The room held a tall cabinet in one corner, a couple of straight backed chairs near a window, a yoga mat and a heavy punching bag in another corner, and a rack holding an assortment of free weights along one wall along with a padded bench. The wall nearest the kitchen boasted two full length mirrors on either side of the doorway. "Here it is; my home-gym-slash-dance-studio."

"This is really nice," Kurt said honestly. The room was warm and well lit, and the mirrors and empty center area made it appear comfortably spacious. Gesturing at the punching bag, he grinned. "Kick boxing, right?"

"Now you know why that's the first thing I thought of," Mike agreed. "Like I said, I'm no Bruce Lee, but I do have some Chuck Norris moments."

Kurt smiled politely, having only the vaguest idea who that was. He was pretty sure Norris had been one of those action-movie guys his father was so gung-ho over when Kurt was a child, but he had never kept very good track of them all.

"Do you have something we can use for music?" he asked, looking around and not seeing anything. "Not that we have to use music to tap dance, but I've always found it easier to loosen up if I have something to move to."
"Ah, yes," Mike said mysteriously. "I have everything we could possibly need in the magic cabinet."

Kurt laughed. "Magic?"

"Look and see," he invited, moving to the six-foot, double-door piece of furniture and throwing the doors open.

Kurt followed him and was impressed. One side had a full stereo system, with everything from an old-style turntable to a state of the art digital file converter. The other side of the cabinet held a mini refrigerator in the base, and above it shelves holding towels and supplies of all sorts including, "Tap shoes!"

"What did I tell you? Everything a person a needs right in one handy location," Mike answered smugly. Reaching inside, he plucked two pairs of shiny black shoes off one shelf and presented one to his guest. "Size 12, just for you."

"And what would you have done if I wore, say, a 10?"

He laughed. "Probably asked you to wait an hour so I could run over to the shoe store and grab the right size."

"Very sensible." He moved over to the bench and sat down, taking off his sneakers and trying on the borrowed shoes. They looked a little out-of-place with his workout clothing, but he ignored that. After all, Mike was wearing cut-off jean shorts and a T-shirt with some kind of Anime character on the front so he looked even more ridiculous and did not seem to mind a bit.

The two men stretched their muscles for a few minutes then Mike scrolled through the playlists on his phone to choose something appropriate. "How do you feel about something classic? Sinatra?"

"Perfect," Kurt agreed, feeling himself relax a little more when a set of hidden surround speakers began producing a smooth jazzy instrumental intro, followed a few seconds later by Frank crooning 'Fly Me to the Moon'.

Mike took up position next to Kurt and demonstrated a few slow taps, stamps, and time-steps which Kurt quickly copied. He threw in a few more complicated steps and Kurt easily followed along. "Very good," Mike commented. "You have kept in practice, haven't you?"

"I try," Kurt said, feeling his muscles loosen up a little more as they settled into the familiar patterns of motion. Dancing beside Mike was familiar too, though it had been a long time, and the two of them found a matching rhythm without much trouble.

The song soon changed to 'Dancing Cheek to Cheek' and Mike hitched his eyebrows playfully. "What do you say to a little Fred and Ginger?"

"Does that mean you expect me to be Ginger?"

"Mike grinned. "Not if you don't want to be," he said, sliding his arm around Kurt's shoulders and taking his opposite hand while Kurt's left settled on his waist. "I always thought Ginger had the harder job anyway, gliding around backward in high heels."

Kurt tried not to smile back and failed spectacularly as he waltzed his slightly taller partner around the shining floor of the dance studio. It was not the smoothest performance ever. Mike wasn't used to being the one led and he kept unconsciously attempting to steer; making it occasionally feel more like a wrestling match than a dance, but it was undeniably fun just the same.
"Hang on," Kurt said as the song reached a crescendo. Bracing himself, he dipped the other man which caused them both to burst out laughing.

"That was great!" Mike chuckled as they broke apart. "Think you're up for something a little more energetic?"

Before Kurt could ask what he intended, Mike reached over and tapped a button and the song switched to 'Good Mornin'.

Kurt grinned delightedly. "Singing in the Rain!"

"I promised you Kelly and O'Connor, and that is what you shall have," Mike teased.

The dance that followed wasn't exactly up to the standard of the classic musical, but they did their best, jumping and spinning and stomping around each other. Soon they forgot all about trying to emulate the movie as a spirit of spontaneous competition took over. Kurt tried one of those classic Gene Kelly airplane spins his father had mentioned and it went well until he forgot to center himself, became dizzy, and nearly crashed face-first into the heavy bag.

Mike caught him, laughing at the near-disaster, and moved them to a slower song to give Kurt's equilibrium a chance to recover.

For over an hour, the two old friends danced and pranced about the room, laughing so hard at times that it was difficult to stay upright. Finally, sweat-soaked and completely out of breath, Kurt surrendered and plunked down onto the workout bench again.

"I give! You win," he panted. He felt worn out but extremely happy. Watching Mike stride over to shut off the music, looking full of energy still, he huffed a laugh. "Remember when I said that we have some productions in New York that could use your help? I mean it even more now. I mean look at you! You could whip those children into shape while barely breaking a sweat."

Rummaging in the cabinet, Mike produced a towel and a bottle of water for each of them. "I wouldn't go that far, but I've always loved dancing more than anything else in the world. It's not something I have to do for money or for the enjoyment of others. It's just something I have to do for me."

Kurt nodded, helping himself to a deep swallow of cold water. "I feel that way about singing. I do it for a living, helping other people refine their techniques and stretch their limits, but even if I gave it all up tomorrow to become an accountant or something, I'd still have to sing now and then just for myself."

Mike nodded, sipping his own drink. There was a pause, then he said, "You're not really thinking about becoming an accountant, are you? Because I used to sit next to you in math class and you really sucked at it."

For a moment, Kurt stared at him, dumbfounded, but then they both cracked up.

As Kurt mopped off his damp face and neck, he grimaced and rolled his neck, feeling the familiar crunching tightness that shot a stab of pain through his head and shoulders. Seeing the look on his face, Mike frowned. "You okay? You didn't hurt yourself with all those fancy moves, did you?"

"No, it's not that. I've had a horrible kink in my neck for over a month. It's not there all the time. Mostly just when I get stressed or overdo things. I probably pushed myself a little too hard trying to out-do the master."
Mike smiled at the tease. "As much stress as you've been under lately, it's probably gotten even worse. Am I right?"

Kurt nodded, then winced, realizing that had not been a good idea. "Pretty much. I'm tempted to blame the whole thing on my ex-boyfriend but I think it has more to do with the show I just finished. It was one of those Murphy's Law productions, where something seems to go wrong practically every day. It gave me a literal pain in the neck."

"Maybe I can help," Mike said, setting his water bottle on the floor and moving to stand behind Kurt. Setting warm dry hands on his shoulders, he added, "Don't be scared, like I told you, I actually have a license to do this. It's a little out of date, but the skills are still good."

Suddenly hyper-aware of the other man's proximity and his own sweaty and disgusting state, Kurt stiffened. Then those long, strong hands began to move, gliding over the tense muscles in his neck, shoulders and upper back with sure movements and all the fight went right out of him.

"Oh, wow," he breathed, eyelids fluttering when Mike did something at the base of his skull that sent a rush of warmth down his spine.

"You've got knots on knots," Mike commented. "No wonder you're sore."

Noticing a hesitation in the other man's touch, Kurt said, "What is it?"

"I was about to say that this would be a lot easier if you took your shirt off, but I don't want to come across as some massage-parlor cliché," Mike admitted. "Usually when I give someone a massage, it's a professional setting and not a guy I'm . . ."

He stopped and this time, Kurt could sense embarrassment. His stomach fluttered with a sudden rush of butterflies. Hoping he was not about to humiliate them both, he ventured, "Attracted to?"

Mike sighed, squeezing his shoulders gently. "Exactly. Not that you wouldn't stop me if I started taking an action you weren't ready for, but I thought there was a spark between us that first night we saw each other again, and every time I've seen you since then, I've felt it a little bit stronger."

"I've felt it, too. But you don't want to start anything with me, Mike. Especially knowing that I'm only going to be in Lima for a few more days. My life is in New York and I'm going to have to return to it eventually."

"I know that, and unfortunately it doesn't seem to affect my desire to start something with you," he admitted, watching Kurt's face in one of the wall-mounted mirrors. He looked solemn suddenly, a little bit sad. Mike's fingers tightened as he ducked his head, shaking it a little at his own admission. "That's the problem. You just broke up with someone and you're vulnerable. When we spent time together this week, I've feel like everything was right and I'd be crazy not to make a move. But when we're apart again, I feel like I must be depraved for wanting to hit on somebody who just got his heart broken a week ago. I might hurt you, or at least confuse you, without intending to and I don't think that's what you need right now."

Kurt stood, abruptly breaking the warm, absently caressing hold on his shoulders that was making it difficult to concentrate on anything the other man was saying. Walking a few steps away, he turned around, crossing his arms over his chest in a defensive posture. "You're right," he confessed. "You're probably completely crazy not to make a move, because right now you'd have an unusually good chance of getting me into bed. Unfortunately, it would be for all the wrong reasons because you're also right that I'm not ready yet. I'm not even sure I realized how not ready until you touched me."
Looking unsure and just a tiny bit insulted, Mike said, "What does that mean?"

Kurt averted his eyes, only to find himself looking at his own hotly blushing face reflected in one of the mirrors. He dropped his gaze to the floor. "My boyfriend and I were together for over two years and I can't even remember the last time he touched me with as much genuine care and intimacy as you just demonstrated in one completely non-sexual contact." He shook his head, feeling tears welling up in his eyes. "And that's really messed up. If I were to sleep with you, I'm afraid I'd only be doing it because I'm so desperate to feel wanted."

"I understand," Mike said quietly, sitting back down on the bench and keeping his distance. "I've been there too, only mine turned out to be married."

Shocked, Kurt looked up. Mike's open, honest brown eyes met his squarely.

He nodded. "I know I told you that I hadn't met anyone I wanted to settle down and make a life with, but that wasn't exactly true. I did find him, he just turned out to already have that life with somebody else. We were together almost a year. He was a salesman, so he was out of town for long stretches of time. I didn't want to allow myself to be suspicious so at first I ignored the signs that there was somebody else. Then one day, I intercepted a phone call. From his wife." Mike shrugged. "Turned out he was having an affair, and I was it. I was the dirty little secret, the clandestine gay love affair, and I had no claim at all. I think I cried myself to sleep for a solid month after that. Then I started sleeping with any gay guy who'd stand still long enough, trying to forget."

"That's why you said you'd been on your own for a year," Kurt said, moving back to sit beside him on the bench. "You'd had your heart broken."

"Smashed to smithereens," he quipped lightly.

Kurt tipped his head to one side. "Was that the pizza and donut guy?"

Surprised, Mike laughed. "Actually, no. That was just someone whose intentions I completely misread. He thought we were just friends having fun and he never meant to hurt me. I guess I was feeling a little desperate after that other relationship was such a major fail, so I threw myself into something that wasn't meant to be. I was so depressed by my own failure that I decided I wasn't meant to be in any relationships and I turned to pizza for comfort."

"Sounds familiar," Kurt said with a smile. "Not the food binge, but the rose-colored relationship glasses. I've definitely been there."

"Guess we're just a couple of old fashioned romantics, aren't we?" Mike teased, picking up Kurt's hand and giving it a friendly squeeze. "That's why I gave up looking for awhile. No one seemed to want the same things I did and I couldn't give up the dream of happily ever after. My parents and their lifetime of brainwashing about marriage and babies, I guess."

"Me, too. I'm kind of messed up right now, but I'm recovering faster than I ever could have if I hadn't come home. I think . . . I think I just need to slow down and figure out what I'm really looking for."

Mike nodded, giving his shoulder a playful bump. "Understood. Just so we're clear, though, I have absolutely nothing against casual sex."

Kurt burst out laughing. "I'll keep that in mind. For the moment, can I just borrow your bathroom to clean up a little?"

Giving Kurt a hand up, Mike reached back into the magic cabinet and produced a dry T-shirt, this one bearing the logo, 'He's dead, Jim. You get his tricorder, I'll get his wallet.' "You can borrow this
to go home in. Return it any time."

Looking doubtfully at the shirt, he said, "Does this mean you were a closet nerd in high school?"

Mike laughed. "No, it just means that you and I obviously didn't hang out as much as we should have." Showing him the way, he said, "Bathroom's right through there. Help yourself to anything."

"Thanks." Taking the borrowed shirt and his own shoes into the bathroom, Kurt started to clean up, feeling reassured that his instinctive sense that Mike was a true gentleman had not been misplaced. Still, there was undeniable sexual tension between them and it was somehow comforting to know that a man as attractive as Mike Chang had checked him out and not found him wanting.

As Mike walked him out the front door, Kurt studied his face for a moment. "I'm going to take a few days for myself. Just pretend that I'm on vacation for a normal reason, do things with my family, spend a little time by myself and maybe sort through my feelings. When that's all done, do you think I could call you?"

"I'd like that," he agreed, a light of hope warming his eyes that, in turn, warmed Kurt's heart. "I'd really like that."

Impulsively, Kurt leaned in, pressing his lips gently against Mike's. He was not touching him in any other way, giving him the freedom to pull away, and after a momentary hesitation, Mike kissed him back. It was light and entirely chaste, but sweet with promise.

"Thank you for the dance," Kurt said softly.

Mike smiled. "I'll talk to you soon."
Feeling much more cheerful after his visit with Mike, Kurt was smiling as he opened the front door and called out, "I'm back!"

It was just after 4:00 pm so he was not surprised to have his declaration answered by thundering footsteps and two happy shouts of, "Hi, Kurt!"

As the girls ran at him, Kurt surprised delighted shrieks out of them when he swooped down and hoisted them up over his shoulders as he continued into the living room, arms pressed securely against the backs of their legs.

Burt and Carole were sitting in their favorite chairs and the both grinned when Kurt entered the room and turned 360 degrees, affecting a puzzled look as he said, "Has anyone seen my sisters? I can't seem to find them."

"Haven't seen 'em," his father replied.

The twins laughed. Their big brothers used to play this game with them when they were small and it was a delightful surprise to find out that Kurt could still do it, even though they were big girls now.

Kurt spun back faster in the other direction. "Now that's strange. I was sure I just heard somebody giggle."

Christy clapped a hand over her mouth and Kathy hid her face against the back of her brother's shoulder, both trying to stifle their laughter.

Wandering around the living room, Kurt bent this way and that, pretending to search. "Not behind the sofa. Hmm, not under the TV either." He stopped and politely addressed the cat, seeing him perched on the back of the sofa watching this strange human ritual with evident interest. "Excuse me, Shanks. Have you seen two little girls, around four feet tall with brown hair? I seem to have misplaced them."

Crookshanks tapped at one girl’s shoe with a paw and replied to the question with an intrigued-sounding, "Mrrrow?" and Kurt lost his battle not to laugh, as did both the girls and their parents.

Lowering himself down to the middle cushion of the empty sofa, Kurt set his sisters gently on their feet and accepted a pair of hugs. "He was right, here you are!"

"You're so silly," Kathy scolded, helping herself to a sideways seat on Kurt's lap and shooting her sister a triumphant look when the other girl scowled, having been beaten to the coveted place and forced to sit on the cushion next to him instead.

"That was fun!" Christy declared. "I didn't know you were strong enough to do that anymore."

Kurt gave her an affronted look. "$\text{You're so silly,}"$ Kathy scolded, helping herself to a sideways seat on Kurt's lap and shooting her sister a triumphant look when the other girl scowled, having been beaten to the coveted place and forced to sit on the cushion next to him instead.

"That was fun!" Christy declared. "I didn't know you were strong enough to do that anymore."

Kurt gave her an affronted look. "The two of you can't weigh more than 120 pounds together," he objected. "$\text{I may not be Superman, but I can certainly manage that much!}"

"I think you're super," Kathy declared loyally, hugging his neck.

Christy, in the meantime, had become distracted by her brother's attire. Leaning closer to get a good look, her sharp greenish-blue eyes swept over his messy, sweat-stiffened hair and down his chest to read the lettering on the slightly oversized black T-shirt he wore. Her arms folded over her chest and
extreme disapproval primmed her mouth and scrunched her delicate nose. The expression was so very familiar that it gave Kurt the disconcerting feeling that he was looking at a younger, feminine version of himself. He could hear the echo of his own long-ago voice telling Mercedes, "You need to check with me before you dress yourself." Apparently good taste was genetic. (And skipped a generation, given their father's lifelong dedication to denim and flannel.) Either that, or his baby sisters had been paying more attention to his own rants and lectures on fashion than he had ever realized.

"Guess maybe I should go change, huh?" he asked with a chuckle, plucking at the borrowed shirt.

"Where did you get that?" she asked. "What does it even mean? Who's Jim?"

Kurt was a little startled by the question. "Star Trek? You know, the original version from 50-something years ago?"

She huffed a little at the mention of something so ancient as that.

Given how much Carole and Finn both adored those series – having relentlessly indoctrinated Kurt and his father after becoming part of their family - Kurt had to ask his stepmother, "Are you sure this is your kid?"

Carole laughed. "Pretty sure."

Turning back to the girl with a shake of his head, he said, "Jim is one of the main characters and this line refers to …" Seeing the look on her face, he waved the matter away. "You know what? Never mind. I got my own shirt dirty, and Mike was nice enough to give me a different one to wear home."

Kathy nodded. "Daddy said you'd gone over to have a grown-up play date. What did you guys do?"

Shooting a pained look at his father, Kurt repeated, "A grown-up play date? You know that doesn't exactly have the same ring as dance lessons."

Burt's expression gave away nothing. In an inflectionless voice, he told Kurt, "The girls asked where you’d gone and I told ‘em. I wasn't sure that dancing was all you guys had in mind. You been gone all afternoon."

Before he could stop himself, Kurt’s mouth gaped open in shock. Dad knew. He knew that Mike was gay, that Kurt was interested, and that there had probably at least been some flirting involved in their afternoon. What was stranger still, he approved! His father’s features were entirely calm but it was all there in those wise and all-too-knowing eyes.

"Nothing happened," Kurt said firmly, trying to force his suddenly flustered thoughts back into order. "Mike showed me around his house, we danced for a while, we talked some, then I got cleaned up and came home. That's it. That's all that went on. No more, end of story."

"Why, Kurt dear, you're blushing!" Carole said with a delighted smile.

Cursing his complexion for giving him away, Kurt lifted his sister off his lap and stood, automatically brushing a few golden cat hairs off the dark fabric of his shirt and pants. The darned stuff got everywhere in this house. With as much dignity as he could muster he lifted his chin and said, "I'm going up to take a shower. I'll be back down in a little while to help with dinner."

"There's no need for that," his stepmother told him. "I already have a chicken casserole made up and ready to go. I just need to pop it in the oven and cut up some salad veggies. The girls can help me with that."
"Don't feel guilty about taking the opportunity for some R&R, son," Burt advised him, ignoring his daughters' put-upon groan as he shot Kurt one of those penetrating looks that always made him feel like he was being X-rayed, and searched carefully for signs of distress. "It's okay to kick back a little and let somebody else take care of you for a change."

Kurt squirmed, feeling childish when he realized again how safe and relaxed that protective attitude of his dad's still made him feel. "I guess I am sort of on vacation," he said slowly. "I haven't been in a very good frame of mind since I came home but I really am starting to feel better. I was saying just a little while ago that I wanted to spend some time with you all and to relax and have some fun for a few days before I need to head back."

"That's the spirit," Burt approved. "Any ideas?"

He nibbled his lip, studying his hands. "One or two. I was thinking on the way home that I could use a spa day. My fingernails are a mess and I'm practically clawing my way out of my shoes." Running a finger over his cheek, he added thoughtfully, "It's been a while since I had a facial, too, and I think a good massage would do wonders for my stress levels."

Carole sighed. "That sounds lovely."

"Then come with me," he instantly invited. "It's just as easy to make an appointment for two as for one and tomorrow is Saturday. You're off, right?"

He was not surprised by her immediate protest of, "I am, but I wasn't trying to invite myself along! I certainly don't want to intrude on your plans."

"You wouldn't be," he said honestly. A heart-felt smile popped his dimples into view. "I'd love to treat you to a little pampering, then maybe catch up a little more over lunch and shopping. You can give me all the Lima gossip. Girl's Day is more fun with a friend."

As he had hoped, Carole laughed. "In that case, I'd be delighted."

Her words instantly had the twins shooting over to her and begging, "Can we go too? Please, Mom? We'll be good. We'll do all our chores for a week without any reminders. Pleeease?"

Their voices babbled over each other and Carole had to raise hers to be heard. "The two of you do not need massages and facials," she said sternly, bringing disappointed pouts to both little faces, "but I will let get your nails done if it's all right with your father and Kurt. Daddy will have to pick you up and look after you if I'm going to spend the day with your brother."

"It's okay with me if they come along," Kurt said, not at all surprised by the request.

Two sets of big blue eyes fixed on Burt, and Kurt smothered a smile. He knew without a doubt that he was going to have two little shadows the next morning. The man who had not been able to stand up to a sixteen-year-old boy pleading for a ridiculously expensive Gucci sweater that he did not need (but was sure he would die without) would not stand a chance against the big pleading eyes of his baby girls.

"Yeah, it's fine, but how do you know I wasn't already planning on going with you guys?" Burt asked, smirking at the shocked expressions on all three of his children's faces.

Carole smacked him playfully on the arm and he burst into hearty peals of laughter.

After a moment, Kurt joined in. "You're welcome to join us if you want to, Dad, but I still remember that time I dragged you into a nail salon and made you get a manicure with me. I've seen less terror in..."
the eyes of a kid shoved from understudy into lead actor on a moment's notice!"

Burt winced at the reminder and Kurt laughed.

"I'll pass, thanks," the older Hummel decided. "Tell you what, just give me a call when you girls are done getting dolled up and we'll go have lunch at Chuck E Cheese before I take you home."

"Pizza!" the girls chorused, throwing their arms around their father's neck, perfectly happy with that compromise.

Burt looked smug, Carole looked indulgent and Kurt just rolled his eyes. Greasy food, creepy animatronic cartoon characters, and more tinny music and colorful video games than any sane adult could stand. It sounded awful, and yet he could still remember the strange appeal of the place and how patient and indulgent his dad had been about taking him there when he was a little boy. He also didn't blame his sisters for choosing that option above a comparatively boring lunch at some quiet, adult-friendly restaurant.

"Sounds like we have a plan," he said. Kurt wondered sometimes if he would turn out to be even half as good a parent as these two, assuming he ever got the chance to try. It was nice to believe that their example would give him a boost over the hard parts. Checking his watch, he said, "I'm going to get that shower and make some phone calls to set things up. I noticed when I was in town yesterday that the place on Taylor street is still open for business."

Carole suddenly looked a little unsure. "Isn't that one awfully expensive?"

"Maybe, but they're worth it," he said, knowing full well that his favorite full-service salon was at least twice the price of any other store in the area, but that the services were more than good enough to justify the expense. Besides, Lima prices did not even come close to the average cost of living in New York City.

Trusting him to know his own limits, Carole nodded. "All right then. Thank you."

He smiled, happy at the thought of spending a little fun time with his family. "It's my pleasure." And it was. He could feel his tension levels lessening already, just thinking about it. As he began to leave the room, Kurt looked back at his father. "Dad? How long have you known about Mike?"

Burt smiled. "Since the year his dad came to me for advice on how to deal with something he hadn't figured out on his own. I didn't tell you because it was a secret and I swore I would keep it."

"Does Mike know that you know?"

He shrugged. "Not sure. He's never said anything to me if he does."

"You like him, though," Kurt said.

"He's a good kid," Burt said, giving his simple but powerful stamp of approval. "I've kept an eye on him off and on over the years, whenever he came back to visit. He's hard-working, loyal and I've never seen him deliberately hurt anyone."

Kurt nodded. The silent 'unlike your ex' was as loud as if his father had shouted it.

"Is that why you were so quick to point out that Mike had come back to Lima that morning, when we were driving home?" he asked curiously. The pink flush that colored Burt's round cheeks gave him away and brought a soft laugh to Kurt. His father had been looking out for him, as always. Trying to let him know in his own way that there were other fish in the sea. Bending over, he
dropped a kiss on top of his father's bald head. "Thanks, Dad."
Spa Day

Kurt had decided to book the appointments along a staggered schedule. Nails first, then lunch with the entire group at the pizza place; in the spirit of family togetherness he could live through an hour of ear-splitting games and people in cartoon animal suits; then he and Carole would leave for their facials and massages at 1:30.

Carole and Burt had agreed that this was a good plan, so at 11 am on Saturday, Kurt, Carole, Christy, and Kathy checked in to one of Lima's better nail salons where a staff of smiling technicians immediately directed them to choose nail polish colors and take their places at the waiting manicure and pedicure stations.

The place was just starting to get busy and Carole and Kurt decided this would work better if they each kept one of the girls with them. "How about we start with C's at the manicure station and K's at the pedicure," Carole suggested, wrapping an arm around Christy. "Then switch."

"Works for me," Kurt agreed, lifting his sister Christy up high enough to choose the polish color she wanted off the rack on the wall, then switching sisters when she found something she liked right away. Kathy conversely took her sweet time about finding the perfect shade and as Kurt's arms began to grow weary from holding her in place, he sent a silent apology to their father for all the times he had done this to him, back when his child-sized self had been in pursuit of the perfect hair or skin care product that he could not reach on his own.

"See anything you like?" he asked after five solid minutes of concentrated study, hoping to prod Kathy along.

"I like this pink one but the green one right next to it would be good, too. Oh, and this blue one!"

He rolled his eyes. Christy had chosen an iridescent apple green polish and Kurt knew his sisters well enough to know that this choice would eventually eliminate the green bottle from Kathy's list. Being identical made the twins very particular about having some things exactly the same and other things unique.

"The dark green is nice but it's really more of a winter shade," he suggested, "and tomorrow is the first day of spring. Maybe you should pick a light, cheerful color to celebrate the season with."

She nodded. "That's a good idea! Which one would you choose?"

"Probably the blue," he replied, both because he wanted her to make a decision and because it was true. He had never worn fingernail polish other than a clear topcoat back when he used to do this with his high school friends, but if he was going to wear any of these colors himself that pretty ocean shade with the tiny flecks of glitter in it would definitely be his first choice. "It's really pretty."

Kathy twisted her head around to look at him and said, "Then how about if you wear this one and I wear the pink?"

"Oh, no, I couldn't do that," he protested, setting her down and gratefully shaking out his weary arms.

"Why not?"

Scrunching his nose, he said, "Well... I don't know. Don't you think wearing colored nail polish might be a little too girly?"
Calmly, Kathy responded, "Fashion has no gender."

Her sister chimed in, "And this is supposed to be Girls' Day, remember? Why shouldn't you do what you want?"

Carole burst out laughing at the look on his face. "I think you've just been outsmarted by your own arguments. And just for the record, I'm with them. You should wear it if you want to. It's not like everyone is going to see it."

"True," he mused, turning the bottle in his hand. He glanced at the nail technician, who was quietly laughing at the exchange. She nodded, clearly agreeing with his stepmother. "Well . . . why not? I can always take it off later if I change my mind."

His sisters cheered his decision and Kurt found himself grinning as he handed over the polish and kicked his shoes off, bending to roll his cuffs up. The over-sized Levis his dad had purchased for him had been neatly folded and stored in a drawer once Kurt had bought some properly fitted pants. He mourned that skinny jeans had mostly gone out of fashion now, but these fitted straight leg jeans looked good on him too and they were significantly more comfortable. Not to mention easier to tug up over his knees!

The nail technicians expertly adjusted the chairs at the two pedicure stations to the comfort of their two distinctly different-sized clients and went to work.

Kurt smiled as he half-listened to the girls chatter away while he checked his phone messages. Emily had called with an update on Zachary. Apparently, having nobody left to sponge off of after finding a very cold reception from his and Kurt's circle of mutual friends, he had been forced to head back to Newark and his parents' house while searching out somewhere new to live. A stab of vindictive pleasure shot through Kurt at that news. Zach hated New Jersey with a passion.

Emily's message also promised a surprise when he got home and Kurt was tempted to call and prod her for details. She sounded a little nervous, and that wasn't like his confident and brassy friend. His thumb hovered over the dial, undecided, then he shook his head. If it was important that he know right now, she would have said something. Right now he did not want to worry about it, so instead he just sent back a quick text saying that he was looking forward to it and moved on to the next call. This one was from one of his regular clients, begging to know when he would be back in town so they could set up a session as she had just accepted a new role and was desperate for his expert guidance.

Kurt snorted softly at the gushing voicemail and resolved to call Em that night and figure out a new schedule. He still was not ready to go home, but knew that he would have to face reality soon if he did not want his client list to be snapped up by other coaches. New York City had no shortage of voice instructors; Kurt just happened to be one of the best and his reputation had so far stood strong against outside pressure. However, he knew that if he did not get back into the game soon that could change.

Suddenly, Kurt jumped and jerked his foot out of the technician's hands. She looked at him with concern, asking if she had hurt him. A blush heated his cheeks as he admitted. "No, I'm afraid I'm a little ticklish. I should have warned you."

She just nodded and went back to work, scrubbing a little harder with the exfoliation brush. Kurt held himself very tense until she was finished, willing himself not to pull away again, and breathed a soft sigh of relief when she released him.

A soft giggle to his right had Kurt looking at Kathy. "Oh, shut up," he said with a laugh.
"Mom does that, too," she said smugly, "but me and Christy don't."

"Christy and I," he corrected without thinking about it, then added, "And that's only because your tickle spots are in other places. In fact, I think I still remember where they all are. I may have to test myself later and find out if I've forgotten any. You know, just in case."

Alarm leaped into her blue eyes as she protectively clutched her rib cage. Kurt just winked and put his phone away, settling more comfortably into the massaging pedicure chair and folding his hands across his stomach as he absently watched the lady trim and shape his nails. He grimaced a little. They really had gotten ridiculous. He had to stop letting his busy work schedule take over his life to the point where he was oblivious to all the important things around him.

"You have really fuzzy legs," Kathy commented after a few minutes, watching the technician smooth a thick layer of lotion onto one of her brother's long legs as she began his leg massage.

He shrugged one shoulder. "No more so than Dad."

"I guess." A few seconds went by and then, "Is that why men don't get to wear dresses?"

A sudden vision of his father in flannel shirt, work boots and a denim skirt popped into Kurt's head and he burst out laughing. "I'm sure that's part of it. Though I did used to have a couple of kilts," he admitted with a smile. "Always got me a lot of stares when I wore them to school, but I didn't care. I even wore one to prom."

Kristy grinned. "I know. Aunt Mercedes has pictures."

Kurt sighed and rolled his eyes dramatically, making her laugh. "Aunt Mercedes has pictures of everything. I swear, that woman has enough blackmail material to keep me doing her bidding for the next fifty years."

"You like letting her order you around," she said all too wisely.

He chuckled. "Well, maybe just a little."

Closing his eyes, Kurt hummed a little, enjoying the skilled fingers of the pedicurist as she worked the tension out of his calves, ankles and arches. It really had been too long since he let go and allowed himself to be pampered.

The massage was over all too soon, but he watched curiously as light greenish-blue polish was applied to his toenails. He felt a little silly for doing this. Somewhere over the course of the years, he had become self-conscious about things his teenage self wouldn't have batted an eyelash about. Especially after he started dating Zach. Anything too overtly feminine had made him uncomfortable. Somehow it made Kurt feel proud to reclaim a tiny spark of his old flamboyance.

"You like it?" the technician asked when the first coat of polish was finished.

Kurt smiled. "You know . . . I do."

In spite of his sisters' urging, Kurt refused to wear color on his fingers, but he appropriately oo'ed and aah'ed over all the ladies' finished manicures, sitting in the back seat of Carole's car between his sisters afterward and playing mediator as they argued over whose nails were prettier.

The drive to the pizza place was thankfully short and Burt was already waiting at a table in the back of the lightly populated restaurant when they arrived. "How'd it go?" he greeted, giving his wife a kiss on the cheek and hugging his daughters warmly as they ran up to show off their nails.
Kurt sat down across from his dad and was immediately flanked by the twins again. "It was good. They do nice work there," he said, glancing in satisfaction at his neatly buffed fingertips.

"Kurt got blue toes," Christy blurted excitedly.

"He looks pretty," Kathy chimed in.

Burt gave him a questioning look and Kurt shrugged, trying not to feel embarrassed. "Just for fun. Feels like it's been awhile since I did anything silly."

To his surprise, Burt smiled and said, "Glad to hear it. You been too serious for way too long. It's good to know you're letting loose a little."

"You don't think it's weird?"

Burt chuckled. "Compared to some of that stuff you wore for glee club, and whatever fashion-plate craziness was in your head when you were young? Sorry, kid, but a little nail polish doesn't even come close to weird. No offense."

"None taken," he laughed, privately conceding that his father might have a point.

"Can we go play some games?" Christy begged, looking eagerly around at the bright, colorfully lit restaurant.

Carole replied, "After we eat. Your father ordered already so it should only be a few more minutes."

"Okay," the twins chorused glumly.

Fortunately, the food arrived just at that moment and the children were happily distracted by pizza. Kurt was grateful that his father had remembered to order him a salad bar visit, but the tantalizing odor of piping hot pizza tempted him into grabbing a hearty slice of that as well. It was greasy and fattening and would probably require hours of exercise to burn off, but Kurt could not bring himself to regret it as he bit into the tip, closing his eyes and allowing the burst of flavor to wash over his tongue.

While Kurt was savoring the indulgence of his single slice, the twins gobbled down two apiece and immediately begged their parents for game tokens again. Having prepared for this, Burt dug into his pockets and gave them each a generous handful.

"Have fun, guys. I'll see you at home later," Kurt called out to their retreating backs, reminding them that he would not be returning with them.

The twins immediately turned back around and gave both Kurt and their mom enthusiastic hugs goodbye.

"You'd think we were going all the way back to New York for those massages," he said, rubbing his half-strangled neck with one hand as the girls scampered away.

"They're just enjoying having you around," his father said, taking a sip of his soda. "We all are."

Kurt smiled. "In spite of the circumstances that brought me, I'm enjoying being here." Giving up on the thick doughy roll of crust at the top of his pizza slice, Kurt wiped his fingers and helped himself to more water from the pitcher left on the table. "I really am sorry that I haven't been home more often. Somehow I just kept putting off my visits. For work, or other commitments, or because we were booked somewhere else on our holidays. I never realized how much time was slipping away
and how little control I had over my own life anymore. Maybe that's why this whole situation caught me so badly off guard."

"It's all right, Kurt. We understood," Carole told him, reaching out to squeeze his hand. "That's what happens when you become an adult. Your responsibilities and priorities change."

He shook his head. "They shouldn't have changed that much. I feel like I've been walking around with my eyes squeezed shut for the past two years. Maybe if I'd spent more time with the people I love, I would have seen the truth a lot sooner."

"Or you might never have seen it at all," Burt said, surprising him. "You can't hold on to the should haves and might haves in life. It'll just drive you nuts and it doesn't do any good. Believe me, I know! And if you missed a few signposts along the road, that just means it took you a little longer to find your way home."

"I wish I could be sure I wasn't going to make any more detours once I start traveling again," Kurt said ruefully.

Burt snorted. "You figure out how to manage that, you be sure to let me know."

"Speaking of traveling, I want to rent a car," Kurt told him. "Walking is fine if I'm only going short distances around town, but it's a little inconvenient otherwise and I hate to keep borrowing from you guys. Besides, I've been thinking that I'd like to drive when I go back home. It will give me a couple of days to myself before things get crazy again."

His father nodded agreement. "That's a good idea. I got a couple of cars in the shop that I've been rebuilding. One is almost ready to go. If you want to help me finish 'er up, you can just take that and you won't have to pay a rental fee. You haven't had a car of your own for while now and I think it's about time you did. Maybe it'll inspire you to get out of the big city and breath some real air once in a while. You'd have the freedom to come back here for a visit whenever you want to, and since the idiot is gone for good, you can take his space in your building's parking garage."

Kurt laughed, realizing that his father must have already planned this scenario out in his own mind. "That sounds great, Dad. I appreciate it."

Carole checked her watch. "We'd better get going if we don't want to be late to the spa. They asked us to check in fifteen minutes early, remember."

"Right," Kurt agreed, knocking back one final gulp of water and wiping his lips. "We'll see you in a few hours. Have fun. Don't let the girls wear you out too badly."

Burt laughed. "I was about to say the same thing to Carole about you."

Sticking his tongue out, Kurt wrapped his arm around his stepmother. "Don't worry about us. We are all about relaxation today. Right, Carole?"

"Right," she agreed cheerfully.

They went on their way and arrived at the day spa in plenty of time to check in and fill out the paperwork on stresses, allergies, health issues and problem areas for the masseurs to work on.

"Would it be cheating if I wrote down 'everything'?" Kurt asked when he got to the latter question.

Carole laughed. "Not if it's true."
They were each given a changing room where they could exchange their clothes for a voluminous white toweling robe. The facials were first. Carole and Kurt were guided to a pair of reclining chairs where they could chat comfortably as their skin was exfoliated, moisturized, and treated with deep-pore toning masks. While the products set, each of them was given a soothing neck and scalp massage.

"This is wonderful," Carole sighed.

Unable to see her due to the cool slices of cucumber currently covering his eyelids, Kurt smiled in spite of the slowly stiffening mask. "Isn't it? I'm really glad you came with me today. You're an amazing wife and a terrific mom, but everyone needs a day off once in a while."

"Amen," she agreed, so heartily that Kurt had to laugh.

A pleasant silence stretched between them for several minutes, then Carole startled him by saying, "Are you planning to see more of Mike Chang while you're in town?"

Kurt's head popped up, dislodging the cucumbers. "Why?" he asked, a trifle defensively. "Don't you think I should?"

Allowing his facialist to gently settle his head back on the cushioned headrest so she could return to work, Kurt's suddenly tense shoulders relaxed when Carole replied, "I do think you should. In fact, I'm glad you two are becoming friends again. He's a very sweet young man. I was always glad to see him when he came by to hang out with Finn when they were younger." Her voice was soft with a combination of sympathy and that indefinable quality that Kurt could only call motherliness as she added, "You've had a hard time lately. You deserve someone who will be your friend and treat you as well as you deserve to be treated."

Hoping she wasn't outing Mike to half the town by speaking in front of the salon staff, Kurt stayed quiet for a few moments until the facialist left them alone to allow the masks to finish working and confessed quietly, "He told me yesterday that he wanted to make a move but didn't want to hurt or confuse me by going too fast."

She sounded very pleased as she asked, "And what did you say?"

"That I needed a little time but that I wanted to call him when I got my feelings straightened out."

"Good for you," she replied, satisfaction clear in her voice. "For both of you."

Lightly biting his lip, Kurt ventured, "Mercedes thinks I've been alone too long, all domestic situations aside, and that I should take a chance and go for it."

Recognizing that he was looking for advice, Carole told him, "And I think you should move as fast or as slowly as your heart tells you to. If you feel ready to try again, ask him on a date and see where it goes. But if you're not ready, Kurt, then there's no need to rush into anything."

"I keep worrying about it. What if this is a mistake and I end up using him for a rebound?"

"What makes you think that?"

Kurt struggled to find the words for something that he had barely even worked out in his own thoughts. "I don't know. What if I only want to take this chance because he's convenient and I'm lonely . . . or because he's gorgeous . . . and when he looks at me I feel desirable and even a little sexy . . . and he makes me laugh . . . and he's so easy-going where I'm uptight that he makes it easy to relax and go with the flow . . . and because I feel like I'm sixteen again whenever I get within ten
feet of him... and because he's so refreshingly straightforward about everything... and maybe because talking with him, spending time with him." He swallowed, almost whispering the final words. "It makes me remember what it feels like to like myself."

Carole sat up, removing the slices from her eyes and reaching across to grip his hand. Kurt did the same, taking strength from her loving, caring presence as she squeezed his fingers gently and told him, "I think you just answered your own question. You're not going to use him, Kurt. You like Mike, it sounds like he likes you back, and he makes you feel good about yourself. If you'll forgive a little bit of maternal meddling, I think Mercedes is right."

"I'm kind of scared," he admitted, glad the mask was hiding his shamed blush. "After all, I believed that Zach was a whole lot of wonderful things, too. I moved into that relationship fast and threw my whole heart into it, and he just stomped on it and kicked it right into the gutter. What if I'm only seeing all these good things in Mike because I want to see them so badly?"

"There's always a risk, in any relationship," she said honestly. "But you thought most of those good things about Mike long before you had any romantic interest in him at all. Before you had even the slightest notion that he might be a real possibility."

Kurt bit his lip. "That's true. And he did say that he felt a spark when we first met again. I felt it, too, even though I still thought he was straight then."

"If an outside viewpoint helps at all, I like him and so does your father, and obviously so does Finn."

"That's already 50% better than Zach had."

She laughed. "If you still have doubts, put him alone in a room with your sisters and their cat. Let them interrogate him and he'll either be part of the family by dinnertime or you'll never see him again. Either way, you'll have your answer."

Finally, a smile broke through Kurt's worry. "I might just do that. Sometimes I swear those kids studied under the guidance of Sue Sylvester."

By the time their masks were removed and their faces treated with botanical extracts to soothe and moisturize the skin, Kurt was feeling much better. At times like these he was filled with thankfulness all over again that he had introduced his father to Carole Hudson all those years ago.
Relaxation and Resolution

Kurt's masseur was a tall broad-shouldered man of about 35 whose nametag read 'Dustin'. He measured a small pool of oil into his palm and rubbed his hands together, before beginning with Kurt's left side. The gentle background music and the strong sure movement of the therapist's hands allowed Kurt to zone out a little and just enjoy the treatment. Tension was worked out of his arm from shoulder to fingertips, then the same for the other side.

Dustin hummed softly as he worked, interrupting himself with a small amused-sounding note as he moved to work on Kurt's legs.

"I took the ladies in my family in for pedicures this morning," he volunteered. "My baby sisters thought I'd look good in blue."

Dustin had a deep, pleasant voice and light laughter rumbled in his chest. "I understand. My daughters have done that to me more than once."

Kurt smiled, relieved that he would not have to explain any further, then grunted in protest when strong fingertips hit a particularly painful knot of tension in his thigh.

"Too hard?" Dustin asked, firm expert strokes of his fingers soothing the tightly bunched tissues and making the stubborn muscles unclench. "That must have been bothering you for a while."

"So long that it almost didn't bother me at all anymore," Kurt admitted. "And no, the pressure is fine. I've just been overworked and overstressed lately. There's probably a lot of spots like that."

"I can feel it. Just let me know if anything is too much and I'll adjust. I think we're making some progress though."

As if in agreement, another knot released. "Oh, God. That's wonderful."

Dustin just smiled and started humming again. By the time he went to stand at the head of the table and began to massage Kurt's shoulders and neck, his client had closed his eyes again and was thoroughly enjoying the experience. Expert hands gripped and manipulated the tightly bunched tissues and seemed to smooth them into putty. Kurt could feel little spears of warmth running all the way down his torso. Strong fingers pushed across his collarbone and a few inches down his chest, while thumbs simultaneously pushed up against the tense cords in his neck, balancing the weight of his head on their tips and making Kurt feel oddly weightless. He sighed contentedly when the hands slid up to the sides of his head and thumbs began to softly massage his temples. The headache which had been plaguing him off and on for the past week slowly ebbed away and the relief of its absence drew a long contented breath from his lungs.

Eventually, he was asked to roll onto his stomach and the entire process was repeated on the painful knots out of Kurt's back, neck and shoulders. Dustin took his time, kneading and smoothing away each new source of pain and tension as he found it. Kurt lost track of how many times he felt his body jerk and tremble with relief as the accumulated stiffness and soreness of weeks was slowly worked away. He was not fooled into thinking that one massage was going to magically erase weeks of built up stress, but damn did it help.

"You'll want to drink plenty of water tonight," the masseur advised when Kurt's time was up. "And don't be surprised if you feel a little sick or sleepy later. I'm guessing you probably haven't been sleeping well with all this built-up tension."
"Not very but this should help a lot," he mumbled, taking a few moments to just revel in the pleasure of relaxation as the door clicked shut and he was left alone.

There were showers in the changing rooms, so Kurt took a few minutes to let the hot water finish what his excellent massage had started. Feeling better than he had in ages, he got dried and dressed and went out to the reception desk to meet his stepmother and pay for their sessions.

Carole was waiting when he arrived, also looking wonderfully relaxed. "Your session must've been as good as mine," she said with a smile. "How do you feel?"

"Amazing," he said.

"I really need to talk your father into trying this. I think it would do him a world of good."

"I think so, too," he agreed, privately doubting that his dad would ever go for the idea but hoping that he was wrong. His father worked hard and would benefit greatly from a little hands-on relaxation if he could only bring himself to enjoy it.

Kurt paid for the two therapy sessions, leaving a generous tip for both workers, then threaded his stepmother's arm through his as they strolled back out onto the sunny streets of Lima. "Do you still feel like a trip to the outlet mall or would you rather just go home?"

"Oh, definitely the mall," she said immediately, squeezing his arm with a laugh. "It's only a little after three o'clock. We still have plenty of time to get our hair done and find you a couple of nice outfits. On me, this time. After all, you'll want to look extra nice if you're going to start dating again."

"Carole," he half-protested, laughing at the mischief in her eyes.

She raised an eyebrow. "Am I wrong?"

He could feel himself blushing and could not prevent the silly grin that spread across his face. Brushing a hand through the slightly unruly thickness of his hair, he replied, "I suppose it could use a trim."

After a few hours with Carole, laughing and chattering and trying on clothes together, Kurt found himself pleasantly exhausted when they reached home. He lasted long enough to show off his new purchases to his sisters and eat a light dinner with the family, making sure to drink plenty of water as advised, and then found that he could not keep his eyes open any longer.

Feeling a bit silly for turning in earlier than a pair of nine-year-olds, Kurt wished everyone goodnight and went up to bed, barely lasting long enough to take off his clothes and crawl between the covers before he was sound asleep.

~*~*~*~*~

Kurt slept for a solid twelve hours, for once not dreaming about anything. He opened bleary eyelids around 7:30 and sighed indulgently at finding the big yellow cat once again sharing his bed. Vaguely remembering getting up for a middle-of-the-night bathroom visit, he realized that he must have failed to close the door behind him upon his return. Crookshanks lay stretched out along the length of Kurt's body with his face hidden by one paw and tucked up under the amused man's chin.

He began to stroke the warm fur. He did not really mind the company and the purring was very pleasant. "I should get up," he murmured, not really feeling like it in spite of the number of hours he had slept. Rising early was his habit, but it had been a long time since he felt so comfortable. "On the other hand, it is Sunday and nobody is going to care if I sleep in for awhile. What do you think?"
The cat purred louder, one big green eye peering up at Kurt for a moment before snuggling its head back down against his chest.

Kurt laughed softly. "Who am I to argue with that?" Adjusting his pillow more firmly into the space between neck and shoulder, Kurt sighed contentedly and closed his eyes again.

At 9:00, he woke again. The cat was gone and the room was awash with bright sunlight. Feeling much more awake this time, Kurt got up and took a shower, dressing for the day in jeans and a light shirt and sweater combination. Today was just going to be a lazy, do-anything kind of day. He had been single for an entire week now. It was about time he started thinking of himself that way. Zach was no longer a part of his life and he had to break himself of the subconscious habit of pausing every time he thought about doing something to consider how it would affect his partner.

"Breakfast, then chores," he decided, jogging down the stairs and helping himself to a bowl of cereal, a banana and some juice when he saw the note on the refrigerator advising him that the family had gone out for Sunday brunch with friends.

The time and location were written down in case he wanted to join them, but Kurt knew that the message really meant they had probably gone to the late church service. Kurt had gone along once or twice when the family was newly formed, but the others had accepted that it made him feel uncomfortable, so he had eventually been given permission to skip the ritual if he preferred.

Kurt was quite happy with the prospect of some alone-time. He loved his entire family dearly, but it was nice to have quiet and a little solitude.

He munched his breakfast contentedly as he read through the morning paper that had been left on the table and considered his plans for the day. Laundry was definitely first on the list. Carole had offered, but he felt bad about adding to her workload so he had declined.

Putting his dishes in the sink, Kurt went back upstairs and gathered his dirty clothes and used bath towels, sorting and starting the first load and then gathering together ingredients in the kitchen to make the marinade for slow-bake pork chops. It had been one of his mother's recipes and remained a family favorite all these years later. He wouldn't start the food cooking until early afternoon, but by then the marinade would have soaked in and flavored the meat, resulting in a mouth wateringly tender and delicious entrée after they had a few hours to bake on a very low oven setting.

Happily singing to himself as he worked, Kurt mused that it had been a long time since he indulged himself in a kitchen. Zachary had done most of the more ornate meals in their home and they had eaten quick, simple fare the rest of the time. Kurt was usually at the theater by the time his partner got home of an evening so half the time they ate separately and Kurt would just grab a salad or a sandwich when he got hungry.

He sighed, shaking his head. The more he thought about it, the more he wondered why he had been so surprised to discover that he had been cheated on. His ex had always been something of an attention whore, pouting and sulking whenever the things he did failed to get enthusiastic praise. He had not liked that Kurt had refused to give up his "silly" hobby of supporting theatrical productions with his time, talent, and sometimes money when he could be doing other things. Kurt had done his best to share his interests, and support his lover's, but even at his most delusional, sickeningly-in-love, he had always found the other man's level of self-interest rather annoying.

It should not have been a total shock that Zach had lost interest when Kurt's life refused to totally revolve around him. It still hurt horribly that he had strayed, like salt in the open wound that he had been so callous in abusing Kurt's love and trust, but the pain was beginning to lessen to more of a dull constant ache. Like the hole left by a missing tooth, that part of Kurt's heart that had belonged to
Zachary was tender and sore and he could not stop probing at it just to confirm that something was missing.

He pondered the situation throughout the remainder of the morning and early afternoon, allowing himself to remember in detail all of the times he had shared with his ex-boyfriend, both the good and the bad. The good times had been many and he still believed that Zach had honestly loved him at first, but there had been plenty of unpleasant moments too. Things that Kurt had denied or dismissed or forced himself to forgive that now stood out like warning beacons in hindsight.

He had been a fool. There was no point in denying it, as much as the thought hurt and embarrassed him. The question was, could he find the strength to let go and just file these last two years away as a learning experience and move on. Before he could start something new with Mike, he had to be sure that he was doing it with a full and honest consideration of where he stood. It would not be fair to either of them to do otherwise.

But . . . Mike had been used and hurt by someone, too. He had been very honest about his crushing experience with the married man who had broken his heart. If Mike could move on from something so awful, surely Kurt could find that same strength. Mike would understand, if anyone could, what he had gone through and forgive him an occasional back-slide. Wouldn't he?

After Kurt had transferred his laundry into the dryer and started a second load, he moved to the living room and sat down on the sofa, resting his back against one arm and stretching his legs out as he closed his eyes and pictured his old friend. Setting the brooding over Zachary aside, he took a few minutes to think of nothing except Mike. His handsome face, his spectacular body, the way his smile brought an expression of honest warmth to his eyes that invited others to join in his enjoyment of life. Kurt pictured his friend as both a teen and an adult, dancing with joyful abandon and awe-inspiring natural skill. He recalled the ready laughter and the serious 'listening' expression when another person needed sympathy or comfort. Kurt remembered the way that Mike had always been friendly and kind to all of the so-called loser kids back in high school when he, as a popular jock, could have just as easily shunned them. He also thought about the way Mike had tried to honor his parents, even when it must have been obvious that he could never give them everything they wanted from him.

Opening his eyes, Kurt felt new resolve filling him. Carole was right. In all the time they had known each other, he had never once seen Mike Chang deliberately set out to hurt anyone, or abuse anyone's faith and trust. He was not cruel or selfish – something Kurt guiltily acknowledged had not always been completely true of himself – and he was open about his interest. What did he have to lose by giving the other man a chance? More importantly, how much did they both stand to gain?

Pulling his phone out before he could change his mind, Kurt found Mike's number and dialed. The other man picked up on the fourth ring, sounding a little breathless as he said, "Kurt, hi."

"Did you just run for the phone?" Kurt asked curiously.

"Yeah. I was just working out and I left it on the kitchen counter. I was afraid you'd go to voice mail."

Kurt found himself grinning. "How'd you know it was me?"

"Ringtone," he replied. Kurt heard a slurp and realized that Mike must have gotten himself a bottle of water. "I programmed you to play Singing in the Rain."

Kurt laughed. "Perfect." Stomach suddenly knotting with butterflies, he swallowed and said, "So, um, I was wondering. Are you busy on Wednesday night?"
"No," he replied, sounding pleased. "Why?"

Licking his lips nervously, Kurt said, "Well, it's supposed to be a nice evening according to the weather service and we'll have a full moon that night. I thought maybe you might like to have dinner with me and then afterward, maybe we could take a walk through the park and talk?"

There was a pause and Kurt immediately berated himself for making such a stupid suggestion. Sure, let's just go wander around in the dark and have some nice awkward conversation with a guy we barely know anymore. What a splendid idea! Crap, Kurt, you really are out of practice at this…

Then Mike shocked him by saying, "That sounds kind of romantic. I'd love to. Where are we going? Should I meet you, or…?"

"I'll pick you up," Kurt said, a grin as big as Texas breaking across his face as he remembered his dad's promise of a newly restored car. "Is seven o'clock okay?"

"Seven is perfect," he agreed, his voice sounding a little shy, which just made Kurt's heart melt even more. "I'll see you Wednesday."

Kurt nodded, then realized what he was doing and said, "I'll see you then."

Clicking off the call, Kurt stared at the phone in his palm for several long seconds, then abruptly jumped off the sofa, whooped and spun himself around in a fast, giddy circle of pure delight. Not satisfied just to celebrate on his own, he snatched the startled cat off the back of the couch and hugged him. "I have a date, Shanks! He said, yes! I'm going to dinner with Mike on Wednesday!"

The insulted feline squirmed out of his grasp, dashing off somewhere to recover his dignity.

Kurt hugged himself and laughed. He would probably be frantic later, wondering what to wear, what to bring, how to act. He always got like that on opening nights, and first dates were even worse, but right at this moment he did not care about any of those things. For the first time in a long while, the world felt exciting and wonderful.

Kurt Hummel had a date with Mike Chang.
Kurt floated through the rest of Sunday on a cloud of elation and possibilities. His family's excitement for him was gratifying and Kurt could not resist phoning Emily, Mercedes and Finn to share the good news. He felt absolutely giddy and needed the outlet and support of having his happiness reflected back at him.

Finn, naturally, felt that it had been his own awesome matchmaking skills at the restaurant on Thursday night that had put his brother and friend on the path to togetherness. And while the notion was ridiculous, Kurt did not try to disillusion him. It was both adorable and rather touching that Finn had not only accepted Mike's coming out to him with such aplomb, but that he cared enough to try and make them both happy.

Mercedes immediately volunteered to blow off her own Wednesday night plans – nothing important she assured him - to come over and help put together the perfect outfit. Knowing full well that he would be a nervous wreck by then, Kurt gratefully accepted.

As the only one among the three who had no personal knowledge of Mike, Emily had questioned her friend closely about both men's motivations. Kurt was glad he had indulged in so much introspection, weighing the pros and cons of this potential relationship so closely, for he was able to answer every point she brought up without sounding defensive or unsure. Finally, though, even Em's protectiveness could not hold out against the satisfaction she felt that Kurt was giving Zachary such a firm and positive "fuck off" by quickly starting over again with someone new.

As the call drew to a close, Emily asked if he minded her sharing his good news with their circle of friends. "Please!" he agreed. "I keep getting all these sympathetic messages from people offering to fix me up. I know they mean well, but they're making me feel like an emotional charity-case. Even if this doesn't work out, I'd really like to let everyone know that I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself."

Em just laughed and told him that he'd better hope it worked out or he'd come home to find a line of eligible men stretching from his front door all the way to the Brooklyn Bridge.

"Oh, jeez. Should I tell Mike that? Maybe he'll take pity on me if I end up making a complete ass of myself," Kurt chuckled.

With a quick switch to business mode, he verified that his partner would put together a new appointment schedule for him beginning two weeks from Monday. He had decided that three weeks was not an unreasonable length of time for a vacation. Then they wished each other a fond good night.

Tossing the phone away after his calls were finished, Kurt flopped onto his bed and stared at the ceiling for a long time, unable to get his thoughts in order but equally unable to stop smiling.

~*~*~*~*~

For the next three days, Kurt threw himself whole-heartedly into the task of working on his new ride. The vehicle was a dark blue 2016 Chevy Colorado with a standard engine and crew cab. He had never been a pick-up truck kind of a guy, but there was no arguing the price. Burt wasn't even charging him for the parts needed to finish restoring it and since they were doing all the labor themselves, Kurt would not have to worry about the quality of the restoration.
The truck was not quite as close to readiness as his father had led him to believe. The body was almost perfect but the engine needed a lot of work and the brakes and suspension system required a full replacement. Kurt did not mind any of this. He was glad for a chance to pour all of his increasingly nervous energy into a dedicated task and it was pleasant to spend the days working alongside his dad; letting the familiar scents, sounds and atmosphere soothe him.

Burt was busy taking care of customers, so Kurt worked largely alone, but his dad came over as often as he could to help out and just spend a little time talking. Both men enjoyed this time together, feeling their powerful bond grow deeper. The garage had always been one place that was comfortable for the two of them, even during the days when they had not been able to relate on anything else.

Even though Finn had worked here for a while during high school and Burt was already bringing his daughters up with a strong basic knowledge of auto maintenance, none of them had embraced the joy and fascination of getting elbow-deep in the guts of a car and making it whole and perfect again, the way that Kurt had. He had been coming to this shop since he was just a toddler on his mother's hip, and he could tell by the expression of contentment in Burt's eyes whenever they looked at one another that his dad was as happy to have him here as Kurt was to be here.

It made Kurt feel a little sad sometimes that he could not have been the kind of son his father deserved. The small-town guy happily getting his hands dirty for a living; taking over the family business, settling down in Lima with a stereotypical wife and 2.5 kids and following in his father's footsteps. Not that his dad had ever pushed for that. Maybe not even wanted it. It had taken both of them a few years to get comfortable with Kurt's differences, but he knew that his dad had only ever wanted him to be happy and to lead a good honest life he could be proud of. Burt made no secret that he proud of who Kurt was – in every respect – and as happy with the life Kurt had made for himself in New York as he was with his NFL quarterback stepson with the pretty wife and charming son.

Besides, it wasn't as though Burt had followed the family track either. His own father had been a businessman, wearing a suit and tie in an office building every day and spending his days slaving over paperwork until he had died of a heart attack at the age of fifty. There was no set path or perfect system for getting through life. You just had to love and support the people you shared the journey with, for however long you were lucky enough to have them. If there was one lasting truth that Kurt had learned over the years, it was that.

"What are you thinking about?" Burt asked curiously, drawing his son out of the depths of his own musings with a start. "You were concentrating so hard I could almost smell the brain cells burning."

Kurt ducked his head, face flushing lightly. "Honestly? I was thinking about what a great father you've always been to me and how lucky I am to have had someone like you in my life all these years."

Burt looked startled and his face likewise turned pink. "I just did the best I could, and it wasn't so hard to be a good dad. You're a hell of a great kid. Always have been."

He grinned, not surprised by the modest deflection. "Maybe it's genetic. We were destined to be fabulous just because we're Hummels."

His father burst into laughter. "You telling me all that worrying I did when you were a teenager was for nothing?"

"No, just that I'm glad you were there to do that worrying. Knowing you were on the job made me worry a lot less myself, even though you might not have thought so at the time."
"You were a little on a dramatic side," Burt agreed, eyes warm and full of fondness, "but I always figured that had mostly to do with hormones."

Kurt laughed. "You could be right. It definitely wasn't easy, especially with the complications that came along with being gay in a town like this one. I still remember how scared I was to tell you the truth about that. I was sure that you couldn't possibly understand or accept me, but then you did. That time, and every other time that I was afraid of what life threw at me. And you still do it, even now."

He shook his head, that old sense of amazement and gratitude rippling through him. "I'm not sure I've told you how much that means to me."

"I love you," Burt replied simply, his tone gruff with hidden emotion. "It's as simple as that. I knew from the minute the doctor first laid that tiny little baby boy in my arms that I'd do anything for you. That I'd do my best to keep you safe and to stand by you, no matter what. It was my job to help you grow up into a man to be proud of, and you did that, Kurt. This past week has only reinforced my certainty of it. You're strong, brave, and way too stubborn not to get back up and keep fighting when life knocks you into the dirt. Yeah, I'm damned proud of you."

Kurt dashed at his nose, blinking back joyful tears. "Thanks, Dad."

Their hands had never stopped moving as they talked, working with the subconscious ease of experience. The car was almost done. Just another hour or two and it would be in mint condition again. Kurt's stomach was growling but he ignored it. He had missed lunch but he wanted to get this finished and give the truck a test drive before it was time to clean up for his date. He was picking up Mike at 7 pm and Mercedes was coming by at 4:30, knowing from vast experience that it would take at least two hours before Kurt was satisfied with his appearance.

"You nervous about tonight?" Burt asked, his tone teasing as he watched Kurt's hands move, tightening and testing engine parts that had already been tightened and tested hours ago.

"What makes you think that?" he asked lightly, frowning as he mentally went over the check list of things he had needed to do to the vehicle. He was surprised to realize that changing the tires and topping off the fluids seemed to be all that was left. Having his father helping with the final few repairs had made the chore go by much quicker than originally anticipated.

Burt raised an eyebrow. "Call it a hunch." Gesturing vaguely at his son's body, he said, "You got your clothes on inside-out."

Eyes wide, Kurt looked down at himself. Sure enough, the gray cotton material of his coverall was wrong side out. His dad kept a washer/dryer in the back of the garage and Kurt had just grabbed a set of his dad's work clothes out of the dryer this morning and put them on over his designer jeans and long sleeved Marc Jacobs shirt without even looking, his mind already racing with thoughts of the things he needed to get done today.

"Got a little grease on your cheek, too," Burt pointed out helpfully. "Any other day, you'd have stopped whatever you were doing to go wash it off."

Kurt immediately strode over to the small, cloudy mirror that hung on the wall just outside his dad's tiny office. Sure enough, when he had dashed at his face a few minutes ago, he had left a long smudge of black from the edge of his nose clear across his right cheek.

"Why didn't you say something?" he grumbled, wiping off his hands and grabbing one of the packets of moist towlettes that his dad had got in the habit of keeping around during Kurt's teenage years, when he had spent a lot of time here.
Burt grinned at him. "I just did."

He sighed and scrubbed, a little smile fighting its way to the surface even as he pretended to be annoyed. "Maybe I am a little nervous," he admitted. "It's been a long time since I've been on a date. I mean, you know, a first date."

"But you guys already know each other pretty well. That's got to help, right?"

Kurt grimaced. "In a way, I think that's making it worse. If he was a stranger we wouldn't have any real expectations about each other. And being friends is different from . . ."

He stopped, not wanting to embarrass his dad but Burt turned the tables by smirking and saying, "Wanting to get into each other's pants?"

"Dad!"

Heartlessly, he teased, "Oh, come on, kid. I may be an old married man but that doesn't mean I can't remember how these things work." He approached Kurt and laid a comforting hand on his shoulder, meeting his eyes in the small mirror. "You got nothing to be scared of. This is supposed to be about having a nice dinner and getting to know each other better. Just have fun and don't think about all that other stuff. If and when it's supposed to happen, it will. Besides, if all you guys wanted was a little action, you'd have probably done it already."

Kurt raised an eyebrow. "What makes you so sure we haven't?"

For a moment, Burt looked alarmed. Then he squeezed Kurt's shoulder a little harder, giving him a shake. "Don't do that to me, kid. You wouldn't have waited almost a week to see Mike again and then invited him on a romantic dinner if that's all that was going on."

He turned around, giving his dad a quick hug. "Probably not, and your good advice is noted, but if I don't get this truck finished, all my grand plans for the perfect first-date are going to be ruined. Help me put the new tires on?"

Burt clapped him on the back. "Glad to help out, son."

Happily, the engine roared to life without a hitch half an hour later, purring like a kitten as Kurt put it in gear and took a quick drive to the nearest gas station and car wash, filling the tank and giving the exterior a wash and wax. He made sure that the interior was properly detailed and given a spray of subtle air-freshener before taking it home, making a couple of quick but important additional stops along the way.

Mercedes pulled up to the curb just a few minutes after he arrived home and Kurt went out to meet her, the two old friends greeting each other with hugs and smiles.

"Nice ride," she said, giving the shining blue truck next to her little compact an approving once-over. "Your dad really just gave this to you?"

"Yeah, he said it was a real mess when he first got it. I guess the original owner used to take it off-roading but didn't bother to take care of it. No engine maintenance, bald tires, wrecked suspension, dings and scratches all over the paint. You name it. The auction report when Dad bought it said that the truck had been found abandoned after it died out on the Interstate. That is no way to treat a lady."

She smiled, watching him stroke the side of the newly restored vehicle, as if trying to soothe its injured feelings. "I hope Mike isn't the jealous type. If you can bear to tear yourself away from your new girlfriend, I think we'd better get started on cleaning you up for your date."
Kurt laughed, linking her elbow with his as they went up the walk and into the house.

They paused to greet Carole and the girls, who were just leaving for the twins' Girl-Scout meeting. Christy and Kathy both loudly and enthusiastically wished Kurt good luck on his date.

"So, what are you wearing tonight?" Mercedes asked briskly once they were upstairs. She rubbed her hands together eagerly. It had been a long while since either of them had had a chance to doll the other up for a special occasion. "You're still taking Mike to that little seafood restaurant across town?"

He nodded. "It's quiet and intimate, with a tasteful décor and good food. Or at least, I hope they still have good food. I haven't been there in a long time." Suddenly concerned, he said, "You haven't heard anything bad about it, have you?"

"Oh, you mean that time they were shut down by the Board of Health? I wouldn't worry about that. I'm sure that was just a fluke. You know how it is. One person sees a rat and everybody panics." For a moment there was dead silence, Mercedes expression bland while her best friend's eyes became the size of dinner plates, then she couldn't hold it any more and burst out laughing. "I'm kidding, Kurt! Their reputation is fine and the food is terrific. David took me there for my last birthday and we had a great time."

Kurt sank down on the bed, dramatically clutching his chest. "Don't do that to me! I'm about two seconds away from a panic attack here."

She smiled and playfully mussed his hair. "I'm sorry, baby. That wasn't very nice, but I just couldn't resist. So, what did you decide about the flowers? Yes, or no?"

"Yes, but I decided to go with something simple. Just a couple of yellow roses with some baby's breath. The florist told me that yellow roses signify friendship, and if I remember right that's Mike's favorite color, so it seemed like a decent choice. I didn't want him to think I was reading too much into this and red roses are little cliché. Assuming he wants flowers at all. I don't know if he's the kind of man who would find getting flowers from a date to be romantic or cheesy. I mean, I don't want him to think I'm treating him like a woman, but I also don't want him to think I'm a cheap date who can't be bothered with little things."

"Kurt. . ."

Abruptly, he stopped talking and groaned, leaning forward to rest his face in both hands. "Oh, my God, I'm babbling! This date hasn't even started yet and I'm already acting like a total idiot."

Mercedes made a sympathetic noise and sat down next to him, wrapping her arms around him and laying her cheek on his shoulder. "It's okay. I'd be surprised if you weren't a little nervous, all things considered. Just remember that this is Mike Chang we're talking about."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, he's the guy who used to grow a garden in his back yard just so his mom would have fresh flowers year-round. The one who used to give up entire weekends to help Finn and Sam learn enough choreography that they wouldn't embarrass themselves during glee club performances. The same person who wrote down in the senior class yearbook that his biggest dream was to backpack across America."

Kurt's brows lifted as he raised his head. "He did? I didn't know that."

"He did, and from what he told us the other night, he more or less did exactly that after graduation.
Mike's not going to be a demanding, high-maintenance date, Kurt. He's sweet and thoughtful and fun. I think he's probably just happy that you asked him out and that he'll love how you took the time to do something romantic, like buy him yellow roses." She kissed Kurt's cheek. "You have to stop being afraid that something will go wrong and you won't be good enough for him."

Kurt sat up straight, looking at her in surprise. "What?"

Mercedes' beautiful brown eyes were compassionate. "You think I don't know? I've known you since you were sixteen, Kurt. You've always been scared of that. Your first crush rejected you and broke your heart. You first boyfriend broke things off because he wanted to chase boys. Two other guys chose their careers over you. And now this thing with Zach?" She shook her head. "Honey, you'd be crazy not to be scared of getting hurt after all that, but you can't start something new, already afraid that it's doomed to failure."

"What should I do?" he asked humbly, unable to deny that she was right.

She smiled, stroking a hand over his cheek. "You should remind yourself that Kurt E. Hummel is a caring, beautiful, kick-ass man that any gay guy in his right mind would be lucky to have. I believe that, Kurt, and I'm pretty sure from what I saw the other night that Mike believes it, too. Now you just need to get on board and leave all this self-doubt behind you. You hear me?"

Wrapping his arms around her, Kurt smiled. "I hear you. Thanks, Mercedes."

"My pleasure. Now get your skinny white butt in gear and go take a shower while I lay out a couple of fabulous outfits for you to choose from."

He laughed. "Carole bought me some really nice things on Sunday. They're in those garment bags hanging in the closet. I'm not sure which one I want to go with, though." Giving her a playful wink, he said, "They both look amazing on me."

"Now that's more like it," she approved with a laugh. "By the way, I love your new haircut. Don't mess it up with too much product, okay? We want Mike to be tempted to run his fingers through it when you guys kiss goodnight."

A hot blush immediately flared through Kurt's cheeks at that thought and his best friend burst out laughing. "Oh, yeah. This is going to be a good night, I can feel it."

Gathering his bathrobe and his dignity, Kurt tossed his head and went to clean up; already knowing he would obey her suggestion. Mercedes' pep-talk had done its job. He was starting to have a really good feeling about tonight.
The First Date

There was something oddly thrilling about the old-fashioned ritual of standing on a quiet front porch, a small bouquet of flowers in his hand and a nervous flutter in his stomach as he rang Mike's doorbell. Kurt could barely remember the last time he had done this. He thought it must have been when he was dating Andy. Emmitt had lived with a roommate in a dingy little college dormitory which Kurt had avoided like the plague (mostly because he thought there was a very good chance of actually catching the plague after seeing the vast collection of unwashed socks and pizza crusts that had been littering the room the one time he had seen it), and the first time he had been to Zach's apartment was the first night they slept together, and he hadn't exactly been concerned with ambiance and décor.

Suddenly, Mike's door swung open and Kurt forgot all about his exes. His thoughts were reduced to a simple, appreciative 'Wow', as he took in the sight of his date. Mike was dressed in a slim fitting dark brown suit paired with a cream colored shirt that emphasized his tanned skin and glossy black hair. He wore no tie and his top two shirt buttons had been left undone, giving him a casually sexy appearance that had Kurt momentarily lost for words.

"You look . . . amazing."

It took Kurt a moment to realize that the thoughts inside his head had not been voiced by himself, but by Mike. The other man was looking him over with open appreciation in his dark eyes that had Kurt sending a silent thank you to Mercedes. She had suggested that he wear black slacks with the gray-green blended silk shirt that Carole had picked out. The shirt was soft and just loose enough to float lightly against his skin when he moved, while at the same time accentuating the long slender lines of his body. The color perfectly accentuated the blue-green shade of his eyes and Kurt had known the moment his stepmother handed it to him that it would look gorgeous paired with his mid-thigh length black walking jacket.

"You look pretty terrific yourself." Feeling a little self-conscious as Mike continued to stare; Kurt brushed a hand through his hair. The freshly trimmed strands glided silkily over his fingertips and he realized from the way Mike's eyes followed the motion that Mercedes' insistence on leaving it soft and natural tonight had also been right on the money. Remembering the flowers in his hand, he offered them shyly. "I got these for you. I hope that's okay."

Mike grinned brightly and lifted the little bouquet to his nose, inhaling the sweet fragrance. "Thank you! I don't think anyone has ever given me flowers before. And you even picked my favorite color."

Silently congratulating himself on remembering that Mike liked yellow, Kurt obeyed his silent invitation to enter.

"I'll just put these in some water before we go," Mike said, leading the way to the kitchen and searching through the cabinets for a container. His hands moved quickly as he pushed aside dishes and pulled out a narrow crystal vase, fumbling it and nearly dropping it on the floor.

Reflex took over and Kurt darted out a hand to steady the vase, feeling sparks shoot through his body when his fingers brushed over the top of Mike's. When Mike did not attempt to pull away, he dared to brush his fingertips across the other man's knobby knuckles in a light caress before reluctantly letting go. "I'm glad to see I'm not the only who's feeling a little nervous tonight," he ventured. "Mercedes swore she was going to tie me to a chair earlier if I didn't quit pacing."
Surprise flickered over Mike's features and then he smiled, visibly relaxing as he filled the vase and set the flowers in the middle of his small kitchen table. "That sounds like her. I wish I'd had somebody over to help me get ready. You should have seen me. I must have changed clothes about a dozen times." He laughed self-consciously, brushing a hand down his jacket. His cheeks darkened just a trace as he admitted, "It's been kind of a long time since I went out on a date. Especially with a guy that . . . well, that mattered."

Kurt's heartbeat sped up. Not knowing what to say, he glanced down at his hands, and checked his watch out of habit. "Um, I made a reservation for 7:30 at The Cove. We should probably get going if we don't want to be late."

Mike looked pleased. "I love that place! Haven't been in years but they used to make the best stuffed crab I've ever had."

Glad that his choice was being met with approval, Kurt let go the breath he'd been holding and let his features relax into a genuine smile. The coil of nervous knots in his stomach let go as well and he suddenly realized that it had been a long time since breakfast. "I may have to give that a try. Shall we?"

Pausing long enough to let Mike grab a coat and lock up the house, Kurt escorted him to the beautifully polished truck waiting on the curb and opened the door for him with a playfully gallant gesture.

"Full service dating, I'm impressed," Mike joked, stepping up into the cab. As Kurt crossed to the driver's side and buckled himself in, he said, "You never struck me as a pickup truck type of guy. I mean, not that you shouldn't, or that it isn't a beautiful truck! It's just more what I would have expected from your dad or Finn."

Amused by the hasty backpedal when Mike realized that questioning his taste in vehicles could be cause for offense, Kurt just laughed. He started the engine and pulled out, noting with satisfaction that the new transmission was handling beautifully.

"No, you're right. My dad has always owned trucks but this is my first one. I gave up my old Navigator when I went to college, then I tried out a slick little sports car after graduation but it made me feel more pretentious than bad-ass, so I traded it in for a Rogue. I'm more comfortable with larger vehicles, but we decided that I didn't really need my own car living in Manhattan, especially since Zach had one that we could use for out-of-town trips."

Seeming to pick up something in his voice, Mike said, "Giving the car up wasn't your idea, was it?"

Surprised, Kurt looked over at him. "No, actually. Not having my own transportation made me feel a little trapped, like I'd given away a piece of my freedom, but I kept telling myself that I was being unreasonable."

"I don't think you were," Mike decided unexpectedly. "You grew up around your dad's shop. You're comfortable with mechanics and, if you're anything like me, it's important to feel like you have the means to bust out and go your own way. Even if you'd never actually do it."

That warm feeling was spreading through Kurt's chest again. He had tried to explain that very concept to Zachary once and they had ended up in a shouting match over it, a messy fight that had ended with a lot of tears and Kurt eventually giving in. That had happened a lot, now that he thought about it. "Exactly. And just so you know, my dad did buy this truck. He's made a hobby of restoring and reselling damaged vehicles for as long as I can remember. He offered to give me this one in exchange for completing the last few repairs it needed."
"That's terrific," Mike said, eyes filled with interest as he looked around the cab. "Like I told you the other day, I'm not very good with engines but I do enjoy puttering around with them. I kind of envy you. My dad didn't know the first thing about working on cars and my mom didn't even learn to drive until she was forty. My sister basically bullied her into taking Driver's Ed together because she was afraid she'd end up chauffeuring Mom everywhere and die from acute teenage humiliation."

Kurt laughed, secretly thrilled with the idea of potentially having someone with whom he could indulge that particular interest without the risk of boredom. For now, though, he let it go and asked a couple of questions that led the conversation into a comparison about the embarrassment brought about by well-meaning family members.

"By the way, I'm really sorry about the way Finn was throwing me at your head the other night at dinner," Kurt said, shaking his head at the memory. "He meant well but subtlety has never been his strong suit."

Mike chuckled. "Honestly? I'm kind of glad that he did it. If you hadn't been so embarrassed by him, you might not have had the guts to flirt with me and I might not have had the guts to call you up."

"Flirt?"

Giving him a 'who are you kidding' look, Mike slowly licked his lips and gave him a playful come-hither hitch of the eyebrows.

Kurt blushed and laughed. "Okay, so maybe my brother isn't the only one who lacks subtlety. It worked, didn't it?"

Reaching over, Mike grabbed Kurt's free hand and gave it a squeeze. "It definitely worked. Maybe we should send Finn a thank-you gift."

Their eyes met and both of them burst out laughing. By the time they reached the restaurant, the nerves had completely settled and conversation flowed easily, flitting from topic to topic with casual ease.

The Cove was sparsely crowded, not surprising for a Wednesday evening, but far from empty. When Kurt and Mike were led to a table-for-two in an otherwise unpopulated section of the restaurant, Kurt felt a small prickle of discomfort. He hoped that this extra privacy was just a courtesy gesture. Certainly their table was beautifully made up with fine linen napkins, china and crystal and lit by a romantically-flickering shaded candle, but he could not help wondering if they had been moved so far away from the other patrons for fear that the sight of two men on a date might offend someone. Social progress was slow, after all, and while Lima had improved in that regard over the years it was still a long way from the casual acceptance he had become accustomed to in New York.

"Don't worry about it," Mike said quietly as they picked up their menus, causing Kurt to look at him in surprise. "If other people can't handle seeing us together, that's their issue. I gave up letting things like that bother me a long time ago."

Kurt took a deep breath, oddly glad to know that he was not being paranoid and that Mike had come to the same conclusion regarding their seating arrangement as he had. "You're right, and it usually doesn't. It's just; I really wanted tonight to be perfect."

"It is," he said sincerely, sliding his right hand across the table and lacing his fingers through Kurt's left. The grip felt natural and comfortable, sending little tingles through Kurt's body. "And who says a little extra privacy is a bad thing?"
"Not me," he replied, good mood instantly restored by the openly affectionate expression in Mike's smiling eyes. He squeezed the other man's hand. "In fact, I think that I could become very used to this."

The smile drifted down to Mike's lips. "So could I."

To their credit, neither the wine steward nor the waitress acted the least-bit uncomfortable at the sight of two young men holding hands across the tabletop. They were nothing but courteous, respectful and friendly, and Kurt began to regret his automatic assumption of bigotry.

After studying their menus for a few minutes, Mike decided to go with the stuffed crab he had mentioned earlier while Kurt found himself unexpectedly attracted by the "surf and turf" of filet mignon and lobster tails. He still preferred healthy options most of the time but Mike saw him debating between what he really wanted and the more calorie-conscious shrimp salad and urged him to go for it. Kurt quickly decided that Mike was right. He was not above splurging for a special occasion and this evening was feeling more special by the minute.

They laughed and chattered animatedly over their meal, each of them happily sampling a couple of bites of the other's dinner.

"Should we have dessert?" Kurt asked, looking uncertainly at the small dessert menu that had been left for them when their plates were cleared away. He usually did not indulge, particularly after such a calorie filled meal, but he was reluctant to let this experience end too soon.

A happy little sigh escaped when Mike grinned at him and said, "I was hoping you'd share one of these chocolate volcano things with me. It looks amazing but I'm going to feel like a pig if I eat it all by myself."

Kurt laughed at the mischievous look in his eyes. The dessert in question was a chocolate brownie topped by a large scoop of vanilla ice cream that was hollowed out by a pool of hot fudge. It definitely would not have been Kurt's first choice. He liked chocolate just as much as the next guy, but the sheer richness of this dessert was threatening to send his body into sugar-shock before he even tasted it. However, the coaxing by Mike as he playfully stuck out his lip and made puppy-dog eyes at him was enough to overcome any argument Kurt might have made.

"Fine," he huffed, "but no complaints when you have to roll me out to the car later!"

Mike laughed. "Deal!"

When the creation was delivered, Kurt eyed it doubtfully. The photograph in the menu had not done any justice to the real thing. It was huge and gooey, the strong scent of chocolate wafting from the warm brownie and hot fudge sauce all but screaming decadence.

"Tell me the truth," he said as Mike pushed the dessert invitingly towards him. It had been delivered on a single plate with two spoons and Kurt reluctantly picked up a spoon and dug out a chunk. "You have a secret fetish for fat guys, don't you?"

Mike chuckled. "Of course! It's the real reason I joined the Titans football team," he joked, picking up his own spoon and taking a healthy bite. "Wow, this is delicious."

Kurt could not form a reply. The light, fluffy brownie all but melted on his tongue and the combination of cold ice cream and hot fudge was so incredible that he actually let out a moan. When Mike started laughing again, Kurt's cheeks heated up, realizing that he had sounded damn near orgasmic.
"Okay, okay, you're right. It is amazing," he admitted, taking a second hearty spoonful and popping it into his mouth. Fortunately, he managed to keep any more noises from erupting this time.

Mike looked smug. "I worked in a bakery for a few months and they had this thing called a Slice of Heaven cake. I swear to you that stuff could bring about world peace if we could find a way to get it to everyone at the same time."

Laughter nearly caused Kurt to choke on his dessert. Mike just looked so blissed out by the memory. You could almost hear the angels singing inside his mind. "A bakery? Is there anything you haven't done?"

One shoulder shrugged but he was smiling as he took another bite of brownie.

"Okay, better question. Is there any kind of job you wouldn't do? This would be a good time to tell me if your list of past employment happens to include a life of crime."

Mike rolled his eyes at Kurt's sarcasm but a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth just the same. "Well, I do try to stick with legal things," he teased. "And I'm willing to give most things a try just to see what they're like, but I draw the line at anything involving human or animal waste, and that includes janitorial work. Seriously, guys like Mr. Kinney at WMHS deserve mad props."

"Agreed."

Thinking it over for a moment as he munched another mouthful of brownie, Mike added, "I also try to avoid anything that would result in major bodily harm."

"That would be a crime," Kurt teased, scooping up a thin curl of ice cream with the edge of his spoon, avoiding the hardening trails of fudge sauce. The dessert, though excellent, was so sweet and rich that it was starting to make him feel a little grossed out. Putting the spoon in his mouth, he slipped the ice cream off slowly, closing his eyes and allowing himself to savor this one final taste.

Mike paused mid-bite, eyes widening as he watched the sensual movements of his date's mouth as Kurt slowly slipped the spoon free of his lips and the tip of his tongue darted out to lick away the last bit of sticky sweetness.

The clatter of a spoon had Kurt blinking his eyes open, surprised to see the stunned look on Mike's face. What was wrong with . . . oh! Kurt's eyes widened as he realized what he had been doing and how it must have looked. A self-satisfied smile teased over his lips. Apparently, he had made up for that embarrassing reaction to the dessert.

"Ready to go?" he asked innocently, picking up the check and giving the other man a politely inquiring look.

Still a little flustered, Mike's face turned red and his voice sounded a little strained as he hastily wiped his lips and said, "Yeah, yes, of course."

Kurt all but skipped to the cashier's station, smiling as he was asked how everything was.

"Excellent," he told the woman sunnily, handing over his credit card and adding a generous tip to the bottom of the charge slip as he was handed his card back. "In fact, everything was perfect."

She smiled back at him, thanking them both for their business and wishing them a good night.

As they left the restaurant, Mike laughed. "Well, you're in a good mood all of a sudden."
Not wanting to admit how elated he felt just from the simple confirmation that a man as attractive as Mike Chang found him sexy, Kurt just smiled and slipped a hand into Mike's again, giving it a squeeze. "I'm just happy."

Mike squeezed back. "So am I. Do you still want to walk through the park?"

He nodded. There was a park with a set of very nice paved walking trails just a few blocks from the restaurant. "If you do."

"Definitely," Mike said, swinging their joined hands as the two of them crossed the street and strolled in the correct direction, leaving Kurt's truck in the restaurant parking lot for now. Glancing up at the bright smiling moon that was lighting their way, he admitted, "In fact, I've been looking forward to this all day."

Kurt ducked his head. "I'm glad. I was kind of afraid you might think it was corny when I suggested it."

"It's a beautiful moonlit night in the springtime," Mike countered, letting go of Kurt's hand as they reached the entrance of the park and unexpectedly slipping an arm around his shoulders instead. "And I'm with a terrific guy who, for a change, doesn't seem to be allergic to romantic gestures. What's not to like about that?"

Moving a little closer to him, Kurt slipped his arm around Mike's waist. They were nearly the same size, Mike just an inch or so taller, and Kurt could not help the thrill that shot through him at how perfectly their bodies fit together. They walked slowly along the dimly lit paths, not talking much but not feeling awkward for the lack of conversation.

"What are you smiling about?" Mike asked after a while, his lips curving up in response to Kurt's.

He shook his head. "If I told you, you really would think I was a total corn-ball."

Mike's arm tightened around his shoulders for a moment. "Tell me anyway?"

Kurt could feel his face reddening. "I was just thinking that if this was a movie, I'd probably be singing some romantic song to you right about now."

"So let's pretend it's a movie."

He looked at the other man in surprise, laughing a little as he said, "What?"

Mike's eyes twinkled. "Why not? If you want to, I mean. I'd love to listen to you sing again."

The blush was getting worse, making him very glad that the ambient light was too dim for Mike to see clearly. Still, he sounded sincere and the temptation was very strong. He hadn't felt the urge to do such a spontaneously silly thing in ages. He nibbled his lower lip for a few seconds, then softly began to sing one of his lifelong favorites, "My Heart Will Go On." He did not put in any of the showy, heavily emotive emphasis that the song typically called for, still feeling a bit self-conscious, but as they strolled along Mike's tender smile did not fade and Kurt found the courage to put a little more feeling into the words.

When the final note faded into the night, Mike sighed. "You have a beautiful voice, Kurt. I'd forgotten how pure it was."

"Thanks," he said softly, the sincere compliment making him feel warm from head to toe. "I'm sorry if my song choice was a little sad, though. I don't feel that way tonight, honestly."
"I understand. Of course, if we were strolling along the deck of an ocean liner, I might be worried."

Kurt laughed. The joke didn't break the mood, but it lightened it and he gave Mike a little hug of appreciation.

They walked and talked together for nearly two hours, circling all the way around the park over a series of winding paths, and never noticing the passage of time at all. Finally, though, they came back out and found themselves once more in the parking lot of the now almost empty restaurant.

As Kurt drove Mike back to his home, conversation died out and only the quiet sounds of the radio broke the silence. Nerves buzzed through Kurt's body again as he cast small glances toward his companion, who was staring out the side window with a dreamy little smile in his lips. It had been an amazing date but what if Mike was counting on it continuing all the way toward morning? In spite of the almost overwhelming attraction Kurt felt for him, he knew he was not quite ready to take that step.

He was certain that Mike would not try to pressure him into anything but what if he was disappointed? Upset? Or worse yet, believed that Kurt was uninterested?

They pulled up in front of Mike's house and got out of the truck. Kurt walked him to the front door, hiding his suddenly shaking hands in the pockets of his jacket. He felt like he was seventeen again.

"So, I guess this is goodnight," Mike said, looking a bit shy again.

"I guess so," he replied, wishing his voice didn't sound so weak. He cleared his throat self consciously. "I . . . I had a really good time tonight."

Mike reached out to take hold of Kurt's hand. "So did I. The best first date I've had in . . . maybe ever." He shifted his weight, seeming poised on the verge of saying something, then changed his mind. He glanced at his door, then at Kurt's face and then looked a little uncomfortable.

"I should go," Kurt found himself saying.

Face caught in a strange place halfway between relief and disappointment, Mike nodded. "Do you think you might be free tomorrow night? There's a new musical playing over at the Rialto. Maybe we could go see it and then catch a late dinner at Breadsticks afterward."

Happiness burst through Kurt's chest. They were on the same page and, even better, Mike wanted to see him again. "I'd love to."

"Great. I'll pick you up at six, okay?"

"Perfect," he breathed, feeling a little distracted when Mike licked his lips.

He leaned forward and Mike did the same. Their lips met in a soft press, then adjusted a little and kissed more firmly. Kurt's arms slid inside Mike's suit coat, wrapping lightly around his firm body and he felt Mike's arms encircle him, holding him close and warm as the kisses became more intimate.

Kurt could not have said how long they stood there, kissing each other in the sheltered darkness of Mike's front porch, but his head was spinning and his entire body felt feverish when they finally broke apart.

Breathing hard and swallowing desperately in an attempt to regain his composure, Kurt said in a voice that sounded like it belonged to someone else, "I . . . I th-think I'd better go home now."
Mike looked like he wanted to protest, but he took a deep breath and nodded, his arms parting reluctantly from Kurt's body. "Yeah. Tomorrow at six."

Kurt took a couple of steps back, halfway surprised that he did not simply fall down the porch steps, as uncoordinated as his body suddenly felt. "Tomorrow," he repeated. He could not prevent the goofy grin that stretched over his lips. "Good night."

An equally silly smile lit Mike's face. "Drive safely."

Feeling that the advice was not entirely out of place, given how dazed he was, Kurt said, "I will."

They said goodnight a few more times before Mike finally stepped inside his house and Kurt finally reached the door of his truck. He got inside and just sat for a few minutes, unable to stop smiling. "Wow."
Kurt hummed quietly as he changed into his pajamas. While he brushed his teeth and went through his moisturizing routine, he could not stop smiling. He sent a quick text to his best friends and to Finn, telling them that his evening had gone well and that he had a second date planned. It would be enough to satisfy their concern, though he fully expected to be grilled for details at some point. But that was just fine too. Part of him wanted to call someone and gush like an excited teenager, but another stronger part wanted to keep this night to himself, just for a few precious hours.

Putting the phone aside, he shut off the lights and lay under the covers with his hands laced beneath his head, staring up at the dark ceiling and enjoying the chance to relive the evening in all its quietly perfect glory.

The next morning, Kurt woke to the sounds of his parents and sisters getting ready for the day. He stayed in bed for a few minutes, enjoying the warmth and comfort, but soon decided that breakfast with the family sounded more appealing than another hour of sleep.

"Morning, son," Burt greeted as his sleepy-eyed firstborn came down the stairs in his pajamas and bathrobe, attempting to finger-comb his hair into some semblance of order.

"Morning," he replied sleepily, giving up on his hair as he realized that he would require a shower to wrestle the thick brush into submission. The downside of having left his hair natural last night was a major-league case of bed head.

His father’s eyes twinkled as he finished laying out bowls of cereal and glasses of milk for the girls. "How'd everything go last night?"

"It was good," he replied, going into the kitchen and helping himself to a freshly brewed cup of coffee. Taking a sip and sighing in satisfaction at the strong jolt of caffeine – Burt Hummel's coffee was not for the weak – he returned to the table with an empty bowl and helped himself to a serving of Cheerios and milk. "Actually it was great. I had a really nice time and I think Mike did too.

"But what'd you do last night?" Christy asked around a mouthful of cereal.

"We went to the Cove restaurant and then we took a long walk through the park." He could not help the blush that lit his cheeks when he looked at Carole and said, "He put his arm around me and we walked and talked about anything and everything. We must have been out there for a couple of hours but it didn't feel that long at all."

She smiled. "Those are the very best kinds of conversations."

Burt squeezed her hand and a loving look passed between them, but Kathy made a face and said,
"You just had dinner and took a walk? That doesn't sound like a very fun date."

The adults exchanged an amused glance.

"Did he at least kiss you goodnight?" Christy asked, eyeing her brother with a grave concern on her face that nearly made him laugh.

Feeling just a little uncomfortable under his father's equally interested gaze, Kurt nodded. "Yes, he did. When I took him home, he asked me out and then we kissed goodnight." Offering his parents a bashful smile, he added in a voice too quiet for the twins to hear over their clinking spoons, "For about fifteen minutes."

Carole looked positively delighted and even Kurt's father could not prevent the little grin that stole across his features.

"I'd say that definitely qualifies as a good date," Burt chuckled into his coffee cup.

"Hey! You should invite him to Friday night dinner!" Kathy decided, eyes lighting up with enthusiasm.

Friday night dinner was a ritual begun by Kurt's late mother back when he was just a little boy but it had endured through the last twenty-odd years to become a firm tradition with the second incarnation of the Hummel family.

The twins exchanged one of those silent-conversation glances and then Christy nodded. "I bet he'd like it if you did, and plus, that way we could make sure he isn't another frog in prince-clothes."

"Well, I don't know what that's all about, but I think the kids have a good idea," Burt said, giving his daughters a puzzled glance. "Why don't you go ahead and invite Mike over for dinner when you see him tonight."

Remembering Carole's joking suggestion to test Mike's mettle by locking him in a room with the girls and their cat, Kurt choked on his coffee. Carole helpfully thumped him on the back when he started coughing.

"Don't you think that's moving a little fast?" Kurt wheezed. "We've only been on one date!"

"Two, if you count tonight," his father offered.

It was all Kurt could do not to roll his eyes. "You want me to invite a guy I've only been on one or two dates with over to meet the family? I'm liable to scare him into never wanting to see me again!"

Stroking Kurt's shoulder, Carole soothed. "Sweetie, when I told you the other day that you should move as fast or slow as you felt was right, I meant it." She shot a warning look towards her husband. "If you'd like to invite Mike to join us then he's more than welcome, but there doesn't have to be any pressure. We already know him, after all. Just tell him that we'd love it if he came by some evening while you're in town. I promise, it won't be some big interrogation."

Burt and the twins all looked a bit disappointed but responded to the stern look in Carole's eyes and reluctantly nodded agreement.

Kurt sighed, relieved but at the same time a little apprehensive. He knew his family. Now that the idea had been planted inside their heads they were not going to let this go. They were feeling protective of him after the disaster with Zachary and while Carole might be couching it in attractive phrasing, it didn't take a genius to realize that they wanted a chance to grill this perspective new
boyfriend.

"If the right opportunity comes up, I'll ask him," was as far as he was willing to commit.

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The rest of the day zipped by in alarmingly quick fashion. Phone calls, a few helpful errands for his family, a couple of hours of shopping; not that he needed more clothes but that had never stopped him before; and a workout at one of Lima's only decent athletic clubs to burn off his excess energy along with some of the calories from last night's extravagant dinner. Before he knew it, it was time to clean up and get ready for his theater date.

The Rialto was not the most formal of settings, but Kurt wanted to look nice so he dressed in a classy but understated dark gray Dior suit, the fabric shot through with threads of silver that made it flash subtly when he moved. A midnight blue shirt with matching tie and handkerchief, and the black heeled boots he had been wearing the night he arrived home and Kurt knew that he looked good.

He styled his hair more formally this time, not putting in so much product that the locks would be stiff but enough that it would not fall completely out of place on what was becoming a rather breezy evening. He was checking himself over critically in the full-length mirror that hung inside his closet when a playful wolf-whistle sounded from the doorway. He turned around, grinning at Carole and striking a pose. "What do you think?"

"You look wonderful," she said sincerely, "And I'm sure Mike will think so, too. I thought you might like these before you go." She was holding out a yogurt cup, a spoon and a wrapped granola bar.

"Thanks."

"I raided the girls' lunch stash," she said. "You said you wouldn't be eating until after the show and I figured you wouldn't want your stomach growling all the way through the second act."

Thankful, since he had stupidly skipped lunch again – his eating habits really had gotten deplorable over the last year – Kurt accepted the snack and sat down on the edge of his bed. A glance at his watch showed that he still had half an hour before Mike was due. "You think of everything, Carole. That might have put a damper on any romance this evening."

She smiled at him. "You're a lot like me. I always got too worked up to think about eating before a date and then ended up regretting it." Ruefully, she added. "Obviously that isn't a genetic trait, because I don't remember Finn ever having that problem."

He snorted softly around a mouthful of yogurt. "Neither did Dad. When you guys first started dating, he used to raid the cupboards for junk food right before he went to meet you. I never figured out if it was nervous eating, or if he just didn't want to make a pig of himself in front of you."

They laughed with the familiar ease of years spent together with the two men they both loved.

Carole stuck around, making light conversation with him while he finished his snack and went to re-brush his teeth, skillfully keeping the nervous butterflies at bay. When the doorbell rang just before six, Kurt cast his stepmother a grateful glance and kissed her on the cheek. "You're the best, you know that?"

"All a part of the service," she quipped, eyes twinkling. "Have a good time. I know it's your second date, but try to watch enough of the show that you can tell me about it later. If it's good, I plan to drag your father out to see it one evening."
Kurt laughed. Somehow, Carole's playful insinuation that he would prefer to make out with Mike rather than watch the show did not make him feel defensive or embarrassed the way it would if anyone else had said the same thing. Perhaps because he knew she was only teasing.

"I'll do my best."

Giving his appearance one last quick check, he descended the steps, but not fast enough to prevent his sisters from answering the door. "Hi, Mike," they chimed, flashing their guest bright matching smiles as they dragged him inside.

He grinned at them. "Hey, guys. Kurt." His eyes swept appreciatively over Kurt's slim form. "You look amazing. I know I said the same thing last night, but it's true."

"Are you sure it's not too formal?" he asked, noticing that Mike had opted for black slacks and a pale yellow shirt with a subtle striped tie. "I can change."

"Don't you dare," Mike countered. "It's perfect, and I love that I'm going to have the best-dressed man in Lima on my arm tonight. Everyone who sees us is going to go green with envy. Oh, and these are for you."

Kurt grinned, feeling his pride swell at the honest admiration shining in his date's eyes. He accepted the bouquet Mike handed him, an assortment of multi-colored tulips, with surprised pleasure. "You didn't have to." Laughing, he admitted, "But I'm glad you did. Tulips are my favorite flower."

"I know," Mike said, then blushed. "I mean, I hoped that they still were."

Trying to remember whether they had discussed flowers at any point over the last two weeks and coming up blank, he said, "How did you know?"

Mike shifted in place. "Remember when we all met up at Mercedes' house for the senior prom? You came from Dalton to be her date and brought her a big bunch of these along with her corsage. You said your mom used to grow tulips and they were special flowers for very special someones."

Astonished and more touched than he cared to admit that Mike had remembered such a thing for all these years, Kurt hugged the bouquet a little closer. "Thank you."

"That's so romantic," sighed Christy, linking her elbow through her sister's and reminding the two men that they had an audience.

"That's so romantic," sighed Christy, linking her elbow through her sister's and reminding the two men that they had an audience.

"I hope if I ever get a boyfriend he's as awesome as you," Kristy agreed, looking at Mike with starry eyes.

Kurt nearly objected to the term 'boyfriend', but then realized that Mike looked pleased rather than panicked. "I'll, um . . . I'll go put these in water," he murmured, leaving the remarkably comfortable-looking man to the mercies of his baby sisters. He hurried as fast as he could, delayed by his attempt to locate a vase that would set the tulips off in appropriately beautiful style, and returned to find that his father had joined the twins. Whatever they were talking about, Mike looked sufficiently relieved by Kurt's return to cause him to level a scolding glare at his dad, who simply shot Kurt a smug smile in return.

"Sorry for whatever they said to you," Kurt said as they left the house. "I didn't think all three of them would gang up on you like that. What were you and Dad talking about anyway?"

"I'm not really sure," Mike mused, glancing back over his shoulder with a puzzled expression. "Part of it was about how many prospects there are outside Ohio for a hard working young man. That
wasn't especially subtle at all, given that you live in New York," he said, looking wryly amused.

Kurt winced. "Oh, my God, he didn't."

The other man chuckled. "Yeah, he did. The other part, the part I didn't really get, was about cooking. Your family all seems to have a really strange obsession with pot roast. They kept bringing it up."

Dropping his face into one hand as they reached Mike's car, a sporty green Cherokee, Kurt groaned. "I'm going to kill them."

"What?" Mike laughed.

"They want you to come over for dinner tomorrow," Kurt explained with a sigh. "I told them this morning that they were being really pushy but they're in this weird kind of Secret Service mode where I'm concerned right now."

Mike's eyes danced as he buckled himself into the driver's seat. "They want to give me the 3rd degree about my intentions, don't they?"

"Yes," he admitted. "It's been kind of a long time since my dad has had the opportunity to do the shotgun-wielding father routine and my sisters just think it's cool that I'm dating somebody. I'm really sorry, Mike. I'll totally understand if you declare my house a no-fly zone from here on out."

He shook his head. "No, it's okay. My mom did that to Tina when she and I started dating. Mom practically ordered me to bring her over for dinner and a nice friendly Chinese Inquisition." He smiled. "I'd moved away from home by the time I started dating men, so I never had to go through that again. But I'm willing. I mean, if you want to. I understand if you'd rather not, though."

"You'd really put yourself through that?" Kurt asked in surprise.

Mike nodded. "Sure. Your dad is kind of intense but he's cool. It's kind of hard to keep up with your sisters when they both start talking at once, but I figure I can count on you and Carole to protect me if things get out of hand."

He laughed again and right at that moment; Kurt realized with a sense of utter shock that he could absolutely see himself falling in love with this man. "Of course we would," he said faintly.

"You're invited?"

"You're invited," he agreed, a smile breaking through his stunned emotions. "You're not allergic to cats, are you?"

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The show, a Lima Community Theatre original musical called "Turquoise Sky", proved to be three hours of pure drivel. The songs were terrible, the dialogue was even worse, and the dancing was enough to make both men cringe.

Kurt secretly wished he could sentence the entire company to dance practice with Finn, who still flailed his arms and stomped on his partner's toes at least 50% of the time but was still somehow better than these guys. It would be appropriate, just for the pain they were putting him through. He supposed it must be even worse for a talented dancer and choreographer like Mike.

As the show dragged on, they found themselves exchanging glances and stifling giggles. The show
was not meant to be a comedy, but by the second act both of them were laughing in all the wrong places. Fortunately – or perhaps unfortunately for the people on stage - they were far from alone in their reaction. Random bursts of laughter kept breaking out in the middle of scenes.

Soon the two men were amusing themselves by whispering cutting remarks under cover of their programs. The show was totally, gloriously, spectacularly awful and both of them were giggling openly by the time they left the small theater.

"Oh, Tom!" Kurt gushed, fluttering his lashes and clasping his hands, squeaking his voice into a high, childlike lilt. "Tell me again how you'd lasso the stars for me!"

Mike's brow furrowed as he tried to lower his voice into a bass, croaking out, "I'd give you the whole sky if you wanted it, little darlin'."

Their eyes met and they immediately started laughing again.

"When I heard this was supposed to be a musical western, I was expecting maybe something like ‘Oklahoma’ set in modern day, but instead we got serial killers on the range! I have got to tell Rachel about this show the next time I see her," Kurt snickered. "That song in the first act about the cowboy killers reminded me of that weird music video she did for Glee back in sophomore year. Remember?"

"Oh, this was worse by a mile," Mike scoffed. "I'm just sorry it was such a dud, for your sake. I kept thinking all through the first act about how torturous those songs must be for somebody who actually works in professional theater."

He laughed. "And I was thinking that the dancing must be making you want to slit your wrists." A guilty little grin tilted his lips. "The thing is, and I’ll deny this if you tell anyone, but I kind of loved it."

"So awful it slips over into accidental genius?" Mike said, nodding. "I can see that."

“I do think I’ll advise Carole and Dad to pass, though. Dad suffered through a lot of LCT productions with me when I was a kid, but I’m pretty sure he’d disown me if I made him pay money for this one.”

They continued on to dinner at Breadsticks. Conversation flowed with gratifying ease, making Kurt secretly wish that Mike had not been quite so shy and silent when they went to school together. They had a lot in common and they should have been good friends. It made him feel a bit sad that they had missed out on so much time. If they had gotten to know each other sooner, they might have both been saved a lot of heartache.

"Hey, where'd you go?" Mike asked, reaching out to touch his wrist and making Kurt start. "Was it something I said?"

"No," he objected quickly, turning his hand and clasping Mike's in a reassuring grip. "Not at all. I was just wishing we could have done this a few years sooner."

Mike nodded. "I know what you mean. Maybe it's better this way, though. We've both done a lot, seen a lot, and lived through a lot over these last ten years. It wasn't all good, but the people we are right now who are having such a great time together wouldn't have been the same without having gone through all of those experiences, even the bad ones."

"Very wise. When did you become a such a philosopher?" Kurt teased, squeezing Mike's hand.
He grinned. "I am a man of many talents."

"Such as?"

"I'm a very good photographer," he said after a moment's thought. "And I bowl a pretty mean game. I can also hold my breath for almost a full minute."

Kurt laughed. "Impressive. I'll have to put you to the test one of these days."

He hadn't meant it as an innuendo, but the moment the words left his lips Mike flushed and Kurt suddenly felt a hot surge of blood in an area entirely inappropriate to a family restaurant.

Mike cleared his throat and took a deep gulp from his glass of ice-water. "Is it hot in here?" The waitress chose that moment to drop off their check and ask if they needed anything more. Clearly relieved by the distraction, Mike all but threw his credit card at her. "Thank you. Everything was great."

Deciding to take a chance, Kurt nibbled his lip until the server was gone and then said, "I don't feel like going home just yet. Do you?"

Mike shook his head. "No. Not unless you'd like to come over to my place for a while. We could have a drink and pop in a movie. Maybe a musical. I think we deserve a classic after that thing we sat through tonight."

"Sounds perfect."

The trip to Mike's house was short and soon they were snuggled together on his ugly yellow and green sofa, sipping mugs of hot cocoa and sharing a bowl of popcorn as they watched the classic Astaire/Rogers musical "Shall We Dance."

The old black and white movie was charming and sweet, and as he became engrossed in the story Kurt found himself resting his head on Mike's shoulder when the other man's arm slipped around him. Mike's body was like a pleasant furnace and his scent was oddly both tempting and comforting.

As Fred and Ginger began gliding around the dance floor yet again, Kurt set his cup down on the table and nuzzled his face into Mike's neck, breathing him in as he began to press gentle kisses against the lean cords. The other man responded with gratifying speed, setting his cup and bowl aside and turning to embrace Kurt more securely.

Their lips met, gently at first and then more intimately as their mutual passion began to grow. Mike's large hands flattened against Kurt's back, rubbing light comforting pressure as Kurt circled his waist and accepted the invitation of Mike's open lips. Soft sounds of enjoyment emanated from them both as they slowly explored each other's mouths.

Kurt's suit jacket and both of their ties disappeared somewhere along the way and shirts became untucked, the better to let fingers slide up to make contact with hot skin. Neither man made a move to get things going any further than that. They were mutually content to kiss and touch and revel in this magical feeling of being wanted and desired.

Kurt felt like he was flying. It had been a long time since he felt this way, so giddy and content, almost drunk on the loving touch of another person. As Mike's hands rose higher, encircling his ribcage as he nuzzled his way down the half-exposed surface of his chest, however, Kurt began to feel a small trace of panic. This is how things had started with Zachary. A relationship that had barely begun before they fell into bed and into a relationship that Kurt had not really bothered to look at with clear vision.
He trusted Mike. He wanted Mike, but, "Stop," he gasped, pulling away from the eager, calloused hands that were tracing patterns over his tingling flesh. "Please. I'm sorry. I can't do this. Not yet."

Feeling terrible, averting his eyes as he waited for Mike to chide him for suddenly acting like a blushing virgin, Kurt was surprised to instead hear a shuddering breath and feel a sigh against his neck as Mike's hands stilled and settled at his waist. "I know. Me, too. I promised myself I'd take things slowly, for both our sakes. Guess I got a little caught up in the moment."

Kurt twisted his head to look at Mike's face. "That makes two of us. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I'm pretty sure you weren't making out with your imagination just now."

Surprise flickered through Mike's eyes and then he laughed. "No, just for once I wasn't."

"Ew," Kurt said, laughing with him. Impulsively, he threw his arms around Mike's neck and hugged him fiercely, then kissed him again. "Thank you for understanding."

Mike kissed him back, lightly at first, then a bit more intensely. His eyes twinkled as he pulled back far enough to look deeply into Kurt's eyes. "Take as much time as you need, but keep in mind what I said the other day."

"Casual sex?" Kurt guessed with a grin.

"The offer still stands if you happen to change your mind," Mike teased, dropping another kiss on his lips.

They made out lightly for a while longer, pulling back to the level they had enjoyed the previous night on Mike's porch, responding to each other's touch with startling ease. The hot chocolate grew cold, forgotten along with the movie that ended and came to a stop unnoticed by either of them.

Finally, however, Kurt sighed and said, "As much as I'd love to continue this, my will power is only so strong. I'd better go."

"I'll take you home," Mike agreed, stealing a couple more tender kisses before reluctantly letting go and standing up to straighten his clothing into a publicly fit state.

Kurt did the same, pulling his jacket on but stuffing the tie in his pocket and leaving his top two buttons unfastened.

"You look entirely too sexy like that," Mike told him, escorting him out the door with a hand lying warm against the small of Kurt's back. "You're going to make me rethink this whole taking it slow thing."

A warm surge of pleasure shot through Kurt at the compliment. He felt the same way but knew better than to say so. It would take very little to convince him to throw away his doubts and spend the night, but they were doing the right thing, as difficult as it was for both of them.

Mike drove him home slowly, taking his time and making the date last as long as possible.

When they reached Kurt's house, he released his seatbelt and leaned over to kiss Mike again, sweet and slow. "Thank you for a lovely evening," he whispered against his mouth. "If we both make it through dinner with my family tomorrow, we'll have to do this again."

The other man's lips smiled against his own. "Any time." He kissed Kurt gently. "I'll see you tomorrow. What time?"
"Come by around six. That'll give them a chance to get the interrogation over with before we sit down to eat. Oh, and dress casually. It'll make my dad more comfortable and give you a fighting chance at survival."

They smiled at each other and Kurt could not resist giving Mike one final kiss goodbye before climbing out of the car. As the dark green car drove away into the night, he sighed deeply.

"I could get very used to having him around," he murmured to no one in particular. Humming a few bars of one of the better songs from that night's show, Kurt made his way into the house.
Friday Night Dinner

Kurt was standing on the front porch, soaking in a little sun and singing along to the soundtrack audible from inside the house where his sisters were watching the old Disney classic, "The Lion King". His hands moved busily as he measured a layer of potting soil into a hanging planter and spread seeds over it, lightly patting them into place before adding another layer of soil and a sprinkle of water from the can at his feet. Satisfied with his work, he lifted the planter up and hung it from a pair of hooks that had been screwed into the wooden porch beam overhead.

"You never told me you had a green thumb."

Kurt turned his head, already smiling at the familiar voice. Indicating the planter, he said, "Only with these. I can't grow anything straight from the ground to save my life." Dusting off his hands, he leaned forward to accept a kiss as Mike ascended the steps, reveling in how natural the gesture already seemed. "You're early."

"I know. Sorry about that. Hope I'm not putting any of you guys out by showing up now. Lynne took over the store for me this afternoon so that I could have some time to get ready, but that didn't take very long and I didn't know what to do with myself, so I thought I'd kill time by walking instead of driving." He ran a hand through his thick black hair, shrugging sheepishly. "Obviously not enough."

A smile twitched Kurt's lips. "It's a pretty long walk from your place. You could have just watched TV or played video games. Anybody would think you were anxious to see me again."

"Maybe just a little," he admitted, sidling closer and sliding an arm around Kurt's shoulders as he gently kissed him on the cheek and again on the lips. "To be honest, though, I often walk home from work on nice days and it's not unusual for me to take this route. Remember the first night we ran into each other?"

"Oh, yes, I guess you were walking that night," Kurt recalled. "Though I'm not exactly sure I'd have said that was a nice day. I seem to recall it being really cold."

Mike chuckled. "Not for those of us who believe in coats and shoes."

Kurt ignored the quip as he adjusted the planter into a more attractive angle and then grabbed another. "If you're still in the mood for killing time, you can help me finish with these," he suggested. "Mercedes reminded me the other day that you used to be pretty handy at gardening."

"Still am, and I'd be happy to," he agreed. "What would you like me to do?"

"Carole wants four of these hanging baskets and both of the deck boxes filled. There's another bag of soil and some unopened seed packs right there," he replied, pointing to the supplies he had left on the porch swing. "There's an extra pair of gloves in that basket with the seeds. Carole bought pansies, petunias, mums, snapdragons, alyssum, jasmine and a couple of other things. Take your pick. She loves lots of color and my Dad's just happy that I volunteered to do it so he doesn't get stuck with the chore this year."

Brows raising curiously, Mike said, "She doesn't like gardening?"

Kurt snorted. "Dad and I both have maybe a nice pale tea-green thumb. Carole's is pitch black. She loves plants and flowers but she's horrible with them. She once killed a Chia-pet that Finn gave to the girls. And the flowering Christmas cactus that Dad got as a thank you from a customer. Oh, and the jade plant I got her for our first Mother's Day as a family!"
"Seriously? I thought those things were impossible to kill."

"I thought so, too until I came home from Dalton one weekend and got a look at the blackened remains."

The two of them shared a laugh and Mike dove into the project with all the eagerness of a true enthusiast. The two of them were soon working in a comfortable rhythm. "Have you been doing a lot of projects like this today?" Mike asked, curious eyes traveling over Kurt's dusty blue jeans and wrinkled T-shirt.

Following his gaze, Kurt shifted in embarrassment. "My family takes the term Spring Cleaning very seriously. Dad and Carole and I have been washing and polishing and vacuuming everything in sight since just after breakfast." Brushing a few crumbs of soil off his clothes, he said, "I had intended to put on something better, or at least cleaner, before you saw me."

"You're fine. It's not your fault that I was early," Mike replied reasonably. Sweeping a hand to indicate his own jeans, tank top and plaid button-down, he said, "I'm more at home this way myself, and I think you look great in casual clothes."

The expression in his eyes as they skimmed over the tight denim clinging to Kurt's thighs and rear made it very clear that he was not just saying that to be polite.

"You're not so bad yourself," he murmured, appreciating the way the tight material of Mike's light green tank clung to his toned chest and abs.

Stripping off his gloves, Kurt carefully shook them free of dirt before returning them to the supply basket. "Just the same, will you forgive me if I leave you to the mercies of my family for a little while so I can go grab a quick shower?" he asked. "I just can't go through an entire evening coated in potting soil and carpet dust."

"Sure, take your time. I'm sure your family would like a chance to grill me in private."

His eyes sparkled with fun and Kurt had to laugh. "You're a brave, brave man, Michael Chang." Placing his hands lightly upon Mike's shoulders, he formally kissed him on both cheeks. "Bon Chance, mon ami."

Kurt opened the door and led him inside. As the twins caught sight of Mike, they scrambled to their feet and pounced on him. Casting a bemused glance over his shoulder at Kurt as he was being rushed into the family room by the chattering pair, Mike put a hand to his eyebrow and gave a snappy salute. "We who are about to die..."

Laughing, Kurt went upstairs and left them to it. He felt a little sorry for the other man, but Mike might as well find out just what he was getting into before things went too far between them. Hearing the mirth already erupting from below as he gathered fresh attire and went to get cleaned up, Kurt smiled fondly. Somehow, he was not overly worried that Mike would feel the need to flee.

Forty-five minutes later, showered, shaved, and feeling much better in a form-hugging, pale green Henley and a pair of black fitted jeans, (No, he was not wearing them in hopes of getting more of those hot glances of approval from Mike. Well... maybe he was.) Kurt went back down to join the party. He had given his father and sisters more than enough time to interrogate their guest and Mike would almost certainly need rescue by now.

He discovered the other man sitting on the sofa, flanked closely by Kathy and Christy, who were explaining in great detail the plot of "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone", which had replaced
their Disney movie on the large television screen.

Certain that Mike had seen this movie as many times as every other child of their generation growing up, Kurt had to laugh at the desperately relieved look on Mike’s face when he noticed him standing in the doorway. "How's it going?" he asked, not bothering to hide his amusement.

"Fine," Mike said quickly. "Though your cat doesn't seem to like me very much."

Kurt raised an eyebrow at Crookshanks. The fluffy golden feline was sitting on the coffee table; a place he was not supposed to be by Hummel house rules. He had positioned himself directly in front of Mike where he could not be missed, then had disdainfully turned his back on the stranger.

Scooping him up, Kurt plunked down next to Christy and looked into the cat's scornful green eyes. "Are you being rude to my friend, Shanks?"

Shanks yawned in his face and then made himself comfortable on Kurt's lap, his smug expression suggesting that this had been the plan all along. Shaking his head, Kurt told Mike, "You know, it's disturbing to think that he just might be smarter than all of us."

Looping an arm around his sister as she cuddled up to him, Kurt realized that he could reach just far enough to rest his fingers against Mike's neck. He lightly caressed the warm skin with his fingertips, brushing them along the slightly prickly edge of Mike's freshly trimmed hairline and bringing a smile to the other man's face as the four of them settled in to watch the movie together.

"Where's Dad?" Kurt asked after a while, suspicious of his father's conspicuous absence.

"Mom sent him to the store to get some dinner rolls," Kathy said, eyes glued to the action onscreen.

Christy added, "She told him to quit harassing the poor boy and make himself useful."

"What was he doing to you?" Kurt asked, alarmed.

"Nothing bad," Mike said with a smile. "He just asked me about all the jobs I've had. Some of them I had completely forgotten about until he started questioning me. It felt like I was on a really intense job interview."

Kurt sighed. "I suppose you were, in a way." Moving his arm from around Christy, Kurt reached for Mike's hand and firmly kissed the back of it. "Just remember that I'm the one who gets final say on whether you're hired for the open boyfriend position. Just like you do for me."

He felt a little nervous about having mentioned the 'B' word so openly, but Mike grinned and squeezed his hand. "Good to know."

Reluctantly releasing him, Kurt shifted and tried to concentrate on the movie, secretly wishing his sister would feel a call of nature or something so he could scoot closer to Mike. Unfortunately, both twins proved to be comfortably settled where they were. Burt came back about halfway through the film and his friendly but intense presence just added to the tension.

Feeling uncomfortably like a 19th century maiden receiving a formal parlor call from a suitor, Kurt got up with the excuse of needing to go help Carole with the dinner preparations. Mike almost sprang from his seat, causing the twins to topple into each other when their shoulder rest suddenly disappeared.

"Need any help?"
"It wouldn't be nice of me to force a guest to work for his dinner," Kurt teased, knowing full well that Mike wanted an escape. "But you can definitely keep me company."

Carole was peeling potatoes when the two young men entered the kitchen and she smiled warmly when Kurt offered to help. "Are you sure?"

"Definitely," Kurt said, grabbing a knife and a cutting board to slice up the potatoes that she had already peeled. He nodded to a stool next to the sink and Mike happily sat down to observe. "Dad was boring holes into us with his eyes."

She laughed. "He means well."

"Oh, I know he does. And I appreciate the concern, I guess, but…"

"But he's overdoing it," she finished, patting his arm sympathetically. "I'll talk to him."

Mike smiled at the way the stiff line of Kurt's shoulders relaxed at her touch. His eyes were a little sad, though, and as Kurt shot him a questioning look, he admitted, "This really makes me miss my folks." He shrugged, looking a little wistful. "They weren't cruel about it or anything, but they were never very comfortable with my sexuality so I never brought anyone home to meet them after I came out. Although, I think I would have with you. They always liked you, Kurt, so I think they would have been okay with us seeing each other."

"They did?" he said, honestly surprised. To his knowledge, Mr. and Mrs. Chang had barely known who he was other than a frequent customer of their shoe store. "What about your sister?"

The sadness ebbed as Mike grinned. "Oh, she's all for it." He shrugged. "I told her we were dating and she told me that she thinks you're very sweet and have a great butt."

Kurt blushed, but was unable to keep from laughing when Mike and Carole exchanged a glance and both said, "She's right."

"Oh god. Thanks, I guess. So at least I can assume that Lynne wasn't bothered about you being gay."

"Nah, she's always been a lot more open minded than our parents." He laughed suddenly. "I remember one time when she was in college, she almost gave them heart failure by coming home for Christmas with a seven foot tall white guy with shoulder tattoos and a lip ring in tow. Then she announced that they were engaged and she was converting to Judaism."

Carole's eyes widened. "Oh, dear. I can't imagine that went over very well."

"Not so much," he chuckled. "Not that she actually did marry him, or convert. They broke up a couple of months later, but I think she just wanted to get a rise out of the folks. She eventually ended up marrying good old boring George Lee from right here in Lima. She was always open minded, though. My sister was the first person I ever talked to about liking guys."

Carole nodded as she finished the last of the potatoes and passed it to Kurt for slicing, washing and drying her hands before laying one of them on Mike's shoulder. "I'm sorry that your parents didn't understand better, hon, but I'm very glad that you had someone you could talk to."

"Me, too," Kurt agreed. He did not even want to think about how bad his life would have been during the really hard times of his teens, if he had not been able to turn to his dad, and later Carole, for understanding and support.
Mike nodded. "It helped, and of course I could always talk to Matt. The poor guy has been my sounding board through good and bad for almost twenty years now. I'm amazed he hasn't kicked me out of his life by now!" The twinkle in his eyes as he said this made it clear that he did not harbor any real fear of that happening.

"Does Matt know about me?" Kurt asked curiously, transferring the potatoes into the roasting pan on the stovetop, evenly surrounding the half-finished pot roast with potatoes and carrots, then putting it into the oven to finish cooking.

An embarrassed flush colored Mike's cheeks. "Yeah. He kind of knows pretty much everything. About both of us."

Realizing from the way Mike said it and then refused to meet his eyes that he must have shared the entire sordid tale of Kurt's breakup, along with their own interactions, with Matt, Kurt felt a surge of resentment. What right did Mike have to share his personal business with a man Kurt had not seen; had barely even thought about; since he was sixteen years old?

As he continued to stare at Mike's guilty-looking face, the annoyance ebbed away. Matt Rutherford was as close to Mike as a brother would be. They were soul-siblings, exactly like Kurt and Mercedes. She knew everything too, after all, including the part about Mike having been used and dumped by a married man. Kurt had never been a fan of double-standards and he was not about to start using them now.

"It's okay," he said quietly, surprising a look of hope into Mike's eyes. "You needed someone to talk to the same way I did. Matt is your Mercedes, right?"

Understanding his meaning at once, Mike smiled. "He is."

"Then I don't have any objection. Just do us both a favor and try to keep the details of our sex life to a minimum, okay?" He said the words as a joke, just wanting to lighten the moment between them, but then his eyes went wide, remembering that Carole was still listening. "I mean, not that there is anything to tell him."

Carole gave them a knowing look that quickly turned into a laugh when Mike hastily added, "Not yet."

Their eyes met, a flash of something passing between them that had Kurt's fair skin instantly flushing pink. Had Carole not been standing there blocking his way, he had a strong feeling that he would have pounced. "Um, I . . . think we should go see how the movie is going," he said faintly.

Mike took a deep breath. "Yeah, good idea. I hope we haven't missed the scene where Ron plays Wizard Chess."

Glad to have a safe topic, they returned to the living room, discussing whether live Wizard Chess or Quiddich seemed like a more dangerous game. The twins and Burt chimed in with their own opinions on the subject, further dampening the dangerously potent sexual tension that had suddenly sprung up between the two young men.

Somewhere over the course of dinner, Mike surprised Kurt by mentioning his acrimonious split with the married cheater. He did not go into detail, but Kurt could feel the last of the reserve between his father and Mike dissipating. Apparently, realizing that he understood from a personal perspective how badly Kurt had been hurt by Zachary was enough to convince Burt that Kurt's heart would be in safe and healing hands if he decided to give it away again.
Desperate to change the subject to something less fraught with emotion, Kurt manufactured a cheerful tone and asked the girls, "Did I ever tell you that Mike was the best dancer in glee club when we were kids? He designed a routine for New Directions that came close to knocking Dalton right out of the running for that year's Sectionals competition."

Thankfully, they took the bait. Like their brothers, Christy and Kathy were both deeply interested music and they immediately begged Mike for a demonstration. Being a good sport, he swiftly agreed.

As the meal was completed, Burt and Carole declared that they would handle the dishes by themselves and encouraged the younger generation to go have fun. Code for 'get out of here because we want to talk about you behind your back' that Kurt could read as easily as if it had been written across their foreheads.

They turned on the radio in the living room and for a couple of songs, Kurt just sat on the arm of the couch and watched, whistling and catcalling as Mike demonstrated some of his funkier impromptu dance moves while encouraging the girls to show him what they had.

The twins needed no coaxing and though Kurt was pretty sure that not a single one of their steps belonged in any dance manual in existence, it was a heck of a lot of fun to watch.

"Now you, Kurt!" Christy shouted, tugging him to his feet.

Feeling silly but loving it just the same, Kurt pumped his arms and legs, making a dance up as he went. He threw in a few hip twists and pelvic thrusts just for the hell of it, making the girls giggle and caused Mike to whistle and tease, "Work it, baby. Shake that money maker!"

Kurt could not keep it up for long. When his sisters joined in the action and started doing booty-pushes at each other he lost his composure and laughed until his sides were sore.

"Now a slow one!" Kathy demanded, expectantly holding her arms up to Mike in a standard waltz frame.

Changing the radio station until he found something that would work, Mike complied, taking her small hand in his and placing his other hand on her waist. Counting out loud for her benefit, he led his young partner in a simple box step.

Kurt tapped Christy on the shoulder and bowed and the grinning girl happily joined in with the dance.

Together the two slightly mismatched couples glided around and around the room. Then the twins exchanged a look and shouted, "Switch!" as they shoved the two men together and paired up.

For a moment, Kurt and Mike simply stared at one another, not sure what to do. Then Mike raised an eyebrow and his arms. "Shall we?"

"It would be my pleasure, sir," Kurt agreed, then added, "Just to be fair, I'll let you be Fred this time."

He laughed and took Kurt's left hand in his, resting the other on his waist and leading him smoothly across the floor.

Kurt lost track of time as they continued to move together. At some point, without his being quite conscious of it, their arms pulled each other closer and their joined hands came to rest between their chests. Their steps became slower and slower until they were basically just shuffling in place and staring into each other's eyes.
The song ended and they instinctively leaned closer to one other, only to leap apart with a startled
gasp when four people burst into loud applause. Kurt blushed, seeing his parents and both sisters
standing there watching them with broad smiles on their faces.

"You guys are really pretty together," Christy sighed, leaning back into her father, who wrapped his
arms around her and kissed the top of her head.

Kathy nodded, leaning her head against her mother's side with a dreamy expression on her face.
"The prettiest princes I've ever seen."

Mike looked at Kurt for explanation, seeing his blush deepen, but Kurt just shook his head. He did
not want to explain that right now. "Well, thank you, but it's getting late and I promised Mike a ride
home. Say goodnight, ladies."

The girls rushed forward, startling Mike with a pair of tight hugs that he bashfully returned, his own
cheeks flushing with pleasure. "Good night. It was nice to get to know you guys a little better."

When they raced upstairs, intent on playing a few games before their parents forced them to go to
bed, Burt and Carole also expressed their pleasure that Mike had been able to join them for dinner
and invited him to come again.

Kurt watched Mike interact with his parents in silence, pleased by the new ease he could sense
between them. He excused himself for a moment with the excuse of needing to go get his keys from
upstairs, returning a few minutes later carrying a small cloth sack in his hands. "I'm all set. You ready
to go?"

"Sure," Mike replied. Addressing Burt and Carole, he said, "Thank you again for a wonderful
dinner. I really enjoyed it."

They said goodnight and walked outside. Not willing to wait any longer, Kurt set his burden aside
and wrapped his arms around Mike's neck, kissing him tenderly. "I think you made a good
impression tonight."

"I'm glad." Glancing toward the window to make sure that nobody was watching them, he pulled
their bodies closer and met Kurt's lips hungrily.

Kurt moaned softly as he opened his mouth and invited Mike inside. It felt as if he had been dying all
evening, never realizing how much he was suffering until granted this soothing touch.

Raising his hand to Mike's jaw, he sucked in his lower lip and nibbled gently, tongue lightly stroking
the surface. Mike shifted against him, tugging at the hem of his shirt and sliding his hands beneath
the hem to feel the warm skin of his back as he changed the angle of his lips and moved in for
another deep kiss.

It all felt so good, so right; tender and hot and dizzyingly sexy, sending tingles of pleasure all the way
through his body.

Kurt could feel the passion increasing and he knew that this time he did not want to let his fears
overtake it. He had thought that letting Mike interact with his family would be good for them,
proving that they did not need to worry so much about him, but he had not counted on how far that
sweet domestic scene would go toward easing his own insecurities.

Breaking away, panting as he struggled to gain some composure, Kurt licked his lips and took a step
back. "I'll take you home," he said breathlessly, picking up his bundle and holding it like a shield
between their bodies.
Mike sighed, brushing a hand over his face. "I'm sorry. I did it again, didn't I? You want space and . . ."

"No," Kurt said, putting a finger to his lips to stop the words. "I just want to get off my parents’ front porch before we do something that will force them to come out and investigate."

Blinking, his brain obviously having trouble connecting the dots while all the blood in his body was busy elsewhere, Mike said, "Huh?"

Shaking the bag in his hand, Kurt said, "You know what this is?"

"What?"

"It's a laundry bag. There are clean clothes inside, along with my shaving kit, my toothbrush and a few other necessities. If it's okay with you, I'm kind of hoping I might need them tomorrow morning." He raised his eyebrows in question, a mixture of daring, shyness and nervous hope turning his eye color to a beautiful stormy gray.

Slowly, Mike grinned as the reality of what he was proposing finally sank in. "Are you sure you're ready?"

Kurt nodded, pressing close again to kiss his friend . . . no, his boyfriend. Grinding in a little tighter to allow Mike to feel the proof of his words, Kurt smiled. "I'm ready."
The journey to Mike's house was short, but surprisingly not as tense as Kurt would have expected, given that he had basically just propositioned the other man. He drove with his left hand on the steering wheel and the right captured in Mike's, their fingers laced together as they chatted about inconsequential matters in an attempt to keep things light.

Finally, Kurt parked his truck along the street in front of Mike's house and killed the ignition. "Here we are," he said casually, hoping the jittery feeling in his stomach was not audible in his voice.

He wanted to do this, but it had been a long time since he had been with anyone other than Zach; a man who had found him second-best to . . . apparently just about anyone. Self-doubt was already beginning to eat at his confidence. What if he couldn't live up to Mike's expectations?

"Grab your stuff and I'll go unlock the door," Mike suggested, interrupting his worries.

He paused for a moment after opening the passenger side door, cocking his head to one side as he gave Kurt a long, measuring look that had him squirming slightly, wondering if he had somehow given away what he was thinking. Nervously running a hand down the front of his shirt to smooth out nonexistent wrinkles, he asked, "What are you staring at?"

Suddenly, Mike leaned over and kissed him sweetly, the tender pressure of his lips making Kurt feel as though his insides were melting. As he pulled back, Mike looked into his eyes and smiled. "Just double-checking that this is real. I've had this dream too many times to be certain."

And just like that, all of Kurt's secret fears of not being enough vanished like a fragile soap bubble.

Hopping out of the vehicle, Kurt grabbed his bundle of clothes from the back seat and made his way up the walk, reaching the door just as Mike unlocked it shoving it open with a grunt. "I really need to replace that doorknob," he remarked, leading the way inside. "Damned thing sticks every single time. Do you want something to drink?"

"Uh, yeah. Sure," Kurt said. In fact he was not at all thirsty, but certain proprieties were to be observed when someone entered your home. Besides, it would be a little tacky to just leap on each other and start tearing their clothes off the moment the door closed. "Just some water, please."

"You got it," Mike said. He ducked into the kitchen and returned a few moments later with two chilled water bottles in hand, joking, "We wouldn't want to get dehydrated."

Like a switch had been thrown, Kurt's brain began flashing images of Mike shirtless, his gorgeous muscles and tanned skin glistening with beads of sweat, just begging to be licked. Kurt hastily uncapped the large bottle and tipped the liquid back; draining the entire contents in a single desperate To.

Having no idea what was going through his mind, Mike looked startled by the action. "Are you okay? Do you need some more?"

Setting his overnight bag and the empty bottle down on the nearest available surface, Kurt stepped forward and slid his hands beneath Mike's jaw, fingers threading through the hair at the back of his head. "I'm actually more hungry than thirsty," he said, giving him a split-second to decipher the comment before crushing his lips firmly against Mike's and closing his eyes as he began to kiss him in earnest.
Vaguely, Kurt made out a dull thud as the second, still unopened water bottle fell from Mike's hands onto the carpet. Then those hands were on him, clutching, sliding, clinging desperately as Mike threw himself into the offered kiss and devoured him with a level of passion that was shocking, amazing, and so hot that Kurt could not contain a whimper.

Ripping his mouth free, Kurt nuzzled his way down Mike's neck, applying tiny licks and gentle scrapes of his lips and teeth that immediately had his partner making delightful little noises in response.

Long fingers tugged Kurt's shirt free of his jeans and pushed it up his body. Unlike the last time he had been to this house, Kurt made no attempt to stop Mike from removing his shirt, just disengaging his busy mouth long enough to tug the garment over his head and toss it onto a nearby sofa.

His hands felt strangely uncoordinated as he tried to return the favor and tug Mike's outer shirt off. It was very distracting to have those strong, agile hands stroking and massaging patterns over his bare chest and Kurt fumbled, clutching the lapels of the plaid over-shirt and inadvertently drawing it tighter when he had intended to dispose of it.

Mike's lips traveled randomly over his neck, shoulders and chest, hands settling on Kurt's waist while his thumbs rubbed against his lightly defined abdomen.

"You're so beautiful," Mike mumbled against his skin. "It used to drive me crazy that you always wore so many layers. Even at the public pool during the summer, you never seemed to get in the water so you always kept your t-shirt on."

Fighting to get his brain focused enough to reply now that all the blood in his body seemed intent on moving elsewhere, Kurt laughed. "If I'd had any idea it would cause this to happen, I might have," he quipped, "but to be honest, probably not. I wasn't very comfortable with my body back then."

Mike paused in his intent exploration, straightening up and looking at Kurt with surprise in his eyes. "How come? You did football, Cheerios, Glee choreo… You must have been in pretty good shape, right?"

Disappointed that Mike suddenly seemed more interested in conversation than action, he decided to be honest. "Eventually, I guess. I was always strong, but you may remember that I went from short and chunky to tall and skinny in the space of a single school-year. Not to mention the fact that I've always been so pale I could be mistaken for a snowman. I wasn't in a hurry to get mocked for that along with everything else."

"But your skin is gorgeous," Mike disagreed, happily putting his mouth back to work. "So smooth, and soft, and pale as sweet cream."

He punctuated each word with a kiss or a light lick and Kurt moaned low in his throat, the sound seeming to ignite new levels of passion in his partner. Suddenly, Kurt grunted and jerked away from Mike's touch with a startled intake of breath when he felt teeth sharply tweak his left nipple. "No."

Mike paused, eyes wide. "I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?"

"I'm really sensitive there," he admitted, his voice breathy and a little too high for his own comfort. Gripping Mike's shoulders, finally bare as Mike lowered his arms, allowing the plaid shirt to slide onto the floor, Kurt sucked in a breath and took a step back. "I hope I'm not ruining the moment, but I just really dislike biting during sex. Nibbling is okay, but no hard biting or scratching. Is… that okay?"
He felt a little worried as he voiced the question. What if Mike thought he was being too fussy, or that he lacked passion? Or what if Mike was one of those guys who got off on the whole pain/pleasure thing? If that was the case, then this budding relationship was about to meet a quick and tragic end.

Happily, Mike simply smiled and bobbed forward to peck his lips. "Of course it's okay. In fact, I'm glad you said something. I want us to be honest with each other. And just so you know? I feel the same way about restraint. I need to be able to move freely, to touch and be touched in whatever way feels good and natural, or I can't enjoy the experience."

Somehow that did not surprise Kurt in the slightest. Relieved that Mike was willing to be open and encourage respect for each others' personal boundaries, he let go a long breath and smiled. "Of course. I have no problem with that. I was afraid you might think I was being a prude."

"Not a chance," Mike said, dropping another peck on his lips. "Now, what do you say we take this into the bedroom? Making out while standing in the middle of the living room is kind of hot, but it makes me feel like I'm living in a cheesy '80's movie."

Kurt laughed. "Me too. Not to mention that I've been struggling to not let my knees buckle for the last five minutes. These jeans are way too restrictive and I'm pretty sure I'll be obliged to murder you in your sleep if you allow me to get rug burns on my ass."

Laughter burst out of Mike's mouth, warm and happy, and Kurt threw both arms around him, hugging him tightly for a moment in pure unbridled affection. Kissing Mike deeply, Kurt smiled into his eyes and said, "Take me to bed and have your wicked way with me, Michael Chang."

Mike hitched his brows and twirled an imaginary mustache, causing a surprised giggle to burst from Kurt.

If this really had been an '80's movie, Mike would undoubtedly lift him into a bridal carry and sweep him off to bed. However, given that this was reality and they were close enough in size to make that gesture as awkward as it was cheesy, Mike just grasped Kurt's hand and squeezed it, smiling as he led the way.

The remainder of their clothing seemed to melt away as if by magic once they reached Mike's room. The bed was queen sized and covered in a thick, silky-soft, maroon comforter that some unoccupied part of Kurt's brain registered as being extremely comfortable beneath the bare skin of his back and legs as he was pressed into its softness.

Mike's hands and lips were everywhere, stroking, teasing, and worshipping every inch of him. It was sensual bliss, sending temperatures soaring and making the blood dance inside Kurt's veins. He could barely even remember the last time he had felt such devotion from anyone.

Never one to remain passive, Kurt gave as good as he got, reveling in the joy of finally being free to touch and kiss and explore the man he had admired from afar since they were teenagers. He felt empowered and almost giddy with the pleasure of bringing Mike to a state of incoherent moaning and gasping, loving his reactions as Kurt learned to unlock the secrets of his body.

Mike, in turn, seemed strangely fascinated by Kurt's porcelain skin and the light play of his muscles beneath its surface, taking particular delight in tracing the firm but lightly delineated abs and pectorals with his tongue, the action nearly driving Kurt crazy with building desire.

Unable to take the sensual teasing any longer, Kurt looped his legs around Mike's body and rolled them both so that he was on top and had easier access. Hitching his brows playfully at Mike's
expression, he began kissing his way down the other man's flat chest and amazingly tight stomach, intent on one particular goal.

"Aah! Oh! God!" Mike yelped.

Kurt kept a careful watch on Mike's face. He was good at this and loved doing it but he also needed to make sure that Mike was enjoying it. Some men could take this kind of attention for what seemed like hours, while others were too sensitive to put up with it for more than a few minutes. The only way to know which held true of Mike was to pay attention.

"Damn. Kurt! O-o-o-oooh…" Mike's breath hitched on each consecutive 'Oh' and when his eyes actually rolled back in his head, Kurt accidentally laughed around him, sending his partner over the edge.

Sensitive, apparently!

"Well . . . that was nice," he commented, grinning as he hitched himself back up the bed and kissed the panting man on one high cheekbone, then again on the lips.

It took Mike only a few moments to recover his wits and he laughed, enjoying the look in Kurt's dancing eyes. "No complaints here," he said with a huff of breath. Raising one brow, he teased, "Now what can I possibly do to pay you back?"

"I'm sure you could think of something," he purred, teasingly skimming a hand down his body. His earlier doubts had vanished. It was difficult to hang on to self-consciousness when your lover was looking over your body like it was a delicious feast and he could not decide what to partake in first.

Mike seemed to decide that a return of the favor was his preference and Kurt was certainly not about to argue. His entire body felt like it was on fire, nerves tingling and skin flushed with pleasure, his fingers tangling in Mike's thick hair, absentely rubbing his scalp in time with the motions of his mouth. He was absolutely sure that he had never felt anything as good as the warm, slightly rough lapping of Mike's tongue and the smooth steady suction of his cheeks.

All at once, Mike stopped what he was doing and a helpless whine of protest instantly escaped Kurt's mouth. He blinked, struggling to regain his focus when he realized that Mike was looking at him.

"Why did you stop?"

"I was just wondering how you'd feel about finishing in a different way," he said carefully. "Seems a shame to let all this preparation go to waste."

"I was just wondering how you'd feel about finishing in a different way," he said carefully. "Seems a shame to let all this preparation go to waste."

It took a moment for his meaning to become clear and Kurt suddenly blushed as the realization of what Mike was asking for flickered through his mind. "You really want me to do that?"

"I do, but you don't have to if you'd rather not," he replied. "Not if you prefer the other position. Or are you not into that at all? Some guys aren't. I used to have a boyfriend who wasn't, so it's totally fine either way. I guess I was just hoping."

A startled laugh burst from Kurt at his reply. "I'm actually fine with either, I'm just surprised. Guys always seem to assume certain things about me. It's been a really long time since someone asked me what I wanted."

"Meaning?"

Kurt sighed. "Zachary wouldn't even consider what you just asked for." He shrugged. "It wasn't worth arguing about. I mean, I didn't really mind."
"But you weren't totally satisfied either," Mike filled in. Suddenly, a light of mischief sprang into his eyes. "Maybe we really were meant for each other, Kurt. I happen to like a little variety myself, but my last relationship wasn't interested. I guess being on the receiving end was the whole point of him initiating a gay love affair. He wanted from me what he couldn't get from his wife."

Amazed by this turn of events, Kurt sat up. "So you're really okay with this."

Mike surged forward, capturing his lips and pulling Kurt on top of his body, bare skin pressed flush from chests to thighs as he clearly decided that actions spoke louder than words. Kurt responded eagerly, returning the attention kiss for kiss and touch for touch.

"Supplies," Kurt panted, breath catching when Mike found a particularly sensitive spot on his neck. Arm flailing sideways, Mike fumbled his bedside drawer open and felt around, making a triumphant noise when he found what he was looking for. Kurt sheathed himself and then carefully and thoroughly applied lubricant to his partner.

"Ready?" he asked, positioning himself.

"I think I've been ready for the last ten years," he said softly, sighing blissfully into the kiss Kurt pressed against his lips, wrapping his arms around Kurt's shoulders and making a sound of intense satisfaction as they became one.

The experience was almost surreal, all panting breath and slick skin and murmurs of mutual pleasure. It would have surprised almost anyone who thought they knew these two men that when it came to sex, Mike was the noisy one. He shouted a mixture of endearments and epithets, moaned and groaned, and even howled if the mood took him.

Kurt on the other hand reacted with sighs, hitching breaths, and an occasional gasp or whimper. It was as if nothing else existed in the entire world except the beautiful man moving so sensuously against him, accepting and welcoming his attention with a level of frank enjoyment that Kurt had never expected.

As his pleasure spiraled higher, his thoughts became fragmented, feelings overwhelming him. Tears trickled down his face before he knew they were coming, and Mike accepted this with the same loving ease that had accepted all the rest, capturing his lips in a firm, salty kiss as they gasped into each other's mouths, finding completion together.

"That . . . was . . ." Kurt panted, lying on his back next to Mike and struggling to catch his breath, the backs of his hands dragging over his cheeks to brush away the evidence of his emotional overload.

Mike smiled sloppily, rolling onto his side and leaning closer to kiss Kurt's bare shoulder. "Yeah, it was." He yawned deeply, nestling his face into Kurt's chest, arm wrapped cozily around his ribcage. "I think you wore me out."

Kurt grinned. "I know it's sort of cliché, but I feel awesome right now," he said lazily, waving his hand in the air to illustrate. He considered for a minute, then added, "Except that now I'm starving. I don't suppose you have anything in your kitchen that I could go raid? Preferably something sugary."

The other man laughed. "Are you a post-coital binger? I never would have guessed." When Kurt pouted at him, he sat up, still grinning. "They're not very romantic but I have some pop-tarts if you want 'em."

He licked his lips, considering it. "What flavor?"
"Cherry. I had some chocolate but I think I ate them already. The box is next to the toaster."

Kurt perked up instantly. "I love cherry. Want one?"

"No thanks, I'd rather just wait for you here. Help yourself to whatever you want."

The way he said those words could have been completely innocent or totally suggestive. Hoping he knew which one it was, Kurt grinned and hopped up from the bed. "I'll be right back."

Quickly pulling on his jeans, he went on his errand. The snack was right where Mike said it would be and he washed his hands and popped a couple in the toaster, checking out the fridge to see what else might be available. He returned ten minutes later with a glass of milk, a plate of veggie sticks, and one of the freshly toasted tarts.

Kurt had heard the sound of water running while he was in the kitchen, indicating that Mike had gone to clean up, but when he got back the other man was already back beneath the covers and had fallen asleep. There was a contented smile tilting his lips and Kurt felt a surge of great tenderness wash over him at the sight.

Setting his food aside, he took his jeans off and slid between the cool sheets. Snuggling Mike close against his chest once again, Kurt ate his snack carefully, not wanting to make a mess or disturb his bed-mate. When he was finished, he set the dishes aside and cuddled closer, winding his legs with Mike's and raining little kisses over any bit of skin he could reach.

Mike stretched and sighed deeply, opening his eyes with a lazy smile. "Who needs dreams?" he mumbled, wrapping his arms around Kurt and returning the attention. "Sorry I dozed off. You eat?"

"Mm hmm," he murmured, concentrating on the shell of Mike's right ear. "You rested enough for round two?"

Body already starting to grind against Kurt's, Mike gasped a little. "Oh, hell yeah. I have plans for tonight and sleeping is way down the list."

A smirk lifted one corner of Kurt's mouth as he pulled back to look in Mike's eyes. "Glad to hear it. Sleep is for the weak, you know."

Mike laughed, playfully flexing his muscles. "Call me Hercules."

That was all the reassurance Kurt needed.
Kurt woke slowly, warm contentment filling him as his sleepy brain registered strong arms wrapped loosely around him, holding him spooned against another body, and the deep slow breathing of someone in deep sleep.

Reality melded so nicely into the dream he had been having that Kurt was not even aware of the difference until he mumbled, "Love you, Zach."

The other person muttered something in his sleep and rolled away. At the sound of that voice, medium tenor where his ears had expected a low baritone, wakefulness hit Kurt with a jolt and he sat up, staring down at the sleeping form of Mike Chang. Both hands clapping over his mouth, his blue eyes widened with shock as he registered what had just happened.

"No," he whispered, shaking his head as if he could call back the mistake. Mike slept on, blissfully unaware of what had happened but Kurt could not stop the tears that welled up in his eyes as he said in a ragged whimper, "I'm so sorry. Mike, I didn't mean that. I didn't!"

Except, he had meant it, hadn't he? At least subconsciously? He had spent long wonderful hours making love with Mike last night, and yet somehow his subconscious had betrayed them both and filled his dreams with memories of good times he had shared with Zachary.

God, what was wrong with him?

He cared for Mike, very much. He even thought that he might be in love, or at least that he could be if this new relationship continued along its current path. But Mike deserved better than to be a rebound romance. He deserved so much more than a man who was – at least subconsciously - not yet over his cheating ex, no matter how much he wanted to be.

The realization made Kurt feel guilty and conflicted, sad and horribly lonely all at once.

Thanks to the care of his family and friends, and even more to the relationship that had so unexpectedly sprung to life between himself and Mike, Kurt’s broken heart and wounded spirit were making a faster recovery than he could have believed possible.

Apparently, they just weren’t quite there yet.

Raising his knees, Kurt rested his forearms on them and lowered his forehead. Why had he thought that this would be easy? Even if his heart had experienced a fast recovery, what he was doing was hardly fair to Mike. The other man had a life here in Lima, a house, a business, friends and family.

Even if Mike had been serious about packing up and leaving to experience the bright lights of New York, and Kurt feared that he had only been joking about that, there was no way he could be expected to just drop everything and take off to start a new life just for Kurt’s sake.

And Kurt’s life was simply not here anymore.
He had a thriving career that he enjoyed, friends he loved who shared his interests and supported his ambitions, and a home . . . and all of that was back in New York. His favorite pastimes, shops, clubs and restaurants; places where people knew and welcomed him on sight were all there. Even the general social acceptance that he had come to regard as normal. That was something he would never find in his beloved but stubbornly conservative and provincial home town.

Lima had family, old friends, a wealth of memories both fond and not so fond. And of course, it had Mike, but Kurt’s life was no longer based here and he could no longer hang on to the charming fantasy that it was. He belonged in the city where he had firm obligations and duties that were waiting for him to take them back up in only a week's time.

Dashing at his nose, where a tear had escaped and rolled down to dangle off the pointed tip, Kurt lay back down on the soft mattress and wrapped his arms around Mike's warm, hard body. He was not ready to give this man up, but he knew that he had to do it for both of their sakes, and he could not put it off no matter how much he wanted to. Parting from Mike would only get more difficult the more time they spent together.

His lips pressed against Mike's chest and traveled up his neck and face, feeling his recently mended heart breaking all over again.

Mike groaned softly as the tender kissing slowly woke him. He blinked and smiled, pressing his lips to Kurt's then tugging him closer. Hooking his chin over Kurt's shoulder, he wrapped him in a tight embrace. "Mmm, I could get used to waking up like this every day."

Another surge of mingled happiness and heartbreak washed over Kurt. "Me, too." Drawing on inner reserves of strength that he had thought were all but depleted, he said, "Mike . . . I need to get back home. I'm sorry to wake you up so early, but I didn't want to leave without saying goodbye."

There must have been something in his voice that told his lover that he was not just talking about heading back to his father's house, for Mike's sleepy eyes blinked wider, coming fully awake as he looked into Kurt's eyes and saw the regret and resolve that filled them.

Mike’s expression became sad. "You're leaving, aren't you? Leaving Lima?" Leaving me. The unspoken words filled the heavy silence that followed.

Kurt swallowed hard, unable to speak, and nodded.

"Had you already planned on leaving when you came over last night?" The true meaning behind his question was clear from the almost emotionless tone with which he asked it. Mike needed to know if he had been a one-night stand. Just something fun to pass the time before Kurt returned to the duties and pressures of real life.

"No," Kurt choked, those damnable tears leaking free of his control again. "I just . . . I can't do this, Mike. I want to more than I can say, and last night I was so sure that I was doing the right thing, but when I woke up here beside you I felt . . ."

"What?" he asked softly, brushing the tears away from Kurt's cheeks with such a tender touch that he only caused more to take their place. "What did you feel?"

Choking on a sob, he admitted, "I was dreaming about him."

"Your ex?"

He nodded. "I woke up feeling so warm and happy and l-loved. The past and the present were somehow all," he paused, dashing at his nose again, taking a deep breath as he went on, "All m-
mixed up. I thought for a second that I was still with him, but then I woke up and remembered I was with you, and I... I can't do that to you, Mike. I can't let you become just a substitute for what I've lost. You're too wonderful, and too good, and I w-want to be with you just because you're you, and not in any way because you're not him."

Kurt's breath was hitching and the words were growing more incoherent as his tears fell faster. He felt like a complete fool for breaking down this way, but he could not help himself. He had no idea if he was even making sense. God, Mike must hate him for seeming so fickle.

Then, to his complete surprise, Mike pulled him close and held him in comforting arms. "Shhh, it's okay," he soothed, his own voice thickening with the sound of unshed tears. "It's okay. I get it. I really do. You told me that you were afraid of moving too fast and I felt the same way, but then we did it anyway. Trust me; I do understand where you're coming from."

Clinging tightly to him, Kurt sniffled. "You do?"

"Definitely. Pizza and donuts, remember?"

A startled laugh cut through Kurt's tears. He had momentarily forgotten that Mike had done a little rebound courting of his own following a betrayal. "If it makes you feel better, I want you to know that you have the potential to be so much more to me," he admitted, "but... but I just have to be sure." "You need some distance. Some time on your own," he agreed sadly, pushing them both to a sitting position and gently brushing a lock of tumbled hair away from Kurt's eyes. "Like I said, I get it. I've had an entire year to find closure and come to terms with what I lost, as well as what I hoped to gain. You've had family and friends to act as a buffer, but it's still only a couple of weeks since your life fell apart. You need a chance to live in the space you used to share with him, or doing a routine you guys used to share on your own. That's enough to deal with without worrying that you're substituting convenience for love."

Kurt nodded, hugging his knees and heaving a deep sigh. "I'm so sorry, Mike. I really did think I was ready last night. I feel like I've used you."

Mike copied his pose, resting his cheek on one upraised knee and giving Kurt a sad smile. "I don't feel that way, Kurt. I'd be lying if I said I didn't wish things could have turned out differently but I don't regret what we shared. Not one minute of it."

"I don't either," he said honestly, leaning over to press a soft kiss against Mike's lips.

Kurt shifted, studying Mike's face. "Do you think we'll ever have it? True love and happy ever after? With somebody, I mean," he added hastily, not wanting Mike to feel that he was trying to push for a commitment that it was too awkward to even think about right now. "An honest, made-for-each-other kind of bond, like our parents all had, or like Finn and Julie, or Lynne and George?"

To his surprise, Mike did not look uncomfortable with the questions. Instead, he picked up the hand that was worrying a loose thread in the comforter and squeezed it, his thumb caressing Kurt's knuckles in what seemed to be his favorite gesture of affection. Smiling into his eyes, he said, "I believe we will."

Feeling happier suddenly, Kurt whispered, "I hope we will."

Heart thumping harder, Kurt moved to gather Mike close, kissing him tenderly and trying to convey all of the mixed-up emotions he could not find the words for in that simple gesture. Mike did not
hesitate to return the affection, his right hand rubbing soothing warmth into Kurt's bare back as they kissed.

"I should get going," Kurt said again as their lips regretfully parted.

Mike sighed. "Yeah. I got up for some water last night and grabbed your stuff. It's in the bathroom."

Remembering how he had dropped his possessions haphazardly in the middle of Mike's living room in his haste to get him into bed last night, Kurt smiled. "Thanks. Is it okay if I take a shower first?"

"Help yourself. You want some coffee?"

"If you're making some, I love it."

He nodded and gave Kurt another quick peck on the lips. "Then, I'll make some. Breakfast?"

"Oh, uh, no. No, thanks. I'm not much of a breakfast person. At least not this early," he replied. That was a lie, he had always been a firm believer in the benefits of starting the day with a healthy meal, but it wasn't cool to essentially dump a guy and then expect him to feed you.

Mike nodded. "All right. I'll see you in a few minutes then." He slid out from beneath the covers, pulling a pair of blue sweat pants and a loose plaid button-down out of one drawer and hastily tugging them on.

Kurt did his best to keep his eyes averted, feeling that it would be inappropriate to watch him under the circumstances. Awkwardness seemed to be rearing up between them, neither man able to quite look at the other.

Waiting until Mike had left the room, Kurt also got out of bed, feeling self-conscious of his nudity as he walked the few steps from the bedroom to the bathroom.

Unlike showers at home, Kurt wasted no time on self-pampering or personal concerts. He just washed, shaved, dried off and dressed as quickly as he could manage, the long-ago days of strict Dalton Academy efficiency coming back to him.

Dressed simply in black chinos and a crimson button-down shirt, Kurt gathered his things and carried them and the red and black sneakers he had gone back to Chang's Shoes to purchase after his initial choice of the blue and white pair, into the living room.

Mike came out to join him, carrying two steaming coffee mugs in his hands. "Cream and a little bit of natural sugar," he said, placing one cup in front of Kurt on the low coffee table.

"Thanks," Kurt greeted quietly, feeling a little shy as he noted that Mike had taken note of the way he preferred his drink during the coffee-date they had shared more than a week ago. He took a sip and made a pleased hum. "It's good."

Mike smiled back. "Glad you like it." Glancing down as he took a seat next to Kurt on the sofa, he suddenly laughed. "I didn't even notice that that last night. It wasn't for me, was it?"

Kurt followed his gaze and then smiled sheepishly. He had forgotten all about his blue nail polish. "No," he laughed. "They've been like that for a week. I keep meaning to borrow some polish remover from Carole and then I get busy with something else and forget all about it."

He explained about the previous weekend's spa day and Mike nodded. "I'm glad you did that. Too many people don't take an opportunity to relax and look after themselves. Having a little fun with it is
even better."

Wiggling his shimmery greenish-blue-tipped toes, Kurt smiled. "It made me feel kind of rebellious, like I was getting away with something. I'm kind of surprised you approve, actually. Zachary would have hated it. He was always a little contemptuous of anything that he viewed as too overtly femme."

"What did you ever see in that guy?" Mike blurted suddenly, face going red when Kurt looked up in surprise. Gathering his own coffee cup, Mike took a distracting slurp. "Sorry, I probably have no business asking you that."

"Then why did you?" he asked tersely. He used the task of putting on his socks and shoes to avoid looking at Mike.

Seeming to realize that he had put Kurt on the defensive, Mike held up a hand. "I'm not trying to attack you. I'm sure he must have had a lot of good qualities or you wouldn't have been attracted to him, much less stayed with him for as long as you did. It's just that, well it sounds like he didn't respect you enough to let you be yourself around him, and he wasn't honest about who he was either. I know those things are really important to you. They always have been, unless you've changed a lot more than I realize. You're a very no-bullshit kind of man."

A little startled by this insight, Kurt paused in tying one shoe and straightened up. "You're right," he said, sighing and brushing his fingers through his damp hair. "And on some level, I suppose I always knew things weren't quite right between Zach and me, but as much as I hate to admit it I've always had a streak of denial when it came to guys."

Finishing with his shoes, he sat back against the sofa cushions, looping one arm around his middle as he sipped his coffee with the other hand. "Zach was charming and a lot of fun to be with. Not just when I first met him, but always. Even when he was apparently messing around behind my back, he was usually very considerate and sweet to my face. He would do little things. Having dinner waiting when I got home late, or showing up at my theater with an umbrella when it was raining out just to walk me home. Not all the time, just as a surprise every now and then, but when he did those things he almost always followed up with . . ."

"Good sex?" Mike asked wryly.

Kurt blushed. "Really good. I thought he was being sweet and romantic when he did those things, but now I guess he was just covering his tracks. At the very beginning, even if we didn't have a ton of things in common, the things we did share seemed even more special because of that rarity." Kurt shook his head. "That sounds stupid, doesn't it."

"It's not stupid," Mike disagreed. "Not unless everyone who's ever been in love was stupid. Little things are supposed to be what strengthens a relationship, not what drives it apart. I think they're a big part of why you didn't catch on."

Lips pursing sourly, Kurt added, "And I'm sure Zachary was counting on that." Shifting restlessly, he said, "Look, let's not talk about him anymore, okay? If this is the last time I'm going to see you for a while, I'd rather not waste any of it dwelling on past mistakes."

"Agreed," he said. Shifting closer, Mike slipped an arm around his shoulders and drew him in, resting their heads together. "I think you're right to want to take things slowly, Kurt, but that doesn't mean I'm not going to miss you like hell once you're gone. See, you're not the only one who takes a teaspoon full of denial in his morning coffee. I've been telling myself that you'd be around a long time, so I had all the time in the world to win you over."
Kurt slid down a bit further on the couch, allowing him to rest his head against Mike's shoulder. "Would it sound selfish if I said that I hope you won't give up on me right away, even if we're living in different states?"

He sensed more than felt the kiss that Mike pressed against his hair. "Not at all. You're worth waiting for, Kurt Hummel, and I'm a very patient man."

Happy to take that reassurance and tuck it away deep inside, Kurt tugged Mike's shirt open to reveal the left side of his chest and pressed a kiss over his heart. "I'm going to hold you to that."
The town of Lima was just waking up when Kurt drove slowly through it, taking the long way home from Mike's. It was just shy of eight am and very few stores were open this early on a Saturday, but he was sure that the one he wanted would have its doors open.

Atley's was a thrift shop, one of those hole in the wall businesses that mysteriously seemed to stock every article known to man, from antique pocket watches to brand new electronics. Clothing, knick knacks, stuffed animals, furniture, planters, you name it and they probably had it, if not on the shelves then stored somewhere within their Mary Poppins carpet-bag of a back room. And they were always open by 7 am sharp.

When a little bell over the doorway jingled to announce his arrival, a teenager in a brown stock apron popped up from behind a counter with the startling suddenness of a prairie dog. "Hi! Welcome to Atley's! Can I help you find something?" she asked with a bright smile, showing far too much enthusiasm for so early in the day.

Nonetheless, Kurt smiled back at her. "I was hoping you might have some suitcases in stock," he said. It had occurred to him that he had not brought any luggage and that he would need something to transport home the many outfits he had purchased during his stay. "I need a medium sized one, plus maybe a smaller, sturdier case for shoes. I hate packing them together with my clothes."

"Oh, me too! Don't you hate it when you get scuffs on stuff you haven't even worn yet, just because it was shoved up against your best awesome boots that you wear, like, all the time? That just totally ruins your whole day!"

Kurt nodded, trying not to laugh as he suddenly had an insight into what he must have sounded like to his father when he was this girl's age. About fifteen or so, he guessed. Atley's was a family-owned business, so this young woman was probably one of the three toddlers he remembered seeing in this store with their parents when he was a teen. The thought made him feel a little old. "You're right, it does."

"I'm sure we can find something perfect for you!" she enthused, green eyes bright and high blonde ponytail swinging as she bounced over and led him to a small selection of luggage near the back of the store. Picking up a square, heavy-duty black case, she suggested, "How about this one? Or if it's not what you're looking for, we have more in the back!"

Secretly wondering how much caffeine this girl used to start her day, Kurt nodded. "This would be just about right to pack my shoes." He examined it more closely, pleased to note that both the exterior leather and the inside lining appeared to be waterproof. The case showed a few scuff marks here and there but it was otherwise in excellent condition. He suspected it had only been sold because the dimensions were a bit awkward for a regular suitcase. For his needs, however, it was perfect. "This will work. The waterproofing means I can just stow it in the back of my truck and not have to worry if it starts raining."

"Totally!" she chirped.

He nodded. "Now I need a larger one for my clothes. I did quite a bit of shopping while I was in town and I'm afraid I have a fashion overflow crisis."

The girl giggled brightly at the small joke and Kurt could not help laughing with her. It was kind of refreshing to see someone, especially such a young someone, who truly seemed to enjoy customer
service.

She began hunting through shelves, pulling out an assortment of suitcases and judging and rejecting most of them based on criteria that Kurt did not even try to guess at. Finally, she pulling out a deep blue hard shell case. "This one might do," she said, looking between luggage and customer as if trying to decide whether or not they truly belonged together. "It doesn't have any wheels, though. Is that okay?"

"It's fine. Like I said, I'm driving, and my apartment building has an elevator."

"Cool," she said, head bobbing. "So do you think this is big enough for what you have, or should we go for something bigger?"

Mentally sorting through the contents of his new wardrobe, he said, "I have a garment bag for the nicer items, so this should have plenty of room for everything else."

The girl bounced up on her toes, hands clasping in sudden excitement. "Oh! You mean, like, a cheap-o plastic store garment bag or a real one? This suitcase has a bag that totally matches!"

Before Kurt could say anything, she dove into the back room. He could hear the sounds of rummaging and then an exclamation of triumph. She returned holding up a very nice leather-trimmed garment bag that did indeed perfectly match the blue of the suitcase.

He grinned. People were always shocked to learn that Kurt Hummel was a thrift-store enthusiast, but he had always loved prowling around and finding amazing things in shops like this one. Items that could either be used as-is, or reworked into something fabulous.

"I think we have a winner," he agreed. "All right, I'll take both cases and the garment bag."

She beamed; though whether it was over his appreciation of style or because he had not checked the price tags before making his decision, Kurt was not sure. "Great! Can I help you find anything else?"

"No, that should . . ." he paused, his eye caught by a wall of framed movie posters. His smile turned a little bittersweet as he said, "If you can wrap it securely, I'd like that picture right behind you as well."

He gestured to the iconic image of Gene Kelly happily splashing and dancing in a pouring rainstorm, his heart clenching at the reminder of Mike. Kurt suspected that he would never be able to see or hear anything associated with "Singin' in the Rain" without thinking of him again.

"Sure!" she agreed, grabbing a step-ladder and carefully moving the picture from the display to the counter.

She rang up Kurt's purchases, happily humming to herself as she pulled an immense roll of bubble-wrap from behind the counter, wrapping and taping the poster frame until it looked like a fluffy plastic cloud. There was no way a drop of rain or speck of dirt was getting through that!

The girl helpfully assisted him in transporting everything out to the back of his truck, and in return Kurt gave her a twenty dollar tip.

"Wow, thanks!" she bubbled, grinning from ear to ear. "Hope you have a nice trip home!"

"Thank you," he said, swallowing a reluctant sigh at the thought of leaving, and giving her a wave goodbye.
When Kurt pulled into the driveway of his father's house, Burt was outside picking up the newspaper off the front steps. He strolled over as Kurt got out of the truck, a knowing smirk gracing his features.

"Morning, son," he greeted, his eyes twinkling. Whatever teasing words he had been about to follow up with died as he got a good look at Kurt's face. His eyes flicked to the back of the vehicle, where his son had reached to remove the two suitcases he had just purchased. Burt grimaced. "Guess things didn't go so well after you left last night, huh?"

Kurt held his tongue until they reached the porch, dropping the empty cases next to the railing and taking a seat on the porch-swing. He looked up at Burt, silently inviting him to share. The older man took the seat without hesitation, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his thighs, looking sideways at Kurt as he waited for him to speak.

They rocked in silence for a few seconds, then Kurt said, "Everything went fine. Actually, they went much better than fine. Mike was wonderful, Dad. Sweet and giving, and the way he touched me made me feel . . . I don't know. Precious, I guess. Like I was all that mattered in the world at that moment; and I felt the same way about him."

He paused, not willing to share the more intimate details and knowing his father would be uncomfortable hearing them anyway.

Burt sighed. "I hear a 'but' coming here. What did he do?"

"He didn't do anything. It wasn't him, Dad. It was me." A feeling of utter defeat swept over Kurt and he slumped forward, copying his father's pose. "I went to sleep feeling so happy, but when I woke up in his arms this morning, I was having a dream and I . . . I called him Zach."

Burt winced in sympathy. "Aw, shit."

A humorless laugh met the words. "That about sums it up. Mike didn't even hear me say it, he was still asleep, but I felt like I had completely ruined everything. It just crashed in on me. Using Mike to make myself feel better is exactly what I had been trying to avoid doing! I'm ready to go back and face my life again. I know I am, and yet there I was happily leading Mike on with dates and kisses and . . . romance."

Burt snorted a little at the self-edit but did not comment on it. "He knew you weren't staying for long, Kurt. It's not like you've ever had any thought of moving back to Lima, or let him believe that you did."

There was a slight question in his tone and Kurt shook his head. "No. I love you guys and it's nice to come back and visit, but I couldn't live here again. I told Mike the first night we spoke to each other that I was only staying a couple of weeks."

Burt nodded, skillfully hiding any disappointment he might have felt at the thought of his son leaving. "Then I don't see that you did anything so terrible. You're both grown men and Mike's not stupid. You didn’t force him to go on those dates, or to come over for dinner, or any of the rest of it. You didn't try to hide the circumstances from him or pretend like you were staying forever." He shrugged, smiling ruefully. "Maybe sleeping together wasn't the smartest thing to do, but maybe it was the only thing either of you could do. Love has a funny way of making even the dumbest ideas seem like genius, and Mike is in love with you."

Kurt looked up, unable to tamp down the wild surge of elation he felt. "You sound so sure of that."
A smile tipped one side of Burt's mouth as he leaned closer, nudging Kurt's shoulder with his own. "I am sure. The way he was looking at you yesterday is the same way you were looking at him. Like each of you would take whatever the other was willing to give him, even if it was just for a single day."

There was a sad, gentle look in Burt's eyes that Kurt recognized. The one his father always got when he was thinking about Kurt's late mother. The meaning of that comparison awed Kurt, for as deeply as his dad loved Carole, there had been something quietly powerful in the way his parents had loved each other. Kurt had been aware of it even as a small boy. It had been as if nothing could ever beat them as long as they had each other. It was what had kept his father holding on to a memory for almost ten years after she died.

Had his dad really sensed that same kind of connection developing between himself and Mike? Kurt was unable to hold back a sniffle but he pulled in a deep breath, blinking rapidly. "No, I am not going to start crying again," he said firmly. "It feels like I've done nothing else since I first came home except bawl all over everybody. I started crying like a kid this morning when I told Mike why I had to leave."

"You told him?" Burt said, looking astonished. "All of it? About saying the wrong name and everything?"

"I had to, Dad. I told him he deserved somebody who wasn't conflicted and somebody who could love him whole-heartedly, and he . . ."

Burt tipped his head curiously as a little smile worked its way over Kurt's unhappy features. "What?"

"He said I should take some time. That I need to be on my own for awhile, but that he'd wait for me. He said he was patient and that I was worth waiting for."

Sitting up straight, Burt grinned and slapped him lightly on the back, leaving his hand in place and rubbing it briskly over Kurt's shoulders. "See? What'd I tell you? I knew there was a reason I liked him."

Kurt laughed. "He is right, though. I need to get back to New York and start putting my life back together before I can worry about how to fit a new boyfriend into the picture."

"You were always good with puzzles," Burt mused, settling back comfortably on the porch swing, looking immensely satisfied. "You'll figure it out."

The two of them sat in companionable silence for a few more minutes, rocking gently in the sturdy porch swing and enjoying each others' company. They had always been good at this. Even when Kurt was young and they had not known how to talk to each other, they had always been able to share the silences.

"Think you can put off leaving for a couple more days?" Burt asked finally. "It's supposed to be a beautiful weekend. Carole and I have been promising the girls a visit to Birch Park. Place just opened back up last weekend and I was figuring on surprising all you kids with a trip this afternoon. Be a real shame if you missed out."

Kurt smiled, unable to help feeling charmed that his father still considered him one of 'the kids' who would naturally be filled with enthusiasm over a trip to the rickety old amusement park. "Missed out on being your baby-sitter, you mean?" he teased, raising an imperious eyebrow when his father looked at him. "You're not fooling me one bit, Dad. You and Carole just want somebody to take the
girls on all those rides. You know they're tall enough to try out the roller coaster this year."

"Better you than me," he said frankly, making his son laugh.

"I suppose I would kick myself if I missed the chance to win ugly stuffed animals and rot my teeth out with cotton candy."

Ignoring the sarcasm, Burt chuckled. "That's the spirit! What do you say? Do the park with us today, get a good rest tomorrow, and start back home bright and early on Monday."

Kurt pondered the offer for a moment. The park was a great place for kids. When he was a teenager, his dad had occasionally taken him there for "guy time" and those evenings were some of the best in his memory. "That would be fun. Okay."

His father beamed, grabbing the empty suitcases and leading the way inside before Kurt could come up with any reason to change his mind.

The twins were as emotional as one would expect between the terrific news of a day at the amusement park and the equally tragic news that Kurt would be leaving on Monday. They whispered between themselves for a couple of minutes, then decided that it was their duty as loyal siblings to make sure Kurt had the "funnest" day that anyone could ever have.

This translated to running him ragged all day long, riding every ride in the park (some of them twice), playing midway games, and spending ridiculous amounts of their indulgent brother's money on junk food and must-have toys and souvenirs that Kurt knew perfectly well would be lost or broken before the girls' 10th birthday came along in June.

In truth, Kurt did not mind any of it. It was nice to have a distraction from his conflicted emotions, and it felt good to spend a day doing something fun and frivolous with his family. Burt and Carole were clearly enjoying the outing, too, strolling along hand in hand in the younger generation's wake, snapping occasional photos and stopping to play a game every now and then.

At the end of the day, when the crowd had thinned out, Burt and Kurt ended up with one of the target-shooting ranges all to themselves. At first, neither of them was doing well but as they started to get a feel for it, competition took over. Soon they were having an enthusiastic battle over whose high-powered squirt gun could knock over more tiny cardboard clowns.

First Burt was winning, and then Kurt, then they managed to even up with just one more taunting clown left on either of their target ranges. Both men were laughing so hard they could barely aim straight, but they kept pulling the triggers anyway in the pursuit of bragging rights and one of the huge stuffed animals on display.

Finally, Kurt zapped his last clown seconds ahead of his father. Putting his squirt-gun down, he raised both arms overhead in victory as the girls cheered for him. "Ha! Flame thrower of justice, my ass," he taunted his father, sticking his tongue out as he accepted an ungainly fuchsia octopus from the booth attendant, handing it to Carole with a playful bow. "M'lady, your prize."

Carole laughed and kissed his cheek. "Oh, thank you. It's just what I always wanted!"

Burt looked at the stuffed mollusk ruefully, noting the way its huge goggle eyes seemed to follow his every move. "You just gave it to Carole so I'll have that thing staring at me every night and you can rub in your victory all the way from New York."

Affecting a deeply innocent expression, Kurt placed a hand on his chest and said, "Why, Father, you wound me! You could do a lot with this fine specimen. For example . . ."
Everybody burst out laughing when Kurt resumed possession of the octopus and wound two of the tentacles over his left shoulder and under his right armpit, hooking the curly ends around his body to form a floppy headed backpack.

"I know you know a lot more about fashion than I do, son," Burt chuckled, "but I'm pretty sure that look will never catch on."

Kurt laughed, barely catching the creature as it came undone and started to fall. "You could be right."

By the time the family left the park, had eaten dinner, unloaded all of their goodies at home, and washed off a day's worth of grime, Kurt was exhausted. But it was a good kind of tired and as he settled down in his bed that night with a book in his hands and a purring Crookshanks stretched across his legs, he was glad he had decided to wait until Monday to leave all this.

He managed to read for an hour before his eyelids started dragging and the words on the page ceased to make any sense. Putting the book aside and removing his reading glasses, which he had thankfully brought with him in his coat pocket, Kurt picked up his phone and checked for messages.

He sighed at the empty display. Mike had not called him today. It was only fair, especially since he had not called either, but he had hoped there might be a message anyway.

~*~*~*~*~

It could have been that his body was making up for the lack of sleep the night before, or the whirlwind day he had enjoyed with his family, or that his subconscious was just clinging to the final day of his vacation in Lima. Whatever the reason, Kurt was startled to open his eyes on Sunday morning and see the number 10:38 shining back at him from the face of the clock on his nightstand.

"Whoa," he mumbled, picking the clock up and taking a closer look just to be sure he has not misread the number. Feeling guilty and lethargic from the overabundance of sleep, he sat up just as a knock sounded on his door. "Come in," he said around a yawn.

Burt stuck his head inside the room, looking startled at finding Kurt in bed so late. "You feeling all right?" he asked in concern.

"Guess the girls wore me out a little more than I realized yesterday," he replied sheepishly.

His father just laughed. "They have a way of doing that. Anyway, I was going to tell you to come downstairs. There's somebody here to see you."

"Who is it?" he asked, but his dad had already vanished.

Half-tempted to go down just as he was, bed-head and all, Kurt sighed and scrubbed at his wild mane. He just couldn't bring himself to do it. "Whoever it is can just wait fifteen minutes until I'm presentable," he muttered grumpily, getting out of bed and heading into the bathroom.

When he got downstairs, he was glad that he had made the effort. Mercedes Jones, Artie and Tina Abrams, and Mike Chang were all waiting in the living room when he arrived.

"Hey, sleepyhead," Mercedes greeted, moving forward to give him a hug and kiss.

"Hey, guys. What's going on?" he asked, eyes flicking nervously to Mike, who just flashed him a warm smile.
"We couldn't let you go away without a proper goodbye," Mercedes told him. "Finn managed to sneak away before we could do anything for him, but you are getting a proper New Directions send off."

"With music," Mike said, holding up a portable stereo.

"And food," Tina filled in with a grin, gesturing to the picnic basket balanced on Artie's lap.

Artie grinned at his expression. "Don't even think about trying to refuse. Your parents are fully prepared to kidnap you on our behalf, if necessary."

He laughed at the absurdity of that proposal. "Why would I refuse? This is really sweet, you guys."

Happy to be reunited for a short time, the five young men and women went outside and piled into the Abrams' waiting van. Their children were being babysat by their grandparents today, and the car-seats had been temporarily removed so they would have plenty of room for everyone. The group traveled to a local park where they spent the day together, eating, singing, and chatting comfortably together like the best of old friends that they were. It was easy to forget for awhile that over a decade had passed since they had all shared the McKinley High School choir room.

Mike stayed close by throughout the day, but it was clear that he was attempting to avoid putting any additional pressure on Kurt.

Kurt was grateful, but at the same time a little sad at how easy it seemed to just pretend that they were nothing more than friends. Maybe his dad was wrong about how Mike felt. Perhaps his own decision to back off so suddenly had jolted Mike away from his fantasy of a relationship and made him realize that breaking up now would be the right thing to do. Still, he could not remember how long it had been since he spent an entire Sunday in the best possible way, hanging out with friends. Especially friends with a legendary habit of bursting into random fits of song whenever the mood struck them!

It made the hours pass all too quickly. Only the onset of twilight, reminding the Abrams that it was time to pick up their brood, finally broke up the party. Tina and Artie drove Kurt home, Tina giving him a hug and Artie a firm handshake from the driver's seat, as both of them ordered him to keep in touch more.

Mercedes threw her arms around Kurt’s neck and rocked back and forth. "Oooh, baby, I'm gonna miss you so much! No matter what happens, you mark it down in your planner that you got a firm commitment to come back here this summer to be my Best Man, you got that?"

"I will," he promised, wrapping his arms tightly around her curvaceous form and squeezing her tight. "There's no way I'd miss seeing my best girl tie the knot. I'll be here if I have to walk all the way from New York."

"You better," she said, sniffling and letting him go. "I love you, baby. You have a safe trip home. Call me the minute you get back, so I'll know you made it."

Kurt laughed. She always said that to him, and he knew well enough by now to do it, even if he got home at 2am. "The minute I get there. Love you, Cedes." Looking around at each face, he told them, "Thank you all for today. I really am sorry that I didn't get to spend more time with you while I was here."

The words were meant for everyone, but he found himself looking right at Mike.

Suddenly, the other man jumped out of the van and came forward, a determined expression on his
lean features that Kurt did not know how to interpret. "I told you yesterday that I was a patient man," Mike said softly, brushing his fingers against Kurt's temple and making his heart thunder in his chest. "But I can't let you leave without making sure that you know how I feel about you." Then, with no worry for their audience, he pulled Kurt into his arms and kissed him passionately.

After the first shocked moment, Kurt melted into his embrace with a soft sigh, feeling as if his whole fragmented world had suddenly been correctly realigned. Whistles, cheers, and much playful fanning of faces greeted the sight, turning to fond laughter when the kiss ended and Kurt's friends got a look at the huge, dopey smile that filled his face.

He tried to think of a way to express all that was going through his mind, but finally he just settled for throwing his arms around Mike's neck and kissing him again with such enthusiasm that he distinctly heard Mercedes say, "Daaaamm, boy."

"I'll call you when I get home tomorrow," Kurt promised breathlessly, breaking away from Mike's lips but holding on to the back of his head. "Right after I call Mercedes, I'll call you. I'll call every day, or you can call me. You're right about me needing some time on my own, but I don't want to lose this."

Mike shook his head. "You won't. I promise."

Heedless of the dewy smiles and tiny coos of approval from their friends, Kurt let out a sound that was half laugh and half sob, giving him one last quick kiss that melted into a teary hug. "I'll miss you."

"Same here," he whispered. Mike held him for a long moment, then broke away. Looking around at the group, he gave them a sharp nod. "I think I'd rather walk from here. Goodnight everyone."

"Goodbye," Kurt whispered, watching him hurry away until he finally disappeared into the darkness. He stayed in the same spot, deep in thought, long after Tina, Artie and Mercedes had driven away.
Leaving was always the hardest part of a visit home, but this parting felt particularly difficult. Kurt had come to Lima broken and bleeding and his family had propped him up, kept him safe, and gave him a safe haven in which to recover. Now he felt like a bird with a newly healed wing, gathering his courage to hop out of the nest and fly away again, all the while pretending that he was not afraid to fall.

Wanting to be comfortable on the long drive home, he had dressed in a pair of soft gray jeans, his blue and white sneakers, and a dark blue turtleneck shirt with a thicker, warmer, blue and gray cable-knit sweater over it. A pleasant spring day was dawning and Kurt doubted he would need his jacket, but it was still chilly enough outside at this early hour that layering was a must, and it would likely be cold again by the time he reached New York.

He had risen with the dawn, packing all of his new possessions neatly into the suitcases and checking bathroom and bedroom, under furniture and within each drawer and cupboard to insure that he was not leaving anything important behind. It had not taken long to pack, for while he was a bit surprised to see how many things he had accumulated in two short weeks, it was still far less than he typically brought with him. Checking his open suitcase, he opened one last drawer, debating on the contents. Finally, he picked up the final item and placed the too-large jeans that his dad had bought on his first day home inside the case. He felt oddly sentimental towards them. And he could always donate them to one of the costume departments he worked with if he changed his mind later.

The entire time he was packing, Crookshanks had sat on his bed, observing and occasionally reaching out to play with some interesting item. Kurt had been forced to rescue shoelaces, a pair of cuff links, and his dental floss from the curious paw of his new friend, but he did not consider shooing the cat out of his room. They had bonded during Kurt's visit, the warm little body snuggled against his chest nearly every night had helped to ease his loneliness far more than he would have believed possible. And if a few secrets had been whispered into those small pointy ears, or a few tears soaked into that fluffy golden coat, Crookshanks did not seem inclined to gossip. That was worth a few stray hairs clinging to everything he owned.

Kurt smiled, stroking his hand down the cat's back and up the length of the long bushy tail as it arched into his touch. "You're a good man, Shanks. I'm going to miss you a lot. You're even making me think that I might have to check out my building's policy on pets, now that I don't have an allergic boyfriend any more." He laughed. "At least that would guarantee he'd never try to come back."

The cat purred, bumping the top of his head against Kurt's palm as if agreeing that this sounded like an excellent plan. Kurt smiled, giving his companion a parting pat as he zipped up his luggage, hooking the garment bag over his left arm as he lifted up both cases and transported it all carefully down the stairs.

Breakfast with the family was a solemn affair. Burt and Carole kept up a round of small talk, reminding Kurt to let them know once he'd made it safely back home. He was grateful for their effort at nonchalance and did his best to reply in kind. The twins, by contrast, did not even attempt to appear happy. The two of them were sniffing and casting sad, tearful looks Kurt's way throughout the entire meal. Kurt lingered for a while over his coffee cup, but at last there was no more reason to delay his departure. Taking a deep breath, he stood and said, "If I want to get a jump on the Monday morning traffic, I'd better get going."

The entire family moved as a group to the front door, where Kurt bent down to kiss and tightly embrace each of his sisters. "You guys be good, okay? Take care of yourselves and keep an eye on
"I wish you didn't have to go," Christy choked out, clinging tightly to his neck.

Kathy nodded, sniffing into his shoulder. "You were gone forever the last time."

A surge of guilt swept over Kurt. To a person only 8 or 9 years old, a year between visits would be practically an eternity. "I'm sorry for that. I didn't mean to put off visiting for such a long time. I won't let it happen again," he promised. "But we'll still have calls and messages, and don't forget that I'll be back in August for Aunt Mercedes' wedding."

"That's still a really long time," Christy observed sadly.

Kurt smiled, straightening up and smoothing his fingers through their soft brown waves. "Four months isn't so long. I'll be back before you know it and I fully expect you guys to keep me up to date on everything happening around here in the meantime. Okay?"

Kathy managed to return the smile. "We will."

"Can I ask you one more favor?" They nodded. "Check on Mike for me once in a while. We'll keep in touch on our own, but he doesn't have any little sisters to look after him, so I'd feel a lot better if he could borrow mine every now and then."

A grin finally beat out Christy's tears. "We can do that! Mike is fun."

"He likes you a lot, and he likes us, too. He has good taste," Kathy added, unintentionally making all of the adults laugh.

"We'll make sure to invite Mike over for dinner now and then," Carole promised, moving in to give Kurt her own hug and kiss goodbye. "Oh, it's been so good to have you home. You take care, and if you need anything don't hesitate to let us know."

Kurt hugged her back hard. "I won't, and that offer goes both ways."

"I know," she laughed. "I love you, sweetie."

Kissing her cheek, he said, "I love you too, Mom. Thank you for everything."

As Kurt had expected, his dad just picked up one of the suitcases, escorting Kurt out to the truck to do his own goodbye in private. Opening the storage bin built into the back of the truck bed, they set both suitcases inside where they would travel securely. Kurt laid the garment bag carefully over the back seat in the cab, unwilling to risk creases in his finer garments. When everything was safely stowed, the two Hummel men just looked at one another for a few seconds.

"I guess that's everything," Kurt said regretfully, wishing he had something else to delay him, but knowing that a few more minutes would not make this any easier. "I wanted to thank you for all that you've done for me, Dad."

Burt immediately shook his head. "You don't have to."

"Yes, I do," he countered quickly, instinctively reaching out to catch his hand. "I know you're going to say that it was nothing, that it's just what any father would do for his kid, but it was so much more than that. You don't know how lost and tired, and broken I felt when I got off that plane. I can't even properly describe it, but when I saw you there in that airport and talked to you on the way home, you gave me the first real feeling of hope I'd had in hours. Spending time with you, talking with you, just
knowing you'd be there to pick up the pieces if I fell apart . . . I honestly don't know how I would have made it through this without you."

Burt blinked suspiciously fast, clapping a hand on Kurt's shoulder and squeezing. "It's no more than you did for me over the years," he said gruffly. "You're a lot stronger than you realize, Kurt, but I'm glad you let us be here for you. And you know that if you need me again, for anything, all you have to do is ask, right? I don't want to hear any of that, "Oh, I don't want to be a bother," bullshit. You need me, you speak up. Try and remember which one of us is the dad in this relationship, okay?"

Kurt laughed, drawing his father into a tight embrace. "I'll do my best. Love you, Dad."

"I love you, too, son," he said, thumping him firmly on the back. "Now get going before both of us end up turning on the waterworks."

Kurt laughed again. It was already too late for that, but he nodded anyway. "I'll see you in the summer."

"Counting on it," he said, smiling and straightening as he stepped back to allow Kurt to climb into the driver's seat. "Have a good trip."

Starting the engine and latching his seat-belt, Kurt waved a final farewell to his family, who had come out onto the porch to see him off. His heart was heavy but he felt contented as he drove away.

Unable to bear the thought of seeing Mike again only to have to tear himself away again just moments later, Kurt took the long way out of town, avoiding the other man's home and business. As he turned toward the freeway on-ramp that would take him to I-80, Kurt sighed, deliberately shaking off his melancholy as he began the long journey home to New York City.

In spite of a few stops for food, gasoline and a chance to stretch his legs, he made good time. The bright lights of New York beckoned sweetly as the sun set and darkness began to breathe new life into the city. The terrible impression of empty hopes and broken dreams that had assaulted Kurt through the taxi-cab window when he had last seen this place was replaced by the familiar feeling of pulsing excitement that New York had always given him.

It was good to be home again.

After sitting through a minor traffic jam that reminded him why he rarely drove in the city, Kurt reached the parking garage of his apartment building just a few minutes after nine. He had maintained his residential parking permit after selling his last car because Zachary had kept a vehicle here, but of course he had not thought to take the permit home with him. Luckily, the security station was being manned by Lou Masters tonight. Lou was around sixty or so, a black man with salt-and-pepper hair, a jovial smile, and a deep rolling voice that always made Kurt think of Mufasa from "The Lion King". The two of them had become friends the first week Kurt moved into this building over three years ago, and yet the older man still insisted on the formality of calling him "Mr. Hummel" while on duty.

Sure enough, Kurt was greeted with a bright smile and a blast of, "Mr. Hummel! Good to have you back. Been off visiting the folks?"

"Yes, I have," he replied pleasantly, going along with the pretense that the other man did not know the real reason he had left. His call to the front desk to have Zachary banned from the building would have traveled through the employee gossip chain at the speed of light. "It had been a long time since
I last saw them. How's Rita?"

"She's well, thanks. We got the grandkids out to stay with us for a few days. Lots of fun, but I need to come to work every night just to get some rest!"

A merry guffaw rang through the garage, making Kurt grin. "I think I know what you mean. My baby sisters do a terrific job reminding me that I'm getting up there in years." Lou chuckled even harder at this observation coming from a man who had not yet hit his 30's. "Lou, listen, I left in such a hurry that I forgot my parking permit. I was hoping you might let me slide just this once."

Lou hit the buzzer to lift the crossing arm. "No problem. Your space is empty and waiting for you," he said, a subtle nod reassuring Kurt that his ex had cleared out. "And may I just say that that's a fine piece of machinery you got there, Mr. Hummel."

"Thanks! My dad and I restored her from a junker he bought at auction," he replied, enjoying the impressed look this brought. "Soon as I get the plates changed and the registry renewed, she's all mine."

"Very nice! We'll take good care of her for you."

"I know you will. Thanks, Lou. Have a good night."

Kurt parked in his designated spot, feeling a small pang at the absence of the blue sports car that usually occupied the space. Trying to ignore that instinct, he gathered his luggage and locked the truck, entering the building and enjoying the sense of peace that washed over him. However painful the circumstances of his leaving had been, it was nice to be home.

Pausing at the front desk, he learned that Emily had been picking up his mail for him. This was fine with Kurt. He did the same for her whenever she and Elise were out of town for more than a couple of days. The desk clerk called the doorman over to take Kurt's luggage to the elevator, allowing him to run back out to the garage and grab the framed poster he had left lying in the truck-bed, saving him a second trip downstairs. The doorman was happy to ride up with him and get everything down the long hallway to the door of his apartment, for which the weary traveler was grateful.

Waiting until the man had taken his tip and left, Kurt unlocked his front door and pushed it open, but froze on the threshold before he could go through. The painful memory of the last time he had been here brought a knot of anxiety to his stomach. For a moment, he could not find the strength to turn on the light and proceed. What would it be like, seeing the familiar cream and beige décor that he had always found a bit dull, but kept because Zachary liked it? How would it feel to cook alone in the kitchen where they had fixed so many meals for two? Or to sleep in the same bed where his lover of two years had betrayed him?

Kurt squeezed his eyes shut, feeling such a sharp agony of loss and humiliation that it was as if the past two therapeutic weeks had never happened. His skin went hot, then cold; his gut churned and his heart pounded. Kurt tried to breathe, his left hand flailing outward to steady himself. Expecting the cold hard surface of the outer wall, Kurt jumped, eyes opening in surprise when his fingers encountered the softness of plastic bubble wrap. The distraction snapped him back to the present, his hand sliding upward and squeezing the edge of the framed poster. Mike's poster. Kurt breathed a sigh of relief as everything this picture represented came back to him, bringing with it a feeling of relief and gratitude.

Taking a deep breath, Kurt pushed the door the rest of the way open and flipped on the light. Then he blinked, a surreal sensation of having walked into the wrong apartment sweeping over him. The previously cream-colored walls had been repainted a soft shade of blue that went well with the
apartment's deep gray carpeting. A lingering scent of fresh paint still lingered in the air, giving away
the newness of the change.

Kurt ventured further inside, setting his things down and closing the door with a soft click. His own
pictures and furnishings decorated the room, several things hanging in the wrong place but still
reassuring him that this was, in fact, his home. His gaze moved over the room, cataloging changes.
The big sofa that Kurt had bought for the convenience of guests and which he personally found very
comfortable for napping was still here, as was the artistic chaise lounge that had traveled with him
from his old basement bedroom back in Lima when he had first come to New York. The sturdy,
hand-carved coffee and end-table set that his parents had sent as a house-warming gift when he had
first moved in was also here.

Kurt had been expecting the absence of Zach's belongings, but he had not been expecting new items
in their place. The love seat they had bought together and spent many evenings snuggling in had
been replaced with a wide, cushy-looking chair covered in reddish-brown velveteen cloth. A new
end table and lamp sat next to it, nestled between the chair and Kurt's well-stocked bookcase. The
chair was rather ugly and it clashed a bit with everything else in the room, but Kurt could already
imagine how nice it would feel to lounge in that chair with a good book and a warm drink after a
long day at work. He could always have it reupholstered in some tasteful fabric.

A beautiful area rug in assorted shades of blue, black and green had been set down between the sofa
and the television, adding a splash of color to the room. The TV, Kurt realized, was the 52" flat-
screen that had formerly occupied the bedroom to satisfy his partner's propensity for falling asleep to
the sound of sports. The smaller TV that had moved in with the other man must have moved right
back out with him. Not that Kurt cared. He had never been a fan of watching TV in bed anyway.

Taking off his coat, Kurt left the garment with his bags and wandered through the kitchen/dining
area, finding this space reduced to strict basics. Most of the cookware had belonged to his ex. He
appeared to still have a few pots, one pan, and the dishes and cutlery he had bought when he moved
in, but he would still need to replace several items. The absence of a dining room table was also
jarring, but as he moved through the empty space, hearing his boot heels click on the bare floor, Kurt
found that he rather liked it this way. It reminded him of Mike's in home dance studio.

Moved by a sudden impulse, he grabbed the new poster from its place propped next to the front
door. Popping and ripping his way through what seemed like a half-mile of bubble-wrap, Kurt
finally reached the picture inside and hung it up on the hooks that had formerly supported Zach's
lithograph of the Atlantic Coast at sunrise. The new addition looked good in that spot. It would be
easily visible from the living room and Kurt decided that he would leave the rest of the space empty
for now. He had a set of wooden TV trays somewhere, probably stuffed in the bedroom closet, that
he could eat off of until he found something better.

Steadying his nerves, Kurt took the step he had been dreading most and entered his bedroom.

Tension immediately drained from his shoulders when he looked around the space. This, too, had
been redecorated. The formerly tan walls were now a soothing shade of green, which again worked
well with the gray carpeting. All trace of Zachary Carson had been removed. His clothes, his random
knick knacks, the collection of music and sports memorabilia that had taken up most of their shared
dresser; all of it was gone. In fact, the dresser itself was gone, as were the two bedside tables and
lamps the former couple had bought together. A new set had replaced them, made of some darkly
polished wood that matched the bed frame.

Since the bed had formerly been lacking an obvious frame, Kurt had to assume that this item had
been replaced as well. He ventured forward and lifted the edge of a brand new comforter, finding
unfamiliar blankets and a set of soft Egyptian cotton sheets underneath. Pulling up the edge of the fitted sheet, he nodded, unsurprised to find a different pattern on the mattress.

The attached bathroom was the only room that had been left alone, not counting the absence of Zach's personal products, but since Kurt himself had done the decorating here he supposed there had been no need for his Fairy Godmother to wave her wand. Shaking his head, Kurt smiled and went to get his bags, flopping down on the new bed and noting with satisfaction that it was soft but firm he pulled out his phone and dialed Emily Switek.

"What did you do to my apartment?" he greeted in answer to her hello.

"You're home? When did you get back?" she blurted in response. "Damn it, why didn't you tell me you were coming? I'd have been there to meet you!"

Kurt smiled, even though she could not see it. "I didn't tell anybody. I just decided I was ready over the weekend, and since I got a car while I was in Lima I drove most of today to get here. Now, stop avoiding the question. You did all of this, didn't you?"

"Surprise!" she said, laughing a trifle nervously. "You don't hate it, do you? Oh, shit, you do! Damn it, I told El that we were going overboard and that you'd flip your shit when you saw how much was changed, but once we got started we just kept going. I put out the word that we were redoing a few things as a welcome-home present for you, and everybody wanted to pitch in and, well . . . you saw for yourself."

"I don't hate it," he said as soon as she paused for breath. "Who's everybody?"

Emily laughed, sounding a lot more natural as she realized he had been teasing her. "Everybody, dumb-ass! Me, Elise, Connor and Misty, Georgia and Dirk, Steve and Ian, the whole gang from the Regal; hell, even the great diva herself floated down off her pedestal long enough to do a little decorating."

"You don't mean Rachel, do you?" he said in astonishment. The only thing his two strong-willed friends had in common was love for him, and a powerful dislike of one another. They tended to be like gasoline and lit matches when they were in the same room, so he usually avoided bringing them together.

"Who else would I mean?" she snorted. "The Divine Miz Berry heard about our plan, God only knows how, and immediately swanned in to tell the rest of us what to do. I guess I do have to give her some credit since she put up the cash for a lot of your new furniture, but the only thing she picked out for you herself was . . . ."

Kurt cut her off. "The chair, right? That ugly red chair next to the bookcase?"

"Got it in one."

He grinned. However much things changed, certain things were eternal. Rachel Berry's gaudy sense of taste was one of them, and Kurt felt a warm surge of love for both of his dear meddling friends. They might hate each other but they had a lot in common when it came to those they cared for. He was lucky to have them both. "Em, I don't even know what to say. Thank you," he told her. Looking around, he choked up at the enormity of what his friends had done for him. "This is too much."

Emily's typically sassy tone softened. "No, it's not. Everybody felt terrible about what happened and guilty that we were all blind to what that fucked-up little piss-pot was doing to you all those months. We love you. Painting and decorating that loser out of your life was the least we could do to show
"That's sweet, but . . ."

"But nothing!" This time, she cut him off, her attitude roaring back to life as she ordered him, "Don't you even think about being an ungrateful little bitch. You're going to take our gift in the spirit it was meant and be happy. If you feel like you have to pay us back, then throw us a kick ass party. Break the place in properly! We will accept all tributes in the forms of food and booze."

Kurt laughed. "You have a deal. Just give me a few days to get settled first."

"I suppose we can do that," she agreed, and he could hear her smiling as she said, "Are you really okay with the place?"

"I love it," he said honestly. "Coming home to this apartment was the one thing I was dreading, but you guys have managed to turn something horrible into something amazing."

"I'm glad," she said simply. "I'm also glad to hear that you sound a hell of a lot less stressed out than the last time we spoke. I guess you had a good time back to Cow-Town, USA, huh? That mean there've been some new developments with your high school hottie?"

They talked for a few more minutes, Em digging for information on his relationship with Mike, which he had not updated for anyone since the first date, and Kurt refusing to give up any details. He was not ready to talk about it yet. He settled for giving her a few of the highlights of his visit, knowing she'd take the hint and back off. It was one of the things he liked best about her. The conversation ended with a verification of his upcoming work schedule and a mention that he'd like to slip in a few extra lessons this week if there were any interested clients. After all, he was home early and knew perfectly well that he'd be bored out of his skull within two days with nothing to do. Em just laughed and told him to be careful what he wished for. Apparently, his unavailability had been mourned, which was very flattering to hear.

After he hung up with Emily, Kurt placed the promised calls to Mercedes and his parents to let them know he had made it home safely, and then he left a message for Rachel to thank her personally for what she had done.

Finally, unpacked and wearing his favorite pajamas, he climbed into bed, finding it far more comfortable than the old one. Zachary had tended to favor mattresses that could double as building foundations. Leaving on the tiny reading lamp next to his bed, Kurt placed one last phone call. He smiled when it was picked up with an eager hello. "Hi, Mike. I made it home okay. Yeah everything is fine. It's a little strange to be here by myself, though. It's really quiet." He paused to listen, a smile drifting over his lips as Mike expressed a wish that he could be there with him. "I wish you were, too. You'll never guess what my friends did to the place while I was gone…"

The conversation drifted easily, staying light and deliberately casual. They spoke for over an hour, but finally Kurt's long drive began to get the better of him and he could no longer suppress a yawn. The first yawn set off a chain reaction and they both laughed. Kurt apologized but soon realized that he was fighting a losing battle. He yawned deeply again, falling asleep only moments later to the sound of Mike's soft voice wishing him sweet dreams.
Starting Over

When Kurt woke on Tuesday morning, he lay still for a minute as disorientation filled him. Eyes blinking open, he took in his surroundings, slowly remembering why his bedroom looked different, felt different, and even *smelled* different from what his subconscious had been expecting.

His hand slid to the right and brushed over the cold sheets on the empty side of the bed, releasing a sigh as he felt the familiar combination of loss and irritation. For once he wanted to acknowledge those feelings, let them wash over him and then roll away. He rolled onto his back and pulled a deep breath through his nostrils, holding it for a moment as he oriented himself to the new reality of having this space all to himself again.

He wondered how many times he would need to do this, waking up with the instinctive expectation of Zach's presence and then forcing himself to adjust to its absence.

Folding his legs beneath the warm blankets, Kurt sat up and rested his elbows on his knees as he studied his newly decorated bedroom for one. There was still an uncomfortable disconnect between the part of him that logically argued that this is how things *had* to be and another, more stubborn part that simply did not *want* it to be.

He sighed again, gaze drifting to his phone. He had apparently stayed awake long enough to set it safely on the bedside table after talking to Mike last night. The connection it represented felt like a life preserver and he could barely resist the urge to pick up the device and reestablish that reassuring connection, but he forced his hands to remain still. You could not leave someone you cared about, declaring the need to rediscover your independence for both of their sakes, and then cling to that person like a frightened kindergartener clutching his parent's hand.

Kurt knew that he had been right to come home when he did. If he had been fully ready to move forward, then he would not still be experiencing this ridiculous attachment to the past. It was not that he valued what he had had with Zachary more than that potential future with Mike. It was just hard to be alone in the home they had shared, a place filled with memories that his heart was still struggling to let go of.

For in spite of the comforting reassurances from his family and friends, it was not easy to believe that he had not done something to drive his ex-boyfriend away, or to quell his fears that he might somehow eventually do the same to Mike.

"What if I don't deserve you?" he murmured aloud, eyes returning to the phone. Kurt nearly jumped out of his skin when the device answered back with a loud blast of music. Fumbling it into his hands, he cautiously answered, "Hello?"

"Mornin', slacker! Want to grab some breakfast with your long lost bestie?" Emily's voice cheerfully blasted in his ear, causing Kurt to breathe a sigh of relief. He was obviously not quite awake, not to have recognized her ring tone. In a cheery mood today, she apparently took his silence as need for convincing. "I just passed Kirkland's Bakery. They were taking a fresh sheet of croissant sandwiches out of the oven."

Kurt's stomach rumbled at the thought. He loved those things. Fresh baked buttery croissant, eggs, a generous helping of cheese, hand-made sausage or thick-cut bacon, and a sprinkle of some secret spice that elevated the simple fare above any other breakfast he'd ever eaten. One could gain weight just by looking at them, but they were so, *so* worth it. "Well . . ."
"Come on," she coaxed. "You deserve a nice welcome-home breakfast and I'm buying. Hell, I'll even buy you one of those froofy little mochas you love so much if you want."

The offer made Kurt laugh. "Froofy? Is that even a word? And I can't believe that's the best you can do. Not whip-creamed nectar of the devil? No lectures on how over-sweetened, calorie packed morning beverages are the leading cause of obesity epidemics in modern America, and should be banned for the sake of us all? You really have missed me!"

Emily just huffed. "Just so you know, all of those arguments still stand. You'd just better get your butt down here while I'm temporarily in the grip of insanity."

"Can thirty years really be considered temporary?"

"Twenty-nine years, thank you very much. So, what do you say?"

Kurt grinned. "You had me at croissants. Give me a few minutes to take a shower and get dressed. I'll meet you there in twenty."

"You better, or I'll come by your place and drag you down myself. In fact, maybe I will anyway. I know how you are about those marathon showers and I haven't seen a cute naked guy all morning."

Kurt guffawed. "Yeah, and I'm sure that's a huge disappointment to you. Or has my recently regained single status caused you to switch teams? Let me guess, you've been waiting for the last two years to get your hands on me and you just can't hold back anymore. Should we tell Elise that you're filing for divorce so you and I can run off to Vegas and make things official?"

A wicked cackle met the suggestion. "Oh, totally! I get to wear the tux, though. You know you'd pull off a wedding dress better."

"It's all in the hips, darling," he mocked back.

The conversation dissolved into giggles for a minute, then she said, "I love you, kid. See you in twenty."

"I'll be there," he promised, smiling as he hung up the call and climbed out of bed, grateful for good friends with excellent timing.

~*~*~*~*~*

"Oh my, God," Kurt moaned twenty-five minutes later as he sank his teeth into a fresh hot bacon, egg & cheese croissant at Kirkland's. Washing it down with a long sip of his mocha, he sighed happily. "Add world's greatest coffee shops to the list of reasons I moved out of Lima."

"Should I leave you two alone?" Emily asked wryly, eyeing him with amusement over the top of her cup of plain black coffee as he took another blissful bite.

Kurt raised an eyebrow. "Jealous?"

"Worried. People are gonna think I fed you porn for breakfast."

He had not been expecting that and made the mistake of laughing just as he took another swallow, causing himself to choke and cough as he accidentally snorted mocha up his nose.

"Oh, shit, I'm sorry," Em said, ruining the apology by giggling at his red face and watering eyes even as she pounded him on the back.
Kurt coughed a few more times, glaring at his friend as he blew his abused nose into a napkin. "Not nice, Switek."

"I said I was sorry," she offered. "You all right?"

"Fine," he grumbled. Sniffing cautiously, he rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "Damn, that'll wake a person up in the morning."

She grinned. "So, now that you're thoroughly awake, do you want to go over the appointments that have been requested for this week. I wasn't kidding when I said folks were anxious to have you back. Your friend Berry just got cast in a new show, don't know if she told you that, but they're casting a bunch of the other roles next week. From what I hear it's a good show, got raves during its preview run in Chicago, so half your usual clientele is salivating over it and they're all convinced they can't make it without your expert guidance."

Though she spoke the words with a hint of typical sarcasm, Kurt knew that his friend was honestly proud of his success. They'd gone to college together, Kurt a Performing Arts major, while Emily had been a Business major. She had been taking theater studies as a fun extra-curricular, and Kurt had been taking a course in tax accounting with an eye towards making it big one day and not getting robbed by some unscrupulous business manager in the process. (He had not read all those celebrity biographies growing up and learned nothing!) As a result they had seen a lot of each other and become friends. When Emily needed a new roommate to share her small off-campus apartment, Kurt had been more than happy to answer the ad and move out of the NYU dorms.

After graduating, Emily had combined her interests and become a very successful talent agent. Em had started referring clients to Kurt’s new voice-coaching business, as well as handling his schedule once she realized that he didn’t have the heart to turn anyone down and was over-extending himself.

"Well, I can't take any appointments today. I need to restock my kitchen, fill the fridge, and find something more aesthetic than a battered TV tray to eat off of, but tomorrow would be fine."

"You might want to replace your computer, too," Emily advised him. "I know you keep all the important stuff on your phone, but the roving reporter took the PC when he left."

Kurt shook his head. "You know, I knew something was missing but I couldn't figure out what. It was his anyway. I didn't use that computer for much beyond games and occasional web searches. I'm not even sure it would be worth the expense of buying a new one."

Flashing him a too-innocent smile, Em said, "Really? And here I thought you'd be dying to get one of those webcam services set up so you could talk to your new boy-toy face to face."

Kurt stared at her. He had not even considered that option but he knew Mike had Skype, and the thought of being able to see him while they spoke was extremely appealing. "That's . . . not a bad idea."

"Well, you don't have to be so shocked," she said, taking a deep slurp of her coffee. Emily was small and thin, with dark spiky hair that was currently bleached white at the tips, a large sharp nose, a ready grin, and wide gray eyes that always had a glint of mischief lurking in them. Seeing the dreamy look that came over Kurt's face as he contemplated being able to see Mike every day, even hundreds of miles apart, she laughed. "Oh, honey, you've got it bad! Tell me more about this guy. Seriously, I want to know."

And so he did. Starting with the shy, near-silent teenager with the amazing dance skills, and working his way up to the shoe store owner with the even more amazing kissing skills, Kurt told her
everything. Including his embarrassing gaffe in saying the wrong name after waking up in Mike's arms. "That's why I had to leave. I care too much about him to leave him hanging on to the hope of a future when I can't seem to let go of the past yet."

"Well, shit," she said eloquently, shaking her head and taking a sip of her recently refilled coffee. One was enough for Kurt, but Em could happily live on the stuff, the stronger the better. "Zachary ‘Fuckwad’ Carson. That asshole just continues to fuck you over right from the grave, doesn't he?"

Kurt rolled his eyes. "He's not dead, Em."

"That's only because he never got close enough for me to get my hands on him," she said grimly. "I supervised when he came back for his furniture to make sure he didn't take anything he didn't own, but he was smart enough to keep his distance. Plus, there were witnesses. A couple of teenagers he hired to move his shit. Fuck me if I didn't wish I had my dad's old hunting rifle on me anyway."

He smiled, feeling comforted by her bloodthirsty grumbling. "My dad wanted to strangle him, piss on the body, and light him on fire."

"Ah, I've always loved Burt. He's a keeper."

"Back off, woman. He's married," Kurt told her with a chuckle.

She shrugged and laughed. "Fair enough, but since I'm married too, El and I will just have to get him to adopt us instead. Don't you think Christy and Kathy would love a couple of big sisters?"

"Probably, but I might be driven to eventual sororicide, so we'd better not risk it."

"Ooo, big word!"

Kurt made a kissy face at her. "I read you know."

"So, getting back to the point you're so neatly trying to avoid, do you might be falling in love with this guy?"

Kurt bit his lip, his face going very still. "I think I could be, and I think it's mutual, but the circumstances and the fact that it's been less than a month make me doubt both of those conclusions."

Emily studied him for a minute, then said, "I wouldn't. You're a passionate person, Kurt; you have been for as long as I've known you. You tend to over-think things sometimes when you should trust what you feel."

"You sound like Mercedes," he said, feeling himself flush with pleasure over the realization that she didn't think he was crazy for moving so fast.

"Mercedes is a smart chick. If she and I both think you should go for it, how can you possibly go wrong?"

They laughed together, Kurt squeezing her hand affectionately as they got down to the business of refilling his empty appointment book.

By the end of the day on Tuesday, Kurt had a shiny new assortment of cookware, a cute round hardwood table with matching chairs for the dining room, a few appealing planters and a new bookcase to take up some of the empty spaces in the living room, and a new computer.

His final purchase had been a webcam with video-chat service. He had allowed a technician to set 
everything up for him, taking advantage of the free installation services offered by the store. Not that he could not have figured it out for himself, but why bother if he could get a professional to do it in less than half the time!

Kurt resisted the temptation to power up and search for contacts immediately, forcing himself to put everything neatly away and thoroughly clean the apartment instead. He had bought a very attractive new upholstery fabric to redo Rachel's gift with. He was too tired to begin that project tonight but looked forward to redoing the offensively bright red chair over the next several evenings.

He had learned how to do at-home furniture recovery in his teens, determined to make over the plain, increasingly shabby furniture in the Hummel household into something stylish and beautiful. His dad had not been as open to this idea as Kurt felt that he should be, but he had humored the project anyway. It had seemed to help when his son informed him that in addition to his mother's old sewing machine, he would need a hammer, screwdriver, pliers and a staple-gun. Any project that involved the use of actual tools was automatically rated higher in Burt Hummel's book and Kurt had eventually been given the green light.

Those skills had been used more than once throughout the years. His first apartment had been furnished in cheap thrift store furniture that had eventually been redone over a series of weekends. The homes of more than one cash-strapped friend had been helped along by a touch of Hummel makeover magic. It was fun and rewarding, taking something ugly and making it beautiful.

Resisting the temptation to ignore his fatigue in favor of starting right way, he stood back and looked around the living room. A feeling of satisfaction coursed through him at the pleasantly complete look it now had. It was different, a little unfamiliar still, but attractive and very 'Kurt'. It no longer felt barren with the obvious change from two residents to only one.

He had left the computer powered up and it chimed, indicating a response to one of the 'buddy' invitations he had sent out when the video chat service was installed. He had only sent a few, to his brother, sisters, best friends, and Mike. Happily clicking the button to switch on his video feed, Kurt felt his mouth stretching into a wide grin when the image of Mike's face suddenly filled his monitor.

"Hi," he said, feeling strangely shy.

"Hi." Mike smiled back. "It's good to see you. I know it's only been a couple of days but I really missed your face."

"Me, too. I mean, yours."

He laughed. "Yeah. So what have you been doing today? Gone back to work yet?"

"Tomorrow," Kurt replied, making himself comfortable in the desk chair as he settled in for what he hoped would be a long conversation. "Em booked me three lessons for tomorrow, two each on Thursday and Friday and three on Saturday. Plus, I'm giving a couple of piano lessons on the slow days."

Mike's brows had risen. "That's slow? Is your schedule always like that?"

He shrugged. "Pretty much. I usually try to space them out more evenly, but I need to make up a little of the time I lost, Plus I like the idea of keeping busy. Less time to think that way."

"Do you miss him, now that you're back?"

It was obvious that Mike was reluctant to hear the answer to that question but felt compelled to ask it anyway. Kurt's lips softened into a fond smile. "A little. Not as much as I was afraid of, though. Not
The smile returned. "I'm glad. We had a big rush at the store today. I'd lost track but it's Regionals time again for Mr. Shue's kids and I spent the entire afternoon fitting thirty-some kids for competition shoes. Problem was, of course, that nobody could agree on which ones would be best for the outfits they'd chosen. It made me think of you and the way you used to lay down the law when it came to New Directions fashion."

Kurt laughed. "Hey, it takes talent to find flattering costumes for a dozen different body types and skin tones, then coordinate the proper shoes and accessories to go with them. That's why I play costume-manager so often for our small productions. I'm the only person in our group who can consistently get everybody outfitted on time and under budget."

"After today, I don't doubt it," Mike said ruefully. "It was a mad house. You should have seen them."

They chatted for over an hour before Mike had to call it a night. He was opening the store the next morning and needed to get up early. "I have a business meeting with some guys who are thinking about buying in. Did I tell you we were thinking about expanding the business? Lynne wants to do it and there's a really good location for a second store across town, the building that used to be Meyer's Furniture."

"I wish you good luck, then," Kurt told him lightly, trying to ignore the pang of dismay that filled his heart at the news. If Mike was expanding his business, then he was settling firmly back into Lima. Did that mean that deep-down he was already letting go? "Sounds like we'll both be pretty busy for the next few days. I'm giving a party for my friends on Saturday evening to thank them for what they did with my apartment. Is it okay if I call you after?"

He held his breath, hoping for an affirmative. If Mike was really backing away then he might have weekend plans that he did not want to hurry along to take a phone call from a 'friend'.

"Sure, but four days is a long time," Mike said softly, bringing a sensation of relief to Kurt's heart. He smiled sweetly and added, "I kind of like this new tradition of talking to each other before bed. It gives me sweet dreams."

"Me, too," Kurt told him honestly. "Maybe I should call tomorrow night instead."

Mike nodded, staring at Kurt's face through the video connection as if memorizing every line. "I'll be waiting. I don't care how late."

He could feel the smile curving over his lips. "Good night, Mike. I . . . miss you."

Kurt tensed, realizing how close he had come to saying something else.

Mike smiled back, his dark eyes full of tender emotion as he said softly, "I miss you, too."

Disconnecting the call, Kurt sighed deeply, hugging himself as he sat back in his chair and stared up at the ceiling. He hoped he was not crazy for thinking that Mike knew exactly what he had started to say, or that he had wanted to say it back.
Life Goes On

Kurt had been a bit shocked when Emily told him that she had seven clients who were all but begging for full coaching sessions this week, but he was not about to turn the business down. He offered everything from single hour lessons to intensive three-hour tutorials and while he was not the most expensive teacher in town, his fees were in the median range for voice coaching in New York City. Enough that more casual singers would think twice about paying for more than an hour at a time. The extended sessions were done by special appointment only and he charged a significantly higher fee for them. Paying a higher rate tended to make people more serious about getting full value for every dollar.

Financially speaking, this week would be enough to make up for missing the last two. Seven intensive sessions, three singles, plus two piano lessons which he offered at a significantly lower rate to children, in four days would be a heavy load, but he was looking forward to being busy. He knew that once the new Broadway show, which had learned was called "The Trophy Wife", had been fully cast and was in rehearsals, the special requests would lessen and his schedule would resume a normal pace again.

Kurt was good at what he did, and while he treated everyone in a friendly and professional manner, it meant a great deal to him to be able to bring out the very best in his clients. Kurt had a gift for recognizing strengths and weaknesses in each individual voice and for sharing that knowledge in a way that would allow a singer to overcome bad habits and work toward their goals in a productive way.

He had an instinctively blunt and unflinching honesty that sometimes offended more sensitive clients, but he refused to temper the truth to pad a tender ego. New York theatre was a tough, competitive, dog-eat-dog business. If someone could not handle tough love in a one on one lesson, then they would have almost no chance of surviving the criticism and competition of the real thing. Not everyone who was chasing a dream was destined to catch it, and some of them would be better off doing something else. Just as he had.

It was a testament to just how good a teacher Kurt really was that even the people who did not appreciate his perfectionism kept coming back for more. Perhaps it was because they recognized that while he refused to pander and flatter, he was quick to recognize the difference between lack of effort and lack of understanding, and was always happy to find a new way to explain a thing if he sensed that there was true confusion involved. He was also quick to cheer on a victory or celebrate a breakthrough. A compliment from Kurt Hummel could buoy the mood of even the most discouraged singer, because they could trust that it was genuine. He truly wanted each person to succeed, encouraging anyone to give their best to be proud of what they had done. Kurt genuinely cared and sooner or later, most people realized that.

The week went by in a blur. Kurt kept a strict schedule when he was working. Each morning, he would rise early, put on workout clothes, grab his iPod, and go for a long jog through the city. Exercise calmed and centered him, getting him ready to face the day. (And if that activity now also carried pleasant reminders of his time with Mike? Well, that was just a very nice bonus.) After returning home for a shower, he would get dressed, have breakfast and spend an hour working on projects and catching up on the life he had missed during his two weeks in Ohio.

At ten a.m. he would open up the studio he leased in the theater district – a small but comfortable space with soundproofed walls, a shining and perfectly tuned cabinet piano, simple recording equipment and enough sheet music to fill a small library. There he would allow the long hours to
bleed away in an endless series of warm-ups, evaluations, song selections, helpful critiques, technical tweaking and fine tuning. With a healthy dose of encouragement and praise for a job well done.

Every client who came through the studio expressed great pleasure and relief at having him back, and it seemed to Kurt that each person he spoke to was convinced that he or she was destined to win one of those coveted roles in Broadway's newest musical. Kurt simply put everyone to work and did his best to help them achieve their goals, secretly entertaining himself by making bets with himself over who had the best odds of success.

Between six and eight o'clock, Kurt would be free. After dinner and a chance to unwind with a book, or his chair reupholstery project, he would usually chat with Mercedes and his family until it was time for his nightly call with Mike.

Kurt was a little embarrassed over how eagerly he anticipated those calls. They were quickly becoming the favorite part of his day, and something that he did not want to imagine living without. They talked about anything and everything, though Mike had made no further mention of his plans for the shoe store and Kurt could not bring himself to ask about it.

It was both gratifying and a little shocking how quickly his thoughts and dreams shifted away from the haunting presence of his ex as soon as his life settled into this pleasant routine. Mike had slotted into his heart and life as easily as if he had always been there, but Kurt was afraid to question their future together. He felt even surer now than when he left Lima that he could never settle back into small town life again. The hustle and bustle of big city life satisfied something deep inside his soul that he would never find there.

But if the same was not true of Mike, and Kurt suspected that it was not given that the other man's stories of job-hopping only rarely seemed to involve large cities, then Kurt would not ask him to give up what he had in found in their old home town. Kurt wanted to be happy, but he knew deep down that Mike's happiness mattered to him even more. If this was as much of a relationship as they were destined to have, just an ever-deepening, long distance friendship, then he would take it and force himself to be content.

~*~*~*~*~

On Saturday, Kurt's lessons were over early. He had scheduled everything close together, wanting to spend as much time as possible preparing for the thank-you party he was throwing for his friends that night. Munching on a Korean BBQ Taco from one of his favorite mobile food vendors, Kurt headed home and picked up his truck. Traffic wasn't bad for late afternoon on a Saturday and he was able to pick up wine, beer, sodas, and a variety of snacks and pizzas. Pizza was one of the few selections that everyone in his circle loved.

Emily and Elise dropped by at six to help set everything up. Since he was still not sure who had done what, Kurt had asked his friends to just invite everyone who had helped with the apartment project. Everyone came, sitting on furniture, floor, or each other's laps as the mood took them, welcoming Kurt back with hugs, sympathy, laughter, catch-ups, and frequent roasting of the absent Zachary.

Unusually for him, Kurt had opted to drink tonight. He was at home and safe in the company of people he trusted, so it would not hurt anything to let loose and get a little hammered for once. By ten o'clock, he was full of pizza and craft beer, singing happily along with an impromptu 1970's rock medley that Ian and Connor had started and were currently playing vigorous air-guitar to. He was not quite sure how he had gotten there, but he found himself on the sofa, making only the most glancing contact with the furniture as most of his body lay stretched comfortably across the laps of Misty, Georgia, Dirk and Steve. Steve was smiling sloppily at his boyfriend Ian, stroking Kurt's hair in rhythm with Emily's off-key howling of "Honky Tonk Woman", while Misty bopped her head to
Connor's backup vocals and used Kurt's abs for bongo drums.

A sharp knock sounded and Kurt's head lolled off of Misty's lap to look upside-down at the door. He stared at it for a moment, waiting for whoever was on the other side to show themselves before it occurred to him that he was probably supposed to get up and answer it. "But I'm comfy," he whined to nobody in particular, making his friends laugh.

"You want me to get that?" Emily chuckled, already moving to answer the door.

Kurt smiled sloppily. "I love you."

She laughed. "Ditto, but if this is a neighbor or a cop coming to yell at us for the noise level, you're on your own." She opened the door with a smile that instantly went stiff and unnatural when she saw, "Berry."

Rachel Berry swept right past her with a dazzling smile and commandeered the center of the crowded living room. "Sorry I'm late, everyone! Our first rehearsal went into overtime." Somehow brightening even more, the tiny woman swept her coat off and tossed it dismissively at Em's head without looking at her, clapping her hands as she said, "So, what are we doing?"

Several of Kurt's friends from the Regal theatre crew stared at the famous Broadway star with undisguised awe. They all knew that Kurt and Rachel were friends who had known each other most of their lives, but they had never seen her in person. Rachel had not actually done any of the apartment redecorating herself, merely choosing a couple of items that were shipped in absentia, and writing a check for the rest, dropping by to see the result after most of the work had been done.

Rachel beamed at them, clearly recognizing and drinking in their admiration.

"Uh, we were just having some pizza and doing karaoke," Elise offered, breaking the silence before her irritated-looking spouse could start a rant. "Want a drink?"

Rachel accepted a bottle of beer and a plate of veggie sticks from the buffet that had been set up along the kitchen counter and happily began mingling. She made a point of passing each person and exchanging a few words, as if gifting them with her presence. Finally, she made her way back around to the sofa, where Kurt still lay cradled in his friends' hold, eyes closed and lips smiling as he listened to the singing that had started back up.

He jumped like he'd been electrocuted when Rachel spotted him and squealed, "Kurt!"

Sitting bolt upright, he shifted off of the laps he was monopolizing and braced himself as his old friend threw herself at him, wrapping one arm firmly around his head and squishing him to her chest. "Are you all right? Do you like the apartment? How was Lima? Did Finn ask about me? Are you and Mike still together? Tell me all about it. I want to hear everything!"

"Ra-chel!" he protested, prying his face out of her wonder-bra enhanced cleavage with some effort and taking a deep breath.

"What?" she replied, looking puzzled.

Kurt shook his head, a fond smile broke past his exasperation. Rachel was 27 years old, famous, cosseted, elegantly coiffed, perfectly made-up and dressed to kill in a deceptively casual black layered blouse and jeans that probably cost somewhere in the neighborhood of a thousand dollars, and yet somehow she would always be the arrogant teenager with the colossal voice, horrid taste, huge heart and completely tone-deaf social instinct. He stood and leaned down to give her a sincere and much more natural hug. "It's good to see you. Thanks for coming."
She looked at him closely, her big brown eyes narrowing with suspicion. "Are you drunk?"

He laughed. "By now? Probably. This is what we call a party, Rachel. It involves friends and food and music, and a whole bunch of these," he added, plucking the untouched beer bottle out of her hand and helping himself to a sip.

"Oh, right," she said, laughing a little and likewise taking a drink. "I can't stay long, I have another engagement at eleven, but I had to stop by and see how things were going. I've been wanting to check on . . . Is that my chair?"

She blurted out the question in a shocked and somewhat insulted tone as her gaze fell upon the overstuffed chair, currently occupied by three happily drunk people who were singing along to the track currently ringing out from the karaoke machine that Georgia and Dirk had brought along with them. The red velveteen eyesore was now covered in a very attractive, and decor appropriate, silken-mesh fabric with subtle blue, gray and black stripes. Kurt had finished it last night and he was quite proud of the result.

"It's my chair now," Kurt corrected, tilting his nose in the air. Rachel backhanded him hard on the gut, which unexpectedly activated the greasy pizza and foamy beer and drew forth a hearty belch that startled them both. Kurt's already rosy cheeks blushed even brighter. "Um, 'scuse me?"

The shocked look on Rachel's face made Emily burst out laughing, which in turn set off Kurt. He broke into giggles, which proved contagious and soon the entire room was drowning in laughter. Rachel's annoyance could not hold out against the jolly mood and she also began to laugh, stepping forward to give her old friend another fond embrace.

"I'm happy you like the chair," she said, shaking her head and gazing up into his face as the laughter died away, arms still encircling his waist. "And I'm even happier that you're feeling better. Can we talk for a few minutes?"

Kurt nodded and led her into his bedroom, the only part of the apartment not stuffed with cheerfully noisy humans. They sat down on the bed, holding hands as they faced each other. Rachel studied his face for a few seconds. Kurt returned her serious gaze. "I'm okay, Rachel. I wasn't when I left, and I was only kind of sort of when I came back, but I'm okay."

She seemed to understand the slightly confused sentence, squeezing his hands tightly. "I'm glad. It broke my heart when I heard about you and Zach, and what he did to you. I'm not sure I ever told you, but that's why I broke up with Dennis."

Dennis Tohler had been husband #1, a dashingly handsome leading man whom Rachel had met during her senior year in college. Rachel had surprised many by not going straight for New York, instead enrolling in The University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, but she had known what she was doing. CCM was closer to home, less expensive to attend during a time when she had discovered that her fathers were struggling a bit, and it offered one of the most comprehensive performing arts programs in the country. She had transferred to the Tisch School of the Arts in her Junior year, sharing classes with Kurt for a few months prior to graduation and the beginning of her ascent to stardom. She and Dennis had run away to get married, only to break up again less than a year later.

"I had no idea he cheated on you," Kurt said quietly. "You never said anything."

Rachel sighed. "I didn’t want to admit it, even to my closest friend. He was using my talent to bolster his ambition, but he never really loved me. I found him making out backstage with a chorus girl. Apparently one of many."
Kurt groaned and flopped back on his bed, pulling Rachel down next to him. "Doesn't anybody stay faithful anymore? You got cheated on. I got cheated on. Mike got cheated on. Even Finn, if you count high school."

A regretful look flickered over her face. "I don't know why some people are always loyal and others just can't be," she said quietly, settling her head on his shoulder and resting her hand over his heart. "Or why some of us are meant for home and family, while others of us are destined for fame and loneliness."

"Are you lonely, Rachel?" he asked, pressing his cheek to her pleasantly floral-scented hair.

"Sometimes," she admitted. "Not always. And the whole world isn't to blame for what our exes did. Troy never cheated on me, after all. He was sweet and loyal and kind. We just weren't meant for each other."

Kurt could not disagree with that. Troy Leibowitz had been husband #2, a quiet, handsome, soft-spoken man whom Kurt had liked upon being introduced to him, but had struggled to remember an hour after they had parted. It had been like that every time they met. He had even gone to their wedding, but somehow even now he tended to think of them as Rachel and . . .

"Troy wanted the picket fence. The kids, the dog, the things I thought I wanted as a little girl, that just don't fit right anymore. I would be great as somebody's favorite aunt, showing up with presents and taking them on outings a few times a year, but I think I would be miserable being a full-time wife and mother." She sighed softly. "That's why I ultimately stopped chasing Finn. He tried to be okay with playing second fiddle to my ambitions, but he really wanted to settle down and I finally realized that I didn't. Strange how you can turn out to be more like a parent you never really knew than the parents who raised you, isn't it?"

"You're not like Ms. Corcoran," he murmured. "You'd never take the money and run, leaving your kid with nothing but questions, then trying to force yourself back into her life for just a few weeks at a time. If I was your dad, I'd let you visit you whenever you wanted."

Rachel laughed lightly. "That doesn't make any sense, Kurt." Hitching herself up on one elbow, she looked down at her sleepy companion, her smile tender and warm.

Kurt could barely keep his eyes open, but he forced them to hold her gaze. This was the Rachel that most people never saw and he always felt happy when he got a visit from her. "I do want kids someday, Rachel," he found himself confessing. A vague sense of alarm slid over him as he spoke. He had never told anyone that before, not even his family. Not even Mike. "I dunno if I'll ever be lucky enough to have that but I want to be somebody's dad."

Rachel stroked his cheek. "Somehow, that doesn't surprise me. You'd be a great father, Kurt. As good as any of ours. Any kid would be lucky to have you." A thoughtful expression came into her eyes that Kurt could not interpret. He decided it was nothing when she abruptly changed the subject, hauling his reluctant body into a sitting position as she said with renewed cheer, "That's enough of the heavy stuff. I don't have much time and I want to hear all about you and Mike!"

Confused by the chance of topic, but always willing to embrace the subject of Mike, Kurt obeyed her request, chattering with unknowingly revealing enthusiasm until it was time for Rachel to leave.

The party broke up just after midnight. Kurt had pulled out of his alcohol-induced weariness as he spoke with Rachel and had rejoined his other friends for a few rounds of singing and some wild dance moves that would have had Mike convulsing with laughter. He saw each of his guests out as they began to leave, hugging each person tightly and thanking them individually for all they had
done.

By the time the apartment was quiet again, Kurt was exhausted. The place was a mess but he wasn't working tomorrow and decided that he could deal with it after a good night's sleep. He looked at his watch, wondering if Mike had meant it when he said he'd wait for their nightly call, no matter how late it was.

Deciding that he wasn't up for a video conference, Kurt shuffled into his room and dragged off his clothing, leaving it in a pile on the carpet. What the hell, one more thing to clean up tomorrow.

Taking a moment to visit the bathroom and brush the grungy, furry feeling off his teeth, he clicked off the lights and slithered between the soft sheets of his new bed. Closing his eyes, he picked up the phone and hit the speed-dial for Mike, his fingers knowing the correct buttons by heart.

The phone rang twice and then Mike's smiling voice said, "Hey, you. I was wondering if you'd changed your mind about calling tonight."

"Huh, uh," he mumbled, moving his face to pull his mouth off the pillow. "Party just ended."

He yawned and Mike chuckled. "Must have been a good party."

"It was nice. Ever'body came. Even Rachel. We had food and music and everybody laughed a lot." He shifted a little more. "I had beer."

Amusement filling every word, Mike replied, "I thought you might have. This isn't going to be a very long conversation, is it?"

Kurt grunted. "I think I might be a li'l drunk."

"Really?" Mike replied with mock surprise.

"Yeah. I wish you were here. My bed's all cold and you're nice'n warm." Tugging his pillow down against his chest so he could hug it, Kurt mumbled, "I wanna cuddle you."

A tender note filled Mike's voice. "I'd like that. You sound like you're about to fall asleep. Should I hang up?"

"No," he protested. "Sing me to sleep."

"You know I'm not really much of a singer."

Kurt snuffled discontentedly, hugging the pillow harder. "Please?"

A soft sigh came over the line. "Why do I have a feeling I'll never be able to resist you?"

Kurt smiled. "Because you're a very smart man?"

Laughter sounded, warm and intimate, in Kurt's ear and then Mike's quiet tenor began to sing the lyrics to the old Johnny Mercer standard, "Dream." He was a little uncertain on some of the notes, but the sweet sincerity in his voice was more than enough for Kurt.

Dream, when you're feeling blue
Dream, that's the thing to do
Just, watch the smoke rings rise in the air
You'll find your share of memories there
So dream, when the day is through
Dream, and they might come true
Things, never are as bad as they seem
So dream, dream, dream

"How's that?" Mike whispered.

Just on this side of sleep, Kurt hummed, "Mmm, nice." A moment passed and he spoke again, "Mike?"

"Yes."

"Can stuff you say when you're drunk be held against you?"

He laughed a little. "Not sure about some people, but I won't. You can tell me anything you want to, Kurt."

"Okay." There was a few seconds of silence, then Kurt whispered, "I love you."

A small gasp sounded from Mike's side but before he could form a reply, Kurt lost his battle to stay awake.
The only window inside Kurt's east-facing apartment just happened to be in his bedroom. Most of the time, he enjoyed the soft natural light as the first rays of sunlight signaled the start of a new day. Today was not one of those times.

Kurt grunted and shifted, trying to escape the light streaming brightly across his bed, scorching its way through his eyelids and seeming to burn a hole straight into his throbbing brain. He tried hiding beneath the covers and throwing a pillow at the glass panes that were so rudely allowing the sun access. How could he have forgotten to close the curtain last night?

"Stop doing this to me," he moaned. "I just want to sleep."

Not surprisingly, the bright and cloudless spring day continued to ignore his wishes.

Kurt grumbled a bitter invective, finally giving up on avoiding the light and dragging the blanket off his face as he rolled onto his back, covering his eyes with his forearm instead.

It could be worse. His head was killing him but his stomach was calm, and he still remembered the party just fine. It had simply been a very long time since he'd last allowed himself to get drunk. He had forgotten the cost of pounding headache and general lethargy that came with it. He knew he should get up and get some water, but all he really wanted to do was just go back to sleep. All it would take was a quick pull of the cord that operated his drapes. Nice, thick, dark-green drapes, which would almost totally block the irritating sunlight . . . and which would unfortunately require him to move several feet away from the bed to reach them.

Maybe if he just closed his eyes and ignored it, he could convince himself that the increasingly bright light wasn't there. He lay still for a few minutes, doing his best. It was almost working, but then he huffed in complete annoyance as he realized that he needed to pee. And of course, now that he was thinking about it, the urge was getting worse.

"Oh, fine," he grumbled, rolling out of bed and stomping his way into the bathroom. A few minutes later, pausing to switch the drapes closed, Kurt collapsed back onto the mattress with a grateful grunt. Mission accomplished. Back to sleep!

Unfortunately, as he lay in the darkness waiting for the asprin he had taken to soothe away his headache, Kurt now realized he was wide awake. Damn it. He stayed in bed anyway. Simple rest was good too. Rest did not have to involve movement.

Kurt would have happily have given his brain the morning off as well, but he could not seem to get the message through. It churned happily along, providing a mental slide-show of the party and everything that came after it. Including, suddenly, his last conversation with Mike.

"Holy crap! I told him!" Kurt blurted, abruptly sitting up in bed as last night's final memory came into focus. One of the most important declarations that anyone could ever make to another person, and he had chosen to abandon his certainty that three weeks was too soon to reveal himself, and imparted his feelings via a drunken, half-asleep ramble. He groaned, flopping back into his pillows and covering his face with both hands. "Ooooh, what have I done?"
Mike had never seen him drunk, even in high school. He was pretty sure they had never run into each other during the single instance of Kurt being been drunk on school property, and he had only seen Mike liquored up once, during a teenage house party thrown by Rachel Berry. At that time, Kurt had not been drinking because he was too caught up in trying to impress the ever-oblivious Blaine Anderson. For all Mike knew, Kurt might just be one of those cheerful, obnoxious type of drunks who would declare his undying devotion to a house-plant. What if Mike had just laughed off his drunken words as being more about booze and drowsiness than any real feeling?

Kurt opened his eyes, hands sliding back to thread through his hair, absently massaging his scalp when his head started throbbing again with the pressure of his thoughts. "But what if he did take me seriously?" he murmured.

He began to chew his bottom lip, allowing his arms to flop loosely down to his sides as he stared up at the ceiling. There was a possibility that they were close enough by now that Mike would have realized that he meant it. After all, he had nearly said it one other time this week.

Kurt allowed his thoughts to drift back to the wonderful night they had spent together, remembering how sweet and passionate and fun it had been. There had been none of the usual self-consciousness of becoming first time lovers. Instead, the two of them had been incredibly comfortable together, sharing themselves freely and exploring each other tenderly.

He rolled onto his side, remembering how sweet Mike had been about giving him space to explore his mixed-up feelings, willing to let Kurt have whatever he needed. Surely that spoke of love louder than anything else could have. Mike had been as wonderful and graceful in his rejection, and Kurt's heart hurt to realize that in a sense that was exactly what it had been, as he had been in his gentle pursuit.

Sighing softly, a wistful smile tilted Kurt's lips as he remembered the way Mike had kissed him goodbye on the last night they had seen each other. He had not been the least bit shy over having an audience and he had said that he wanted to show Kurt how he really felt. It was difficult to deny that there had been love in that beautiful, passionate gesture.

While Mike had never actually spoken it out loud, that proved nothing. Kurt's father, who had always had a protectively sharp eye when it came to the way other people reacted to his gay only son, had been hearteningly convinced that Mike was in love with him. And given the circumstances, perhaps he had simply been waiting for Kurt to speak first.

So now he had. The question was, would Mike be willing to return that sentiment? Or - terrible thought - had he already done so and Kurt had simply missed it by falling asleep! He did not know what to do. He had made the first move, whether he had intended to do so or not. Wouldn't the next one be Mike's?

Kurt’s brow furrowed, nose wrinkling in thought as he weighed the pros and cons of biding his time. Finally, he shook his head. "This isn't a chess match, you idiot," he mumbled. There were no move-countermove rules when it came to love. Sometimes one player had to just be bold enough to step up and take a chance, or as many chances as were needed.

He hitched himself up in the bed and scooted against the pillows. A few minutes of frantic searching finally located his phone hiding beneath the covers, a few inches to the right of his knee. He must have still been holding it when he fell asleep. "Be brave, Kurt," he whispered, taking a deep breath and hitting the redial button before he could change his mind.

The phone rang a few times while Kurt held his breath, struggling not to lose his nerve. Finally, it picked up and he exhaled in audible relief when he heard Mike's sleepy voice say, "Kurt?"
"Mike! I'm so glad you picked up," he blurted, then went silent, suddenly not sure what to say.

After a few seconds, in which he could hear breathing and some rustling and creaking on the other end, Mike asked, "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

It hit Kurt that it was barely 7 am on a Sunday morning. "I'm fine. A little hung over. Did I wake you?"

"Yeah," he replied honestly, "but it's okay. What's going on?"

"I wanted to know if, I mean did I . . . did you . . . do you remember me saying anything unusual last night?" He had been hit by a sudden horrific notion that perhaps he had only dreamed that he had actually spoken those three all-important words.

Sounding uncertain, voice a bit stiff as though he were bracing himself for bad news, Mike said, "You, well, you might have said that you . . . loved me?"

"Yeah. And, um, did you say anything back?"

"I didn't," he admitted.

"Oh."

Hastily, Mike added, "I didn't have time. You kind of shocked me, and you'd no sooner said the words than you started snoring into the phone."

Kurt winced. "Seriously? Was it bad?"

A warm little chuckle met his ear. "Well, let's just say that you have no business mocking your father ever again."

Face blushing what he was sure must be a brilliant shade of mortified scarlet, Kurt said in a small voice, "I'm so sorry."

Mike hesitated, then ventured, "About which part?"

"The electric saw impersonation," he said, managing to laugh a little. Then he gathered his courage again and said, "As for the other, well, that's why I called. I don't know if it was too soon, or too much, or maybe just a really bad idea putting you on the spot this way, but I needed you to know that I meant what I said."

Mike swallowed so hard that Kurt could hear it over the phone. "You really . . .?"

"I love you," he said quickly. Bracing himself, Kurt decided to put all his cards on the table. "More than that. I'm in love with you, Mike. I don't know exactly when it happened, but I do know why. It's because you're amazing. You're gentle and warm and sweet and funny. You're honest about your feelings, and you make me feel like I can be myself around you. Whenever we're together, even if it's just talking on the phone like this, I feel . . . whole. More complete that I think I've ever felt with anyone before."

Kurt had not intended to say so much all at once, but he could not stop the words from spilling out. Somewhere during his speech, he was aware that Mike had started sniffing and the sound of hitching breaths brought tears to his own eyes.

"Please, say something," he begged.
A breathless, desperate sounding laugh gasped through the connection. "Kurt . . . God, if I ever meet your ex-boyfriend, I don't know if I'm going to want to murder him for hurting you, or hug him breathless for being stupid enough to push you away."

This sounded promising! "So then, you . . ."

Mike's voice cracked as he interrupted, "Love you. I do, Kurt, so much. I know we've only been together for little while, and this is probably completely crazy, but you're everything I've ever wanted."

Kurt's tears were falling too but he was grinning ear to ear. "Why the hell do you have to be 600 miles away right now, when I want to kiss you so badly?"

"I know!" Mike agreed with a small laugh. "You have no idea how badly I want to kiss you, and touch you, and help you break in that new bed you've been taunting me with for the past seven days."

Kurt's body flushed hot at the suggestion, but he objected, "I have not! I only mentioned this bed one time and all I said was that it was really comfortable."

"You may have only mentioned it once, but you've called me from there three times, four if you count right now. Do you know what it does to me to imagine you lying there all alone, with me so far away?"

"You could fix that, you know. They have these wonderful inventions called airplanes nowadays. Not to mention cars, or even trains. You should check them out some time," Kurt teased. "I promise you'll receive a very warm welcome."

Mike sighed regretfully. "I'm more tempted than you know to take you up on that, but unfortunately I can't leave right now. On the plus side, everything should be finalized in about a month and I'll be free, but until then we're going to be kind of stuck with a long-distance love affair."

Kurt felt a little thrill shiver over his body at the way Mike was unable to resist slipping the 'L' word into the conversation again. Then he frowned, "Wait, what's going to be finalized?" He sat up straight, cautious excitement filling his voice. "Are you coming to New York?"

"Didn't I tell you? I was sure I mentioned that we were expanding the store."

"Well, yes, you did but you didn't say anything about leaving Ohio. I thought when you said that you were buying another location that you were settling back in for good. I," he swallowed, trying not to let the grief he'd felt over the idea show in his voice as he admitted, "I've been trying to figure out how to let you go, so you could have the small-town life that I thought you wanted."

A gasp and a groan sounded from Mike. "No! That wasn't it at all. Shit, I wanted this to be a surprise. It didn't even occur to me that you would take it another way." He paused and Kurt held his breath against a rising tide of excitement and hope. "Lynne and I decided to take on a couple of business partners. We've actually been working on it since early February, but I didn't have any reason to push until this past month. My brother-in-law George's brother and cousin are interested in buying into the business and so we're forming a limited partnership. Mercedes' fiancée David and my friend Matt have been helping us sort out the legal stuff."

"Mercedes knew about this?" Kurt interrupted. "Damn it, she didn't say a word when I talked to her! And how did Matt get involved in this? Didn't you say he was a criminal attorney?"

Mike laughed at his outrage. "Easy, tiger. Mercedes didn't know until after the New Directions
reunion picnic and I begged her not to say anything. As for Matt, he is, but he's always been kind enough to give me free advice if I needed any. In this case, to point me in the direction of a good corporate attorney. The fact that David Wainwright is engaged to Mercedes was just good luck."

Allowing himself to be mollified, Kurt got back to the important part. "So, how close are you to finishing the deal? Are you giving up Chang's Shoes entirely? That would be kind of a shame after all the work you’ve put into it."

"Not for a few weeks, I've agreed to keep working at the store until they’re ready to open the second location, but when it's all said and done, Lynne and George will be the controlling partners and run the main store, while George’s relatives handle the second location and become junior partners. I've asked to be bought out of my share, except for a minor stake that will give me a small income. Between that, the inheritance money I got from my parents, and some savings I've put together over the years, I should be fine in New York for several months even if I don't find a job right away."

A wave of pure elation swept over Kurt. He felt like singing, dancing, shouting, crying, or just jumping up and down on the bed like a kid. "Then you really are moving here, and we'll be able to see each other every day?"

"That's the plan, I mean, assuming you want me."

"Of course, I do!"

Kurt could all but hear Mike's huge grin as he said, "In that case, do me a huge favor and scout around to see if you can find a promising apartment for me. I'll want to start looking for work right away and that'll be a lot easier if I have a legitimate New York address."

"You . . . don't want to live with me?" Kurt blurted, surprised and a little hurt. He had thought for sure that Mike was leading up just that.

The other man hesitated. "Uh, well, eventually. I just figured it might be a little soon for that. I didn't want to presume, and I certainly don't want to wear out my welcome before you even get a chance to get used to having me around full-time."

Kurt opened his mouth to protest, when suddenly a flashback went through his mind of his sixteen-year-old self's grand plan to get Finn Hudson to move in and share his room, ultimately falling in love with him. He winced, remembering the spectacularly ugly way that plan had blown up in his face.

Mike was not used to living with another person, and Kurt was eager to replace the bad memories of Zachary with good ones. Plus, if he were being completely honest with himself, Kurt knew that he could be a little controlling sometimes. If they did not want to end up fighting like cats and dogs and ruining this relationship before it truly got started, they could not afford to skip all the baby steps.

"You're right, I'm sorry," he said. "I'll be enough just to have you in the same city where I can spend time with you. I'll look around and see if I can find someplace that won't break the bank."

"Thank you," he said, sounding so sincere that Kurt found his initial disappointment ebbling away, realizing how badly Mike wanted to make this work. It was probably for the best that one of them was a logical thinker, because thinking with his heart was something Kurt had never been able to grow out of.

Making himself more comfortable, Kurt tucked the blankets back over his legs and snuggled down. His headache was fading to a dull roar and he felt happy enough to burst. "So, let's get back to that
part where you're completely amazing and I'm all you've ever wanted, shall we?"

Mike's quiet laughter tickled his eardrum and the conversation quickly drifted into the intimate nonsense of two people in love.
Kurt Hummel was a man on a mission. The confirmation of Mike's plans, and more importantly of their mutual love for one another, had lit a fire inside of him. Every morning he went to work, finding a sense of renewed joy in his profession that proved as beneficial to his clients as to himself. And every day, both at lunch time and in the evenings, he was scouring housing ads in search of the perfect apartment for his new boyfriend.

It obviously had to be clean, decently maintained, and not in a neighborhood that would be likely to get Mike mugged before he could even fully move in. Kurt also kept his search close to home because he knew himself too well to believe that he could have Mike right there in the same city and not want to see him every day.

The searching also considered atmosphere. Painting and decorating could easily remake the look of a place, as he had recently been reminded, but wherever Mike lived needed to be both roomy enough and insulated enough from its neighbors that he could dance or use his kick-boxing equipment without causing too many complaints. At the same time, it could not be so large that Mike would burn through his entire savings in just a few months.

Unfortunately, after searching for nearly four weeks with no success, Kurt had to concede that he was being too picky. Mike had provided an approximate range of how much money he thought he could afford and Kurt had done his best to stay within that budget, but it just didn't leave a whole lot of wiggle room.

He did not know if Mike's price-range was the most he could afford, or if he simply had not reckoned with how expensive New York was in doing his estimate, and he was reluctant to ask. Mike was already under a lot of stress trying to get the deal for Chang's Shoes finalized, worrying about finding a new job, putting his house up for sale, organizing a move, and helping his sister and her husband conduct interviews for someone to take his place. Not to mention the emotional stress of long-distance, a feeling Kurt understood all too well since he shared it in full measure. He did not want to pressure Mike about money on top of everything else.

He had noticed the strain beginning to show in visible lines around Mike's mouth and eyes, and the absence of his usual easy laughter. They spoke most evenings, either by video chat or telephone, and Kurt did his best to divert Mike with funny stories about his clients and friends. He also frequently sang to him. Mike had made no secret of how much he enjoyed listening to Kurt’s voice, so on nights when he sensed that his lover was feeling particularly stressed, Kurt found himself performing miniature concerts for one. He now wanted very badly to find the perfect apartment and be able to give Mike one less thing to worry about.

Kurt's own life had become much busier as the spring days stretched longer. He was finally over the instinctive expectation of seeing Zachary when he came home from work, or first waking up in the morning. Last night he had even managed to fix a small pan of spinach lasagna for himself without getting teary, though he had not found much appetite for the meal when it was finally laid out on his plate. Still, he was sure that the attempt had counted as progress.

He was also quite proud of the fact that four of the supporting roles in Rachel's new Broadway show had been won by his own clients. Repeat business and good word of mouth were the backbone of his profession and due to this unexpected level of success, Kurt found himself doing extremely well in that regard.

Almost too well, in fact. He had turned down directorship of the Regal's latest musical, afraid that if
he did not, he might fall right back into the trap of filling his hours so full that he forgot to pay enough attention to the other important things in his life. For while he had accepted that he was not to blame for his ex’s infidelity, he knew in his heart that his own lack of attention had allowed the problem to fester. There was no way that Zach could have cheated on him so often, for so long, if Kurt had not been living with his head in the sand. He was determined that he would not make the mistake of taking his relationships for granted again.

With that in mind, Kurt had accepted an invitation. Rachel's new show was due to open a week from Tuesday and Kurt had been invited to attend the premiere performance and after-party as his friend's date. He had been surprised and delighted to accept, even if he did know that Rachel had chosen him less for their shared friendship than because he was an ideal escort.

There was no shortage of eligible candidates for the honor of escorting Miss Rachel Berry, especially since the black-tie cocktail party was sure to be a media event. Kurt, however, had a few things that those other prospects did not. He had no romantic aspirations toward the leading lady. He was not looking to climb the social ladder at her expense. He handled vapid questions like a pro. And Kurt dressed well and photographed beautifully. Which, of course, would only make Rachel look even better!

Kurt did not mind that he was playing the part of trophy boyfriend for a night. He and Mike had shared a good laugh over the idea when Kurt had playfully asked if he was jealous and Mike had agreed that he was indeed jealous . . . of Rachel.

On the Sunday morning before the show, Kurt was heading to the parking garage to pick up his truck for an appointment across town to get a tux fitting ahead of the big night. Afterward, he was planning to expand his apartment search through the Burroughs. There was no other choice. Mike would be ready to move soon, and he had to have somewhere to call home.

Just as he unlocked the vehicle, newly fitted with a set of New York license plates, Kurt heard himself being hailed. He turned to see Lou Masters just coming off a night shift, judging by the fact that although he was still in uniform, he had called out, "Kurt!" instead of ‘Mr. Hummel’.

"Hi, Lou," he returned with a smile. "How did you get stuck with Saturday night guard duty? Piss off the boss?"

Lou's booming laugh echoed through the large space. His wife Rita was the building manager, and thus also in charge of shift assignments. "Lucky for me, no. I volunteered to fill in this weekend while Rick is out of town. What are you up to on this fine spring day?"

"Just getting a little tailoring done, then heading out to do some apartment hunting." Seeing the concerned look that flashed in his friend's eyes, he said, "Don't worry, it's not for me. It's for, um . . . Well, it's for my boyfriend."

Lou's graying eyebrows furrowed. "You're not helping out that Carson fellow!"

"Oh, no! Zach and I are finished," Kurt corrected hastily. Lou and Rita had taken an almost parental interest in him when he had first moved into the building. He had never figured out why, but something about him tended to make older people protective and doting of him.

Lou's features relaxed and his dark eyes lit up with interest. "You've met somebody new then? Congratulations!"

Kurt could not stop the grin that instantly formed. "Well, not exactly new. More like, I reevaluated an old friendship based on new information. He and I went to high school together and I ran into him
again when I was visiting home."

"And he’s already moving to The City to be closer to you? You must have made quite an impression
on that boy!" Lou teased, his bright laughter ringing out like bells and making Kurt blush. "Good for
you."

"Thank you!" Kurt said with a grin. "I'll introduce you when he comes to town. That will probably
happen pretty soon and is the reason for the apartment hunting."

A thoughtful expression crossed Lou's broad face. "I don't suppose he's looking for a Studio. We
have one here in the building that's going to be ready for new occupancy in a couple of weeks. Miss
Sellwood is moving back to Washington. Rita was going to put out the listing tomorrow, but I'm sure
she'd be happy to give your friend first look if you think he'd be interested. Assuming you don't mind
putting yourself down as a reference."

Kurt's heart fluttered. He knew the tenant in question only vaguely, he was pretty sure she lived on
the 2nd floor, and he had been unaware of any potential vacancies in his own building. This was just
too good to be true, like fate was stepping in to hand him a consolation prize for all its earlier kicking
around.

"I'd be happy to!" He and Mike had both been thinking more along the lines of a one-bedroom, but if
Mike was willing to compromise then this could be better than either of them had hoped. "I'll talk to
him about it tonight. Can you tell me how much you're asking for the place?"

Lou gave him a price and Kurt nodded. It was on the higher end of Mike's budget, and he might balk
at paying so much for such a small apartment, but Kurt hoped that the proximity to himself would be
enough to sway him. Or, and Kurt felt just a little bit guilty for nursing this particular hope, maybe
Mike would simply change his mind and decide that moving in with him was a sensible idea.

"Thanks a lot, Lou. I really appreciate this!" he said, impulsively giving the older man a hug that
earned him a chuckle and a pat on the back.

"Glad I could help," he said. "I'll tell Rita we've got a good prospect and get her to hold off on listing
the place until middle of next week. That be enough time for your friend to make up his mind?"

"It should be. Thank you again."

Lou just smiled and waved a nonchalant hand as he continued toward the lobby door and went
inside. Kurt briefly considered going back up to his apartment, but he remembered that Mike would
be showing a couple of potential buyers his Lima house today. Kurt had been surprised that he had
elected to sell, given his history with the place and the recent renovations, but Mike had admitted that
he had never felt quite at home there after his parents were gone.

Kurt got in his truck and then debated for a solid five minutes before deciding that Mike probably
wouldn't be showing his house quite this early, and he really needed to know what was going on.
Ignoring the fact that he really just wanted an excuse to talk to him, Kurt dialed. The moment the
connection was picked up he said, "Hi, you busy? I have good news! Or, at least I hope it's good
news."

Mike told him, "I'm just waiting on my Real Estate lady. That family who was here to look at my
house last week wants another run-through. My agent thinks they're going to make a firm offer but
they want one more tour before they make up their mind. So, I don't have long, but go ahead and tell
me your news."
"Well, first of all I hope you get a really great offer on the house. And the timing is fantastic because I just found out that there's an apartment coming up for rent in my building. It's only a studio, but it's within your price range. I haven't actually seen the place myself yet, but I'm sure it's in good condition." Kurt was vaguely aware that he was talking too fast, but he could not seem to slow down now that he'd gotten started. "I'm sorry there won't be as much space as you're used to. Your bedroom set, and your sofa, and your magic cabinet will definitely fit, and I'm sure you could get a few other things, like your entertainment center and your kickboxing bag, but I'm not sure how you'll feel about the flooring. Most of the smaller apartments in this building are already carpeted, except for the kitchen space. You could always come over to my place if you want to dance, though."

He winced, realizing how stupid that last part must have sounded when Mike burst out laughing. "Kurt, when I said I didn't have long to talk I didn't mean you needed to form your entire sales pitch in less than thirty seconds!"

"Sorry," he said with a laugh. He took a deep breath and forced himself to relax a little. "What do you think, though? The apartment hasn't been listed so there's no competition for it yet. I'm friends with the building manager and her husband, and Lou said they could probably keep the availability quiet for a few days until I had a chance to talk to you."

"It definitely sounds good," Mike said cautiously. "I'd rather not make a decision until you can look at it, though. I don't have any problem living in a studio. It wouldn't be the first time and most of the furniture here belonged to my parents. I can give Lynne and George first pick of anything I don't want to keep, and just store or sell the rest of it."

Kurt was grinning. "So, it's a definite maybe?"

"Yes, it is. I'll miss my little dance studio, but I never expected to have everything the same and I've lived on way less. This sounds like a good bet, and the location is definitely better than I hoped for."

"Me too," Kurt replied, allowing a suggestive note to creep into his voice as he continued, "And you know, if your bed doesn't fit in that tiny little apartment, I can always lend you mine."

"I may have to take you up on that. I understand it is awfully comfortable," Mike teased back. "Is it true that it comes with its very own bed-warmer?"

Kurt lowered his voice. "I guess you'll just have to come over some night and find out for yourself."

"Why, Mr. Hummel! Are you propositioning me?"

"It's been weeks, Mike. You're damned right I am."

They laughed together, but there was a pleasant undercurrent of sexual tension that told them both that they were not entirely joking. Kurt knew that if he had Mike within his sight right this moment, he would be all over him.

There was a chiming sound on the other end of the line and Mike groaned. "Shit, it's the doorbell. That woman has horrible timing, but I need to go. Can we pick this up tonight?"

"Definitely, and I'll see if I can get some more information on the apartment. Good luck with your sale!"

"Thanks. I love you, Kurt," he said hastily.

Kurt beamed, feeling that he would never grow tired of hearing, or saying, those words. "I love you, too. Bye."
"Bye."

The call disconnected and Kurt started his truck. He still needed to go to that suit fitting, which would probably last until around noon, but now that apartment hunting had been taken off the scheduled, he realized that his day was otherwise free. Maybe he would treat himself to a movie. He was suddenly in the mood for a nice, fluffy, romantic comedy.
Kurt finished tying the black silk tie into a perfect bow around his throat, smoothing the edges of his starched white collar behind it. He surveyed his image carefully in the mirror, straightening the cummerbund and looking his outfit over for wrinkles, stray threads or other minor imperfections. Finding none, he disengaged the matching black jacket from its hanger and slipped it on, fastening the top button and checking himself over one last time.

Classic black and white looked good on everybody, and tonight was about being Rachel’s handsome, potentially straight for those who didn’t know any better, and reasonably nondescript date. An attractive accessory that would make Rachel stand out. She had told him her dress was pink, (God, let it not be some noxious Pepto Bismol nightmare!) and nothing looked classier against a pink gown than a man in a well fitted black suit.

Realizing that he would likely be photographed a great deal, Kurt tucked a stray hair into place – part of him wondering how on earth the strand had dared to part from its fellows after the absurd amount of gel and hairspray he had applied – and flashed a couple of experimental smiles at his reflection. Usually he favored a calm, closed-mouth smile when there were cameras around. Just a tilt of the lips that would keep his features smooth and his slightly too-small teeth hidden from view. He knew, however, that Rachel Berry would be aiming her biggest, brightest, toothiest grin at every single person they met and that he would look bored and churlish in comparison if he did not make some effort.

The perfect charming escort, his role for this evening, would be expected to beam with happiness and burst with pride over his date. Even if the show proved to be a bigger bomb than the Manhattan Project. Not that Kurt thought it would, he had heard a lot of good things about it, but it was always best to be prepared. So, if a big, bright smile was what people wanted, then that's what they would get. Even though he did not feel much like smiling tonight.

Kurt's evening video call with Mike on Sunday night had been strange. He had been vague when Kurt asked how the morning's house showing had gone, only saying that the family had gone with a different property, but that his realtor thought there was another good potential buyer. Kurt had been disappointed that his hopes of a quick sale had been dashed, but he had expected Mike to be cheered up when he reported that Miss Sellwood had been happy to allow him a look inside her apartment once he knew he had a friend interested in renting it. The place was neat, well-maintained, and not claustrophobically small. Perfect for Mike’s needs, only instead of sounding excited by this, Mike had just grunted a quick, "Sounds good. Go ahead and send me the info," and then abruptly said that he had to go.

To Kurt's dismay, that was the last time they had spoken. Mike had been unavailable on Monday, missing their usual bedtime chat, and had not called back today. After nearly 48 hours of silence, Kurt's emotions were shifting between concern and annoyance, but he had to shake it off for this evening. Frown lines and grimly pursed lips would not do for a Broadway gala, so he took a deep breath and let it out slowly, forcing his rigid shoulders to relax and his facial muscles to unclench.

Opening his eyes in a wide, guileless expression that would have done Emma Pillsbury proud, he smiled brightly and gushed at his reflection, "Why, hello! It's so nice to see you! Wasn't Rachel simply amazing tonight? I haven't seen such a great show in . . . I don't know how long! What did you think?"

Kurt grimaced. Okay, definite overkill. He sounded like a sycophant and looked completely deranged, as if he was about to pull a Tony Award out of his jacket and beat someone with it. Let’s
see... Blinking a few times, he thought back to his first dinner date with Mike, which as he had hoped, immediately produced bright eyes and an irresistible urge to smile. Addressing his happy reflection, he practiced, "Did you enjoy the show? Wasn't the cast wonderful? I can hardly wait to see it again!"

Yes, that was much, much better.

Kurt's phone buzzed and he hurriedly pulled it from his pocket, hoping it might be Mike. Instead it was a local number. "Kurt Hummel," he responded, gathering his wallet, keys and a tastefully lavish bouquet of pink tea roses and white Peruvian lilies he had bought for Rachel, as he listened to the voice of the front desk clerk telling him that his car had arrived. "Great! I'll be right down."

He grinned. One of the perks of being the star's date was traveling in style for the grand entrance. Putting away his worries, Kurt locked up and headed downstairs, nodding rather smugly to the desk clerk and doorman as he headed past them to the black stretch limo that was waiting out front.

Rachel was waiting inside the car, wearing a bright smile. Kurt gave her a kiss hello and passed her the bouquet, pleased to see that it looked wonderful against the gorgeous powder-pink dress she wore.

He had been thoroughly briefed by his friend on what to expect this evening. They would ride to the theater together, at which point Rachel would do a bit of schmoozing before it was time to go inside and get into her costume and makeup and warm-up, leaving Kurt to mingle until it was time to go take his seat. After the show he would meet her back at her dressing-room and they would go on to the no-doubt lavish after party, where Kurt would be on Perfect Date duty, expected to laugh, chat, and generally charm the pants off anyone who approached.

"Isn't this exciting?" Rachel said, squeezing one hand in both of hers. Her big brown eyes were starry tonight and the impressive mega-watt smile was already in place. "I'm so glad you agreed to be my date tonight. Isn't it exactly like we once dreamed about back in Lima? I love opening nights! The adrenaline, the excitement, wondering how everyone will react, the anticipation of reading all the glowing reviews in tomorrow's newspapers!"

He laughed. "It's not quite like I dreamed about. In those days I was convinced that it would be my name up in lights, but the reality is nearly as good." Picking up her hand, he kissed the back of it. "Those two small-town kids have both come a long way, haven't they? Especially you. You've really made it, Rachel. Tonight you're about to debut the starring role in a brand-new Broadway musical. A show the critics hailed in previews and everyone else is dying to see. I literally could not be prouder of you."

Her lower lip trembled, and she whipped out a dainty handkerchief to dab at the corners of her eyes. "Thank you, Kurt. When I used to imagine this moment, I always knew there would be a handsome gentleman showering me with compliments, but somehow I never expected it to be you."

Kurt laughed and said playfully, "Considering that my fondest dream for you used to involve a roll of duct tape and the ritual burning of your animal sweater collection, I can honestly say that it comes as a surprise to me, too."

Rachel squawked and whacked him in the arm with her bouquet, ending the tender moment in a burst of mingled laughter.

They arrived at the theater a short time later and everything went perfectly according to script. Rachel took his arm upon exiting the limo, waving and greeting excited fans and posing for photographers with a practiced smile. Kurt's posture was ramrod straight and his facial expression had instinctively
snapped into the illusion of the perfect, doting boyfriend as Rachel lovingly squeezed his arm and parted to sign autographs.

Once Rachel had gone off to get ready, he dutifully mingled and answered a few intrigued questions about how he came to be escorting the show's star tonight. He neither confirmed nor denied whether he was the "new man" in Rachel’s life, simply stating that they had been close for a long time and he was proud to be share her big moment. That part, at least, was true.

The lobby lights dimmed, signaling everyone that it was time to go inside. Kurt found his seat in the front left Orchestra section, sitting down and studying his program as he did his best not to gape and flail like the small-town fanboy he secretly was when he recognized several faces in the surrounding crowd as theater idols from his childhood. Apparently, this show was even more of an event than he had realized! A thrill of pride warred with a spike of pure jealousy that these people were here to see Rachel. He tamped down on the latter reaction sternly. He was not going to be petty about this. After all, if he had truly wanted to pursue a career on stage, he could have.

Thankfully, he was distracted from those thoughts by the rise of the curtain and "The Trophy Wife" began. It was a musical comedy about a small-town girl who claws her way into the spotlight, becoming engaged to a series of rich men along the way, only to go through several trials and end up finding true love in her old hometown sweetheart. The show was well written, sweet, wry, touching and sad at times, with songs that were guaranteed to get stuck in a listener’s head long after the curtain had fallen.

Kurt could not help finding the plot ironic, considering that Rachel had abandoned her own small town beau to pursue the career that had eventually led to this very role. Her performance was brilliant, though. The audience seemed thoroughly smitten with the entire cast. Kurt was thrilled with the work being done by his clients, very pleased to note several places where he could tell that someone had followed a particular piece of advice he had given them. It was almost like being a proud parent, and Kurt suddenly realized that the jealousy he had been struggling against earlier had completely gone. He had done what he loved and was meant to do, and it was rewarding to see it pay off so handsomely.

And speaking of proud parents, Kurt glanced over his left shoulder; seeking the seats where Rachel had told him her fathers would be tonight. They came out to see every show she had even a minor part in, and Kurt smiled, silently cooing to himself when he spotted the two fifty-something gentlemen leaning close together, eyes riveted to the stage. It had been a few years since he had last seen them and he could not quite remember their first names, but the taller white man was clutching the hand of his darker-skinned partner and both men looked as if they were about to burst into tears of pride and happiness.

Knowing he would be seeing them later, Kurt returned his attention to the stage where Rachel was working up to her final glory note. The audience erupted in applause as the number ended and Kurt's own hands tingled with the force of his clapping. He had a strong feeling that his dear friend just might win that long-coveted Tony award for this role.

The second act seemed to pass at lightning speed. Before he knew it, Kurt was on his feet with the rest of the audience, giving the bowing actors a well-deserved final ovation. As the crowd began to disperse, Kurt worked his way over to the two beaming fathers. "Hello, Mr. and Mr. Berry," he said politely, holding out his hand to them. "I don't know if you remember me. I'm-

"Kurt Hummel," they said in unison, looking at each other and then laughing. The black man grinned and accepted his handshake, followed a moment later by his partner, who said, "Of course, we remember you, Kurt. Rachel speaks of you often, and we had coffee with Burt and Carole just
last week after the ACLU meeting."

Kurt nodded. It had surprised him very much when his parents had first chosen to join that organization, but he had realized that it was their way of showing public support for others like him. "I'm so glad you were able to make it out tonight. I know Rachel is thrilled."

"We wouldn't have missed it," the taller man gushed.

All three of them turned as a smiling stage hand came to lead them backstage. They continued to engage in small talk, Kurt being refreshed on their identities as they insisted he use their first names. Finally, Rachel emerged, greeting her fathers with hugs and squeals of joy, then bestowing the same on Kurt as she asked, "So? What did you think? Was it as good as I think it was?"


The four of them chattered about the show for several minutes and then Hiram and LeRoy regretfully excused themselves.

"You're not coming to the after-party?" Kurt asked in surprise, having expected them to stick to their daughter like glue.

Hiram laughed. "Oh, no. Tonight is for you kids. Go out and enjoy yourselves. We'll catch up with Rachel for brunch tomorrow. You want to meet us at the usual place, honey?"

"That sounds perfect," Rachel agreed easily, giving them each another hearty embrace.

Kurt realized from the way they spoke that this must be a family tradition. He was a little surprised that her fathers were not staying in Rachel's apartment, but it was not his place to ask. "It was good to see you both again. Good night," he said politely, shaking hands with them once more.

"You, too," they agreed, puzzling Kurt just a bit when LeRoy threw over his shoulder, "Good luck with your new future, Kurt!"

"My new future?" Kurt said quietly to Rachel as they straightened their outfits and smoothed their hair, getting ready to face the crowd outside.

She shrugged. "Your dad probably told them that you and Mike just started dating. They knew most of New Directions, remember."

"Ah, right," he said, letting it go. The reminder did have him quickly pulling out his phone and turning the ringer back on as he checked for messages. Depressingly, there were none.

The two friends reactivated their show smiles and stepped outside. The stage door crowd was large and enthusiastic, squealing and waving programs and cameras at Rachel. She generously signed as many as possible, posing for a few photos before a security guard ushered her and Kurt back into their limo.

"Well, that was an experience!" Kurt laughed. "Old hat for you, I suppose."

Rachel laughed with him. "No, that never gets old! And most of the time they aren't quite that excited to see me." She hugged herself tightly, suddenly looking like the schoolgirl Kurt used to know in spite of her elegant dress and makeup. "Oh, Kurt, it's all happening, isn't it? Everything I've strived for, my entire life."

"I think it is," he said sincerely. "And I think it's only going to get better from here."
"It hardly seems possible. I'm so glad you're with me, Kurt. Tonight just wouldn't feel right with anyone else." Rachel shifted across the space separating them and snuggled underneath his arm. She wrapped her arm around his ribs and kissed his jaw very tenderly.

Knowing that his friend was searching for the comfort of something familiar in a moment that must feel overwhelmingly large, he hugged her around the shoulders and gave her a brotherly kiss on the forehead, just as he would have done if Kathy or Christy had cuddled up to him in search of reassurance.

"I'm glad I could share this with you, Rachel," he said honestly. Injecting a businesslike note into his voice, he said, "Now, tell me quickly before we get to the party, is there anyone in particular that you'd like me to talk you up to? I won't be offended if you decide to ditch me for a hot straight guy."

Rachel laughed. "I wouldn't do that! Though, if you want to, here's what you should say…"

~*~*~*~*~

The party was a lot of fun, but also somewhat surreal. Kurt had shaken hands with a couple of his childhood idols, smiled so much his face was in danger of breaking, and he had sung Rachel's praises until the words had started flowing on auto-pilot. He had posed with her for so many pictures that he felt numb and half-blind.

Finally, though, Rachel released him from escort duty and went off to mix and mingle on her own. Kurt breathed a sigh of relief at having a few minutes to himself. He decided to check out the buffet line. He had not been hungry all day but now that the stress of the big event was done, he was starving. He had just filled a plate and was searching for a quiet corner in which to eat when his evening took a turn for the nightmarish.

"Hello, Kurt. Lose your date?"

The question was perfectly pleasant, but there was a slight sneer to the word that instantly brought Kurt's hackles up. "Zachary," he said, his voice coming out strangled and weak instead of cool and superior as he had intended. Turning around, he found himself face to face with his ex. To his dismay, the other man looked fantastic. He was wearing an elegant three piece black suit, his tie and vest both a beautiful shade of green that suited his tanned skin, blue eyes, and sandy blond curls to perfection. "What are you doing here?"

Smiling smugly, Zach flicked a press badge pinned to his lapel, one that Kurt had not initially noticed. "Working for the New York Daily these days. They sent me out to cover the big night. I wasn't expecting to see the star being escorted by you though. Quite a surprise! You're looking good tonight, Kurt."

Irritated with the cheerful tone, as if they were good friends who had simply run into one another after an inexplicable period of separation, Kurt grated, "I have nothing to say to you."

"Oh, don't be like that. We grew apart. We broke up. These things happen! I've missed you, Kurt. Life just hasn't been the same since we split." He moved closer, invading Kurt's personal space. With a saucy grin, he reached out and plucked a canapé off Kurt's plate and popped it into his mouth. "Mmm, delicious. Can I have another? You always did have great . . . taste." The word rolled off his tongue, so laced with innuendo that Kurt flushed involuntarily.

He felt as if he had been frozen in place, his mind blank and his limbs unable to move. He wanted to scream, to punch, to throw his plate in Zachary's face and storm out, yelling loud enough for everyone in the room to hear it that this man was a lying, cheating, worthless bastard. Instead, he just
stood there, gaping like an idiot as Zachary nonchalantly ate his dinner and acted like nothing had ever happened, like he had never done anything wrong.

"These things happen?" Kurt finally croaked. "Things like what you did to me don't just happen! You cheated on me." To his disgust, his voice cracked in the middle of his statement, ruining his attempt at withering disdain. He drew a breath and clenched his jaw, feeling sudden tears burning behind his eyes. Tears that he was determined not to let this man see.

Zach just tossed his beautiful blond head and drew himself up straighter, deliberately towering over Kurt as he stepped closer, forcing Kurt to take a step back. "I'm sorry it came to that," he said, voice dripping with sorrow. "That was a terrible thing to do, but you were never there anymore, Kurt. You were always working or running off to the theater; hanging out with your other friends. I was alone so often, I . . . I just needed someone to pay attention to me."

A nibble of guilt immediately ate at Kurt. Wasn't that exactly what he had been afraid of? That his own schedule had been viewed as disinterest? "You could have said something. I loved you, Zach. You didn't have to hurt me to make me pay attention!"

"I know that now. I truly am sorry," he replied, meekly ducking his head and looking at Kurt through the curtain of his long eyelashes. Kurt's stomach flipped, feeling himself losing just a little more ground. He had lost a lot of arguments from being unable to resist that pleading expression. "I haven't been with anyone else since I lost you. Since I . . . drove you away. It haunts me, Kurt, knowing I was so stupid that I pushed the best thing that's ever happened to me out of my life. Can't you forgive me, baby? I'll do anything you say if you'll give me another chance."

He had reached out and captured Kurt's free hand, leaning close enough that Kurt could smell the champagne on his warm breath. Kurt gulped, hearing the rush of blood in his ears and feeling the tight, fast thunder of his own heartbeat. "No," he whispered.

Zachary drew back, the soft pleading expression flickering into one of annoyance. "What do you mean, no?" he demanded.

That sudden, disbelieving arrogance, far more genuine than the show of remorse, snapped Kurt out of his daze. Zachary wasn't sorry for what he had done. He was just sorry he had been caught. He had honestly expected Kurt to be so weak and needy that he would just fold like a house of cards and take him back if he put on a good enough show!

Slamming his untouched plate down on a table, Kurt's fist planted on his cocked hip; chin lifting as his anger suddenly roared to life. "I'm sorry, is that too long a word for you to understand? Let me spell it for you. N! O!" He stepped forward, and this time it was Zachary who fell back. "You lying, cheating, leeching, son-of-a-bitch, how dare you come to me and act like you did nothing wrong! How dare you try to twist your infidelity over to me! Did you really think you would just offer me a weak apology and I'd let you crawl back into my life, like there was no harm done?"

Zachary nearly fell over a chair, stumbling a bit in his haste to get out of the line of fire as Kurt's voice rang out, loud and strong, drawing the attention of everyone in the room.

"I loved you, Zach. Honestly and devotedly, for two whole years. I would have continued to do so for the rest of our lives if you had given me the due respect of keeping your dick in your pants!" Kurt was shouting now, so angry that he did not even notice the thriled and shocked crowd of spectators watching the show with wide eyed enjoyment. "You broke my heart, you bastard! You nearly broke me, and now you think one weak, half-assed apology is going to take that back? Am I supposed to take you back? Well, fuck that! You're absolutely pathetic and I feel sorry for whoever is stupid enough to hook up with you next. But rest assured that it's not going to be me. Not ever again! I have
someone new in my life now, someone better. Someone who genuinely loves me and wants me to be happy, not because he wants something from me, but because he's a better man in every way than you could ever dream of being. So you can take your charm, and your pretty smile and your fancy new press pass and shove them up your ass, because I am no longer interested in anything you have to offer."

Neatly liberating a glass of red wine from a passing waiter, Kurt took a sip and then tossed the rest in his ex-boyfriend's face, slamming the empty glass down so hard that it broke, then turning on his heel and sweeping out of the room to a smattering of applause from the watching crowd.

"Someone please escort this person out of my party," Rachel's imperious voice rang out, dismissing the stunned, red-stained Zachary with a wave of her hand. She apologized to her guests for the interruption and bade everyone to excuse her and carry on, then left to find Kurt. He had not gone far, only reaching the first empty room he came to and sinking down to sit on a small uncomfortable sofa, his head resting on his left hand. Rachel sat down next to him. "Are you okay?"

"I can't believe it," Kurt murmured. A weird, hitching breath, caught somewhere between a laugh and a sob, burst from his lungs. After a moment, he looked up, meeting Rachel's concerned eyes. "I'm sorry, Rachel. I just torpedoed the perfect date image for you, didn't I?"

She pulled him into a hug. "I'm the one who's sorry. I had no idea he was coming tonight, or I would have had him banned at the lobby. Don't worry about what happened, Kurt. People love a scandal. In fact, I'm sure you just single handedly raised the popularity of my show by about 20 percent!"

He laughed weakly and gratefully returned the embrace.

"Do you feel any better?"

Kurt blinked, dashing away a few escaped tears. "You know? Oddly enough I do. I think I needed the closure." He snorted. "And naturally, only the loudest, most public, gossip-worthy form of closure would do for me."

"Spoken like the diva I know and love," she chuckled. Looking into his eyes, she brushed aside that same bold lock of hair that was once again escaping Kurt's careful styling and smiled. "What do you say you go back in there and help me own the room? Show everybody which one of you is the better man?"

Embarrassed by the scene he had created, Kurt winced. "I don't know . . ."

"I have a little incentive," she teased. "We meant to thrill the room with a big surprise reunion, but you kind of beat us to it."

"We?"

She put her fingers on his chin and turned his head toward the doorway. Kurt's mouth fell open, a delighted smile breaking across his features when he recognized Mike Chang, dressed to the nines in a slim-fitting Armani tux. “Sorry, I'm late."

"Mike!" Kurt blurted, launching himself across the room and nearly tackling the other man with the force of his hug. "You're here! How can you be here?"

He laughed and loosened his hold on Kurt, twisting to meet his lips in a passionate kiss that Kurt returned fervently. "They have these things nowadays called airplanes, and trains, and even taxicabs. A friend suggested I try them out," he joked, pressing sweet, loving pecks all over Kurt's face. "As for the party, Rachel invited me last week."
"Last . . . " Kurt turned, gaping at Rachel. "Why didn't you tell me! Or you!" he said, turning back to Mike.

"Partly because it would have ruined the surprise, but mostly because I wasn't sure I could make it. Not until yesterday morning when we signed the final papers to transfer the ownership of the store. Then I couldn't get here fast enough!"

Rachel cut in, "I invited him to stay with me last night, so you wouldn't find out too soon." She laughed. "I thought sure my dads were going to give it away when they mentioned going back to their hotel. They brought Mike with them and insisted that he stay with me until the big moment. He was supposed to make his grand entrance an hour ago."

Mike ducked his head sheepishly. "I was so excited that I left my invitation back at your condo and they wouldn't let me in. I had to go back to your place and get it and then I got stuck in traffic on the way here. I can't believe you guys have traffic jams at 9 o'clock at night!"

Suddenly not caring one bit why Mike was here, or how long it had taken him to arrive, Kurt pulled him close and kissed him again, pouring everything he had been feeling over the last two days into the gesture. Mike moaned softly and melted into his arms, pulling him closer until it would have been impossible for so much as a sliver of daylight to pass between their bodies.

"Rachel?" Kurt said breathlessly when he finally came up for air. "I think . . . I'm the one who's going to ditch you to skip out with a hot guy."

She had been watching them with delighted eyes, bouncing in place like a little girl, her index fingers pressed to her lips to keep from squealing, but now she launched forward and threw her arms around them both. "Of course you are! But first, you have to come back to the party for a few minutes. Please?"

Looking into Mike's eyes, Kurt forced down the desire to simply drag Mike away somewhere private and ravish him. "What do you think?"

He could see a matching desire in Mike's dark eyes, but the other man grinned cheerfully and stroked his lapel. "Well, I did rent this suit."

"Fine," he sighed, "but just for a little while, okay?"

"Don't worry, we won't stay long," Mike promised, then leaned close, his breath tickling Kurt's ear and making him flush from head to toe as he added, "I have other plans for you tonight."

Feeling so hot he thought his joints just might be melting, Kurt swallowed hard and grabbed Mike's hand in his right and Rachel's in his left. "Let's go."
Kurt held his head high, trying not to show how uncomfortable he was with the staring and curious murmuring that greeted his reappearance at the party. He felt Rachel and Mike each give one of his hands a squeeze and he immediately felt better. Though embarrassing, it did not really matter that a roomful of strangers had witnessed his explosion of temper. The people who loved him understood.

Rachel marched them straight over to a little stage that had been set up in one corner of the room. It had been occupied throughout the evening by various speech-makers and well-wishers, but as Rachel tapped the microphone and called for attention, everyone turned, looking interested to see what new turn the evening was about to take. "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I'm Rachel Berry," she began, beaming and taking an adorable little bow at the responding applause. "Thank you all for coming here tonight to support me and my fellow cast members in celebrating 'The Trophy Wife'. Your encouragement and support means the world to us."

More applause greeted the gracious little speech. Kurt and Mike looked at each other and exchanged a tiny shrug, neither one quite sure why they had needed to be present for this but they clapped politely anyway.

Rachel's smile became even brighter as she continued, "Throughout the evening, you've had an opportunity to meet our talented cast and wonderful director, but I also wanted to give a nod to a few of the amazing people who work behind the scenes, and without whom tonight's premiere would not have been possible." She spent a few minutes introducing costume, lighting, makeup and other crew members, proving that she had learned a great deal since her teenage years when Rachel had viewed anyone who did not stand beneath a blazing spotlight as some sort of lesser being. As her gracious acknowledgement wound down, she suddenly ran to the edge of the stage, reached out, and grabbed a startled Kurt by the hand, hauling him up on stage with a show of strength that was a bit shocking in such a tiny woman. "Last, but certainly not least, I'd like to introduce you to one of the best private vocal coaches in all of New York, Mr. Kurt Hummel. Kurt personally trained many of our current cast members, as well as giving occasional advice to yours truly. Whether I wanted it or not."

She made a face, her little joke drawing laughter from a number of people, including Kurt, who could not deny his own need to butt in whenever Rachel's scary diva instincts began to take over her performance quality. He gave an exaggerated shrug, earning himself a chuckle.

"Kurt has been my dear friend, close confidante, and occasional rival ever since high school. The two of us, along with Mr. Mike Chang…" She reached out again, pulling the brightly blushing newcomer up to stand on her other side, "…became friends years ago in the McKinley High School glee club back in our small Ohio hometown. Fate has recently brought us back together, so tonight with your kind permission, we'd like to perform a little number for you!"

The crowd clapped enthusiastically, laughter breaking out here and there at the faces of the two men as they both turned shocked stares toward the happily beaming woman between them.

Undeterred, Rachel continued. "Mike has always been more of a dancer than a singer, choreographing amazing numbers for our group, often on the spur of the moment, and I'm positive he'll remember this song well enough to do so again." Totally ignoring the bug-eyed terror on Mike's face and Kurt's negating head-shake, she turned toward the little chamber orchestra and asked them to play "Happy Days/Get Happy".

The musicians did not even blink at the suggestion, strengthening Kurt's suspicion that they, unlike himself and Mike, had been forewarned. They simply smiled and began the opening strains of the
famous counterpoint duet. Barely resisting the urge to strangle his cheerfully smiling friend, Kurt followed her to the side of the stage, giving Mike room to move as they began to sing together. The song had long been a personal favorite and the words and music came back easily, the wonderful harmony he shared with Rachel taking him back a dozen years to the first time they had performed this song together. He remembered how she had invited him to sing it with her in front of the class, recognizing and offering a surprisingly selfless balm to ease his loneliness and isolation at a time when it seemed as if nobody in the entire school could even see him unless they needed a target for some sort of abuse.

The emotion behind those memories gave strength and poignancy to Kurt's singing and he squeezed Rachel's hand, smiling back at her as he gave himself over to this rare opportunity to perform in a public setting.

Mike also rose to the challenge. His dancing, restricted from its normal loose-limbed freedom by the formal cut of his clothing, was elegant, refined and beautiful to watch. Then, as the song reached its final chorus, Mike smiled. The expression warmed his eyes as he glided closer and took Kurt's hand, tugging him away from Rachel and turning him in a slow, smooth spin that pulled him snugly into Mike's arms. The two of them each spontaneously reached a hand toward Rachel, drawing her into the circle as the last notes of the song soared through the otherwise quiet room.

There was a moment of silence, then the watching spectators burst into enthusiastic applause. Kurt had become a little caught up in the moment and jumped slightly at their unexpected praise, giving them a grateful bow. He was grinning like a fool, but Mike and Rachel both wore similar expressions so he did not feel too self-conscious about it.

The three friends left the little stage to much hand-shaking and back-patting, but Kurt did not let go his grip on Mike's hand. Everyone already knew that he was not Rachel's "new man" by now anyway. Over the last few weeks, he had sorely missed being able to touch Mike and was not ready to let go just yet. Plus, Kurt had never outgrown the romantic thrill that came with being able to openly hold a boyfriend's hand in a public setting.

To his delight, in addition to the many compliments he and Mike were both receiving, they were also being handed business cards and fielding inquiries about the hiring of their individual services. Mike looked a little stunned, so Kurt just collected the cards and thanked everyone for their interest, not promising anything. He looked over at Rachel, eyes narrowing and one brow rising in question. She just laughed and nodded, acknowledging that she had done this on purpose. Rachel was an expert when it came to networking, and Kurt now realized why she had chosen to bring Mike to this particular location for their surprise reunion. "Unbelievable," he murmured, shaking his head in what even he was not sure was annoyance or admiration. Making his was back over as the interest surrounding him and Mike died down, Kurt leaned close Rachel and said, "Exactly how big a favor are we going to owe you for this?"

Rachel laughed. "Blame Mercedes. I called her after your house party and she told me that Mike was planning to move to New York soon and might be interested in some choreography work. We figured he'd need a little help and since I was planning to invite you to be my date tonight anyway, she suggested that this was exactly the opportunity we'd been looking for."

He snorted, glancing at Mike. "Did everybody know what was going on around here except me?"

Mike laughed. "No. I promise, I had no idea that Rachel was going to spring a live performance on us. You're not really upset, are you?"

Kurt smiled and shook his head. "How can I be? Having you here tonight is the best surprise I ever could have wished for, and a little career building never hurt anybody." Giving Rachel a hug, he
added, "Thank you, you little busybody. I appreciate it."

"I do too," Mike said, giving her a friendly kiss on the cheek.

"Remind me to call Mercedes tomorrow and offer my services as wedding planner," Kurt said with a chuckle. "The clock is ticking and the last time we spoke, she hadn't even settled on a color scheme yet. Clearly, my girl needs expert guidance and it seems that I owe her one hell of a wedding present."

Not fooled at all, Rachel said, "You've been planning to take over the job anyway, haven't you?"

He shrugged. "Pretty much since the moment the words 'orange bunting' crossed her lips, yes."

They all laughed and hugged again, saying goodnight as Kurt and Mike excused themselves and made their way from the stuffy, overcrowded lounge and out into refreshingly cool night air. Kurt took a deep breath, stopping at the bottom of the steps and sliding his arms around Mike's neck. He did not care who on the still-crowded streets might be watching. He needed to hold his lover close. "You have no idea how much I've missed you."

"I think I do. It feels like years since you left Lima."

Mike pressed his lips to Kurt's neck, one hand sliding down his back to lightly grip his hip and tug him closer. Kurt sighed contentedly and pressed tight, shifting just enough to meet Mike's lips in a sweet, loving kiss. "I want to take you straight home to bed and love you until you're too exhausted to remember your own name," he murmured against his lips, "but would you hate me if I made you wait a few more minutes?"

"I could never hate you," Mike said, offering a little counter-persuasion in the form of more slow, passionate kisses. "Are you sure whatever it is can't wait?"

For a couple of minutes, Kurt's mind went blank to everything except the sound, scent and touch of the man in his arms, but then a tightening in his gut forced reality back in. "Food," he said breathlessly. "I don't mean to be unromantic but I haven't eaten all day. I started to get something inside, but…"

"I saw," Mike said quietly, hugging him again but this time in a supportive way. "I arrived just as he started moving in on you. For a second, I thought you'd found somebody else and I didn't know what to think, but then you started shouting and I realized who he had to be."

A warm flush darkened Kurt's cheeks as he acknowledged, "Zach. He cornered me at the buffet and said some things I didn't appreciate. I guess I kind of lost my temper."

"Well, whatever brought it on, that was beautiful," Mike told him with a chuckle. "Remind me never to piss you off. I never thought I'd see the day when you'd actually Slushie someone."

Kurt blinked. "Slush...oh, the wine!" He laughed. "I hadn't thought of it that way! As I recall, that is the appropriate way to let someone know he's a loser, though."

They laughed together, exchanging another tight hug before they broke apart.

"I'm up for a late night dinner date," Mike told him, linking their hands together as they ignored the sea of waiting taxi-cabs and started to walk. "After all, we need to keep our energy up."

"Among other things," Kurt replied, eyes sparkling with mischief as his comment drew a startled guffaw from his partner.
"Are you in the mood for any food in particular?" Mike asked, swinging their joined hands as they strolled lazily along the brightly lit streets. His eyes shone with interest as he looked around, clearly intrigued by so much hustle and bustle on a Tuesday night.

"One of the great things about New York is that you can get almost anything at any time," Kurt said, watching his boyfriend's eager perusal with amused eyes. He looked like a kid in a candy shop and it was absolutely adorable. Kurt suspected he had looked the same way the first time he had explored the bright lights of Broadway, trying to drink in the fact that he lived in this amazing city now and could see such sights any old time he pleased. "Do you want anything special?"

Mike visibly struggled to tear his eyes away from the blazing marquees, but he gave Kurt a teasing grin. "It's your choice. I'm not the one who's so hungry he's more interested in food than in the totally sexy boyfriend he hasn't seen in two months."

"I wouldn't say more interested," Kurt teased back. "Maybe equally interested."

"Gee, thanks."

Kurt hugged his arm. "I'm sorry! Let's just find something simple and filling. I only object to eating anything spicy this late. Unless you happen to find heartburn sexy."

Mike chuckled. "Not especially. I only want you to feel hot in a good way tonight. What do you think about burgers and fries? Those are quick and easy."

"And greasy and salty and fattening," he pointed out sternly, and then ducked his head and admitted, "Which sounds delicious."

Lifting their joined hands, Mike pointed out a 24-hour grocery store. "Then how about we go in there, grab some supplies, and I'll cook you dinner back at your place? I'm not exactly a gourmet, but I've worked the grill at a few diners here and there and picked up a few tricks. My pancakes are to die for, and I also make a really mean stove-top hamburger."

Amused to add yet another skill to his partner's absurdly mixed-up resume, Kurt nodded. "That would be great, if you wouldn't mind. While I believe in dressing to impress, I have to admit that I'd feel a bit ridiculous visiting a fast food place while wearing a tux. Besides," he added, hitching his brows suggestively. "If you cook, that means we can get to other things just that much sooner."

"I like the way you think," Mike told him with a grin. "So, does that mean you're planning to take the day off so we can spend all day in bed tomorrow?"

Regret flickered over Kurt's face. "I wish I could. I kept my schedule light today because I knew I'd be out late this evening, but I have a voice lesson from ten to one that I can't cancel. Normally it wouldn't be a problem, but this poor woman has been rescheduled twice already and she has a big audition this Friday. She's one of my regulars and I just can't let her down."

Mike shifted closer and pressed a kiss against Kurt's temple, slipping an arm around his body. "I totally respect a man who has both integrity and a good work ethic."

Kurt smiled, for some reason feeling a little shy in the face of the simple praise. "Inevitable side effect of being raised by my dad. He's always been a big believer in working hard and treating customers with honesty and respect. And I pretty much grew up in his auto shop, so . . ."
"It's in your blood," he said. "Mine, too. For all my crazy, rolling-stone ways, I've never been able to leave a job half finished. That's why I couldn't just drop my responsibility to the shoe store and come here immediately."

Hearing the apology in his voice, Kurt kissed him quickly as they entered the little grocery store and grabbed a basket. "It's been hard not being with you these last few weeks, but I'm really proud of what you did, Mike. Does you being here mean everything worked out the way you and your sister hoped it would?"

"It did. Her brother in law and his cousin are officially partners now, and I personally hired a couple of teenagers from the latest incarnation of New Directions to take my place working for Lynne. It suited us both and gave a helping hand to the students. They're both in Mr. Shue's mentoring program. You know about that, right?"

Kurt nodded. "Mercedes was telling me about it. She's one of the faculty advisors." Will Schuester was taking some of his poorer students who might not have much chance at an academic or athletic scholarship and getting them hired by local businesses as part of an internship program. Something positive and proactive to put on their college resumes and give them a few usable life skills in case their first choices didn't work out. "I was really surprised when Mercedes said that Sue Sylvester had given them the green-light."

"Why wouldn't she? It looks good on paper, the schoolboard can promote their community support, and to parents Sue gets to appear magnanimous and forward-thinking. Plus, the program only cost the school district a few licensing fees," Mike said wryly. "Fund-raising is entirely dependent on the efforts of the students and business owners."

"It's still a really great thing to do for the kids," Kurt insisted. "I was telling Dad about what they're doing and he's thinking about getting involved when the new school year begins. He want to mentor a couple of students at the auto shop."

Mike grinned. "Really? That's great! Does that have anything to do with . . ." He abruptly stopped, brown eyes widening as he clamped his lips tightly together and moved to the meat case, devoting a suspicious amount of attention to inspecting the packages of ground beef on display.

"With what?" Kurt asked. "Do you know something I don't? Because even though they've mostly been positive, I'm starting to get just a little sick of having surprises sprung on me by everybody I know."

Mike smiled ruefully. "I wasn't supposed to say anything, but I guess you have been left in the dark a lot lately. I'd hate to have your family think that I blew the very first secret they trusted me with, though. Can I just ask you to call Finn tomorrow and leave it at that?"

"No!" Kurt protested. "Finn can't keep a secret to save his life, so if he's involved in whatever this is and I still don't know, then it has to be big. You have to tell me, Mike, otherwise I'm going to be completely distracted all night long!"

He laughed. "You don't have much faith in my seduction techniques, do you? Do you really believe you're going to be thinking about your brother while I'm . . . " Mike leaned over and whispered in Kurt's ear, making his face turn bright red and his eyes shine.

"Well," he granted, voice going a bit husky, "maybe not all night."

For the next twenty minutes as Mike filled the shopping basket with all the ingredients he needed, occasionally conferring with Kurt over whether or not he liked something, Kurt coaxed, pleaded and
playfully threatened in an attempt to get him to share the news. Unfortunately for him, Mike remained stubborn.

"You're mean," Kurt pouted when they had paid and stepped outside, hailing a cab to take them the rest of the way home. He gave the driver his address and then sat back, arms crossed over his chest. "Now I don't know if I even want to let you touch me tonight."

Mike leaned over, kissing Kurt's cheek in a sweetly apologetic way and then shifting close to begin nibbling gently on his ear. Kurt squirmed, unable to keep from responding. "But I really, really want to touch you," Mike coaxed, snaking a finger inside the gap between two shirt buttons and stroking Kurt's belly, popping the buttons loose to slide his entire hand inside when Kurt involuntarily made a tiny yearning sound in response. "How about if I give you a hint? If you guess, then I didn't exactly spoil the secret, right?"

"Yeah, that sounds fair," he breathed, turning his head to capture Mike's lips, arms disengaging from their stubborn pose and pulling him close. Using one hand, he tugged Mike's neat bow tie loose and opened the top buttons of his crisp white dress shirt. Kurt's fingers parted the material and lightly caressed his neck and collarbone.

Quickly becoming lost in the kissing and gentle teasing, Kurt forgot all about his quest for information and neither man even noticed that the taxi had stopped moving until a loud throat-clearing captured their attention. The cab-driver, a heavy set woman with curly black hair and badly done makeup, had turned around and was watching them make out with a smirk on her bright red lips. In a heavy Brooklyn accent, she said, "Home sweet home, lover boys. That'll be $14.50."

Kurt grinned sheepishly and handed over a $20 bill. "Thanks, keep the change."

Grabbing the grocery sack, Mike scrambled out of the cab after his partner, appearing more than a little embarrassed by the woman's openly appreciative ogling. "How long do you think she was watching us?"

"Probably the whole way," Kurt laughed, smoothing a hand down his shirt and subtly refastening the buttons Mike had popped loose. "Can you blame her? We're probably the hottest thing she's seen all week."

"It didn't bother you?"

Kurt was surprised. "Why should it? We weren't doing anything wrong, and I can guarantee you she's seen a lot more than kissing in her line of work." He cocked his head. "Can I assume that your impressive list of credentials doesn't include cab driving?"

Mike shook his head, blushing a bit as the smiling doorman let them inside the building. "Sorry, I guess I kind of sounded like a prude."

"You didn't. I think it's sweet that you're a little shy," Kurt told him, leading him over to the reception desk. "It's one of the many things I've always found charming about you."

As they reached the desk, Kurt introduced him to the woman behind it. "Jennifer, this is Mike Chang. I'd like to have him put down on my list of approved visitors. He's applying for residence here but Rita says the apartment won't be ready for new occupancy for another week or so, and in the meantime he'll be staying with me in 412."

She smiled and welcomed Mike to the building, taking a photocopy of his driver's license and giving him a page to fill out.
"Just a precaution," Kurt told him. "It's a secure building so we want to make sure everyone knows your face and that you're okay to be here. Once you move in, you'll have to do this for any visitors you bring in as well."

He nodded, quickly filling out the information sheet. "It's a good safety precaution. They don't want just anyone wandering in off the street."

"Exactly," Kurt agreed, wishing the desk clerk a good night and recapturing Mike's free hand as they walked toward the elevator and got in, hitting the button for the fourth floor. Stroking his jaw with the other hand, Kurt drew Mike in closer and gave him a slow, gentle kiss. "I can't believe you're really here. I feel like I'm going to wake up at any minute."

"Me, too," he said, nibbling little kisses along Kurt's jaw. "Maybe I'd better get you into bed right away so we can both keep on dreaming."

An indignant squawk sounded as Kurt pushed him back, aiming a playful slap at Mike's shoulder. "You did not just say something that cheesy." Suddenly, his stomach growled and Kurt blushed, pressing a hand to his middle. "Which reminds me, you promised to feed me first. I demand to be seduced with your mad cooking skills, Mr. Chang."

Mike's eyes twinkled and sketched a little bow, affecting an accent as he said, "As you wish."

Kurt's brow furrowed. "Did you just quote 'The Princess Bride'?"

"Depends," he teased. "Did it impress you?"

He laughed, all but dragging Mike out of the elevator as it opened on his floor. "No, but it is one of Carole's favorite movies, so I get what you were going for. So, does that mean that you secretly and truly love me?"

Mike's arms slid around his waist, peppering feather-light kisses along Kurt's neck and ears as he giggled at the tickly feeling and struggled to get his door unlocked. "It's no secret," he said as they finally made it inside and Kurt turned on the lights and twisted around to kiss him more fully. "I do love you, even though your stomach keeps frustrating my need to ravish you. What ever happened to post-coital binging?"

Kurt's lips were busy planting kisses wherever they found exposed skin, hands equally occupied with stripping Mike of his suit jacket, silky black waistcoat and unfastened tie. Grabbing the sack of groceries, he tossed it haphazardly on the dining room table. "I hear it's making a comeback."

He groaned, hips unintentionally thrusting forward as Mike efficiently managed to remove his own coat, cummerbund and tie and get his dress shirt unfastened down to the waistband of his pants. Mike's lips busily followed the same path, sprinkling kisses all over Kurt's newly exposed torso.

"Sure you wouldn't rather put this off until after you've had some food?" Mike asked, a wicked glitter in his dark eyes as he dropped to one knee and nuzzled the prominent tenting at the front of Kurt's trousers. "I wouldn't want you to be uncomfortable."

"Damn tease," Kurt griped, his breath hitching when Mike opened his mouth and deliberately fanned hot breath over him before kissing his target through the two layers of material that covered it. Irritating him, but thoroughly amusing Mike, his empty stomach chose that moment to audibly protest again.

Laughing, Mike said, "How about I just give you a little appetizer for now?"
Kurt whimpered when his remaining buttons and zipper were quickly undone, Mike's deft hands slipping the garment down his legs. He grunted in surprise when Mike's strong hands grasped his hips and pressed him to a seat on the sofa, dropping to one knee as he enthusiastically showed Kurt how much he had been missed over the last two months. Helpless to do anything but enjoy, Kurt combed his fingers through Mike's thick black hair, nearly passing out at the overwhelming sensation. Afterward, he lay back on the sofa, pulling the other man into his arms, body trembling in reaction.

After a few minutes of lazy kissing, he tugged impatiently at Mike's suit jacket. "Please," he mumbled. "Off?"

Mike was quick to comply, standing up long enough to strip away both of their upper garments and returning immediately to Kurt's embrace. They sighed in contentment at the meeting of warm skin, not rushing to take things any farther, but just enjoying this chance to make out like the pair of happily hormonal teenagers they had never been able to experience being together.

Responding to the swelling pressed against his thigh, Kurt slipped a hand down, intent on sharing the pleasure he had just been given, all the while enjoying his sensual conquest of Mike's mouth. Happily caught up in the sensations, Mike did not even try to resist, giving himself over to Kurt's touch until the feelings finally overwhelmed him.

They lay still for several long minutes afterward, barely aware of anything besides pleasant weariness and thundering heartbeats. As their bodies began to cool, Kurt pressed a kiss to Mike's hair and murmured, "You owe me a burger and a hint, and both had better be nice and juicy."

Mike's head lifted from its place on his shoulder and he started to laugh, seeing the matching mirth in Kurt's eyes. "Talk about a one track mind!" he teased, climbing off his lover's body and helping Kurt to his feet. "Do you have something I can borrow? I left my suitcase at Rachel's condo and I really don't want grease popping onto my skin."

"Of course," Kurt agreed, leading him into the bedroom and gesturing to the adjoining bathroom. After they had cleaned up a bit, Kurt pulled on his favorite robe and pajama pants and began searching his room, returning with a pair of clean boxer shorts and Mike's 'Star Trek' t-shirt. Grinning, Mike pulled on the clothing, brushing a hand over the logo on his shirt. "I wondered if you had kept this." Seeing that Kurt was about to apologize, he leaned forward and stopped the words with his lips. "You were welcome to it. I liked the idea of you having something of mine."

Kurt blushed as he admitted, "I've slept in it a few times, on nights when I really missed you and nothing else helped me to sleep."

Mike looked so pleased that Kurt could not help giving him a kiss. Kurt led him to his tiny kitchen, sitting in one of the dining room chairs and watching as he mixed ingredients in a bowl and patted together a couple of fresh, alarmingly large hamburgers. Mike heated oil in a deep skillet, peeling and slicing potatoes into thin wedges, then dropping them into the oil. He let them fry while he poured glasses of ice water and warmed up Kurt's Foreman grill – a Christmas gift from Finn - before setting the enormous burgers inside to cook.

Prepping the buns, he checked with Kurt before adding each new topping. Mike liked ketchup, mayo, lettuce and pickles on his burgers. Kurt favored mustard, pickles and tomato slices. By mutual agreement, both passed on onions.

It was fun to watch Mike work. He whistled random snatches of songs, literally dancing his way from place to place as he prepped and cooked the food. Every time he came past the table to set
something down, he paused for a kiss. Kurt could not help laughing when he noticed that the other man was placing each condiment on the table one bottle at a time, making two trips to put a straw in each of their glasses or lay down individual napkins. Finally, the food was ready, and Mike efficiently served it up, waiting expectantly as Kurt bit into his burger.

"Oh, wow, this is amazing," he gushed around his first bite. Swallowing it down, he tried a french-fry, blowing on the hot wedge to cool it before popping it into his mouth. "Mmm, this too! You need to send my parents the recipe for these burgers. They'll be the hit of this summer's block party."

Mike grinned and took a huge bite of his own burger. "Glad you like them."

"So?" Kurt said, munching a few more fries.

Brow furrowing, Mike replied, "So . . . what?"

"Where's my hint? What surprise is my well-meaning family planning to spring on me that was so big they've sworn you to secrecy over it?" Seeing Mike roll his eyes, he laughed. "I'm not letting this go, so you might as well spill it."

"Fine, but if anyone asks, you had no idea."

Kurt grinned triumphantly. "Deal."

"Okay, well, you knew that Finn was thinking about quitting the NFL, right?"

He nodded. "Yeah, he just got offered a position in Miami but it's another backup slot and Finn doesn't really want to go that far from home just to do the same thing he's unhappy doing in Cincinnati. I can't really blame him. I told him he should go ahead and retire if he thinks he'd be better off doing something else."

"Right, well, apparently he still takes your advice to heart and family is still more important to him than any job he could ever have. And that's your hint."

Kurt blinked, pondering the meaning of that for a few seconds. "So, Finn is quitting football," he said slowly. "He doesn't want to leave Ohio, and that means . . ." He gasped suddenly, sitting bolt upright as his eyes went wide. "Oh my gosh! Julie's pregnant again!"

Mike looked startled. "Wait, what? How did you get that from Finn wanting to move back to Lima?"

"He does? Oh, was that the surprise?"

Confusion painted Mike's features. "Yes. Wait, did you just say that other thing to get me to spill the beans?"

"Of course not, but I knew it!" Kurt gushed. "I knew there was something going on. Lately, every time I video-chat with him, Finn gets that weird, constipated expression when I ask what's new. That means he wants to talk to me about something but isn't ready to say what it is yet. And when I saw him in March, he mentioned that Julie would be taking some time off from the hospital later this year! I kept seeing her and Carole whispering about something, but I was too wrapped up in myself to ask about it, and now you say that my brother wants to move back home to Lima? What else could it mean? He totally wants little Kurt to have the same experiences he had growing up, and what better excuse for moving home right now than because their family is getting bigger!"

Kurt jumped up, abandoning his last few bites of dinner in favor of spinning around the room in a 'too excited to stand still' dance. Mike watched him open-mouthed, then laughed when Kurt pranced
over and flung both arms around his neck, plopping down to sit in his lap. He knew he was a little too heavy for such a thing, but Mike just shifted a bit and hugged him back tightly.

"I don't know anything about a baby," Mike said, "but I think you could be right. The only reason I know any of this is that you told your dad I was selling my house and Burt told Finn. Finn called over the weekend to find out if my place was still on the market. Apparently, Sue Sylvester offered him the job of football and basketball coach at McKinley next year. They've been looking for someone good ever since Coach Beiste moved to another school district."

Unable to stop himself, Kurt squealed in excitement, burying his face in Mike's neck. Finn had finished college with a B.A. in Education. The NFL had come calling and he had not even considered turning it down, but his dream had always been to be the positive role-model and influence for good in some other kid's life that instructors like Will Schuester and Shannon Beiste had been to his own.

"That's so amazing," Kurt sighed. "I'm so happy for him, for all of them. Why didn't he want to tell me, though?"

Mike shrugged, kissing him lightly on the lips. "I'm guessing they didn't want to rub it in your face until they were sure you were going to be okay. You were heartbroken and our relationship was new and a little shaky at first. Just because we knew it was love doesn't mean anyone else was sure that it would work out. He barked a self-deprecating little laugh. "Even I wasn't sure until recently."

"Because I ran away," he realized, shaking his head. "I must have really scared everyone when I came back to Lima in such a mess, and then took off in a panic because we were moving so fast. I never meant for anyone to feel like they had to take care of me, though. Especially to the point of being afraid to share their own good news in case it upset me! My God, do you know how selfish that makes me feel?"

"Don't," he said firmly, parting the edges of Kurt's bathrobe and kissing his breastbone, one hand sliding over the warm skin of his chest and stomach. "Don't do that to yourself, Kurt. You needed them and they were worried about you. There's no reason to feel guilty. Just be happy everything is working out for the best for everybody."

Each sentence was accompanied by a gentle kiss, Mike's long callused fingers tracing teasing patterns along the light definition of Kurt's ribs and belly, making his breath hitch.

"I... I suppose, there's... no point in worrying about it now," Kurt panted, grinding his rear into Mike's lap when those talented fingers began to explore his shape through the thin material of his pajama pants.

"None at all," he agreed, teasing the tightly beaded nipple closest to his mouth. "What do you say we forget about your family for tonight, leave the clean up for morning, and head for bed?"

Kurt's hands were already busy beneath the hem of Mike's t-shirt. "Mmm, yeah," he whispered.

Neither one of them was completely sure if that had been an affirmative or just a reaction to what Mike's hands and mouth were doing, but neither one cared. Standing up quickly, Mike pulled Kurt into the bedroom and all but tackled him into the soft mattress.

Thoughts and worries rapidly went the way of their clothing as the two lovers held each other, kissing and exploring as they relearned the secrets of each other's body.

"I've missed you so much," Mike murmured, groaning into Kurt's mouth when his strong thighs rose
to tightly capture Mike's hips as they slid against one another. "Not just for this, but . . ."

"But this was definitely one reason?" Kurt said, his laughter breathless and husky. "I know, I felt the same way. Uhn, you feel so good. Dance with me, Mike."

Mike pulled back a little to look into his eyes, making sure he was correctly interpreting the request. He smiled at what he saw. "Fred or Ginger?"

Wrapping one leg around Mike's waist, Kurt rubbed suggestively against him. "You looked hot in that tux earlier tonight, showing up exactly when I needed you, impressing everyone with the way you moved so gracefully. You need to be Fred."

"I was hoping you might say that," he groaned, the conversation drifting away into deep, passionate kisses and the timeless, beautiful dance of lovers.
Good Morning

Kurt awoke to the pleasant pressure of lips moving against his neck and shoulder. The faint tickle of breath against his ear made him huff a small laugh, and the lips traveled to touch his cheek, chin, nose, and mouth. Prying one eye open, he found himself looking into Mike's smiling face. He pulled the other man closer and kissed him again. "Good morning."

"Hey. Still think you're dreaming?" Mike asked, his gaze tender and loving as he looked into Kurt's eyes.

Carding his fingertips through the other man’s wildly disarranged black hair, Kurt shook his head. "My dreams are never as good as this."

"You sure? You were smiling in your sleep," Mike said, nuzzling Kurt's jaw and provoking a contented-sounding sigh. "In fact, you were sleeping so soundly that I was sorry to wake you, but I decided to be selfish and steal a little time with you before you have to get ready for work."

"I'm glad you did," he replied, allowing his hands to roam along the warm, well defined surface of Mike's back and shoulders. Suddenly, he frowned. "And I hope by 'soundly', you're not trying to tell me that I was snoring again."

"Maybe a little."

He winced. "Oh, God, really? I never used to snore! Was it as bad as the last time?"

Mike shrugged. "You'll have to ask your dad. I'm pretty sure he heard it all the way in Lima." At Kurt's horrified expression, he started laughing. "I'm kidding! It was nothing. Just enough to tell me that you were sleeping deeply. I was glad to hear it, actually. It worried me when you said that you hadn't been sleeping very well lately."

"Having you here helped," he admitted softly. "I can't remember the last time I felt so relaxed and happy."

Snuggling down lower in the bed, Mike pressed an ear against Kurt’s heart, listening to its strong steady beat. "Me too. I usually wake up a couple of times at night, but after you fell asleep in my arms last night, I don't think I even moved until about ten minutes ago."

Kurt frowned. "You don't mean to say that you were just lying here listening to me snore? . . . that is, breathe deeply for a while before waking me up."

"Couldn't help myself. You were just so cute. Did you know you twitch your nose like a little bunny when you're asleep?"

"I do not!"

He laughed. "You actually do, and it's adorable."

"Adorable?"

Seeing that he was unimpressed with this description, Mike tugged him onto his side, so they were facing and began peppering tiny pecks over the surface of Kurt's face as he added, "There's nothing wrong with that. Especially when you're also hot, and handsome, and sexy. Also, talented, and gorgeous, and very smart. Not to mention totally kissable . . . and huggable . . . and lickable . . . and
At this, Kurt finally gave in to the giggles he had been trying to hold back, pressing a hand over Mike's mouth. "Okay, okay, enough! Quit while you're ahead."

"Fine, I won't say it. That doesn't mean I won't think it," he protested, eyes twinkling. "Because you totally are all of those things and more."

"So are you," Kurt told him fondly, "and I'm glad that we're both so wonderful, but if this continues we might never get out of bed and I need to think about getting ready for work. What time is it, anyway?"

Mike lifted his head to peer over Kurt's shoulder at the clock on his nightstand. "About eight-thirty." He continued his momentum, pushing Kurt onto his back again and rolling on top of him, kissing his neck as his hands began to explore. "You said your appointment isn't until ten, right?"

Kurt's arms rose to encircle him, body arching into Mike's even as he protested, "That's not nearly as much time as you think." Instinctively shifting to match the suggestive movements of Mike's body, he explained, "It usually takes me . . . unh . . . at least an hour to get ready. I have to . . . oh, right there . . . I have to shower and shave . . . no, God, don't stop . . . um, and, and moisturize. C-can't forget that. Ah! Oh! Damn, do you have a license in this too? That's really good. Uh, what was I saying again?"

"Morning routine," Mike mumbled, proving that he was listening even though most of his attention was busy elsewhere.

"Right, um, I still have to pick my outfit for the day . . . hunh, wow! And, um, um, oh, g-get dressed. I have to get dressed."

Mike paused to look him in the eye. "I won't object if you choose not to," he teased, then returned to his previous occupation.

"Have to . . . client, lesson," Kurt mumbled, struggling to form a complete sentence. Taking a deep breath, he managed, "Then I need to exercise, and have breakfast, and, oh holy crap!" Kurt completely lost track of whatever point he had been trying to make, unable to think about anything except the way Mike was making him feel.

A short while later, the two men lay in each others arms, breathless and smiling, stroking skin languidly as they nuzzled and cuddled, waiting for their mutual high to die away. "Well, I think we can tick exercise off the list," Mike said brightly, pressing his lips against Kurt's hair and making him laugh. Nibbling his ear, he added, "And showers go faster with two."

"Or not," Kurt chuckled, stroking the forearm that was encircling his ribcage.

Mike smiled. "Okay, maybe not, but I'm sure there are other ways to save time. You could always skip the shaving. You look sexy with stubble and I'll bet your voice-lesson girl would think so, too."

He snorted. "My voice-lesson 'girl' is old enough to be my mother. Possibly even my grandmother."

"In that case, better make it stubble and tight pants. Do your good deed for the day and make the lesson more fun. Unless she wouldn't be able to concentrate on the music that way. I mean, I know I couldn't if I was looking at that gorgeous ass all day."

Kurt smacked him playfully, "You jerk," he chortled. "Shut up, or I won't allow you to come with me today."
"Am I invited?" he asked, perking up at the idea.

"You are if you can behave yourself," Kurt decided. He had not even considered it before this moment but suddenly he could not bear to part so soon. "Gwen won't mind. In fact, she'd probably appreciate having an impartial audience before her audition. Besides, I'd love to have you see what I do."

He felt a little nervous as he said that part, mentally crossing his fingers in the hope that Mike would be interested. He had not shared a music lesson with a lover since he had coached Emmitt. For reasons he could not quite name, it had never felt right to invite Zachary to share that part of his life. Perhaps it had been a subconscious desire to avoid seeing the boredom that he knew would be there.

"I'd love to!" Mike said, sitting up, eyes bright, full of vim and enthusiasm again.

Kurt grinned. "Great! Then why don't you go grab the first shower while I hunt up something for you to wear? I haven't got time to take you all the way across town to Rachel's place this morning. My client is a very sweet lady, but she'd definitely side-eye me for bringing a man in a tux to her session, and I'm positive she'd fire me and find a new coach if I brought her a man wearing a Star Trek t-shirt and boxer shorts."

Laughing, Mike said, "I'll defer to your judgement. What do you say I fix us some of my world-famous pancakes when I'm done, so you can get ready?"

"Deal," Kurt agreed, suddenly excited about this day. "And after the lesson, I'll be free so I can show you around the city and maybe introduce you to a few of my friends. I know that Emily, for one, has been dying to meet you."

"Looking forward to it," Mike told him, pressing a kiss to Kurt's lips as he climbed out of bed and vanished into the bathroom.

Soon, the sounds of water and off-key singing floated out. Kurt grinned as he got up and put his bathrobe on, loving that Mike could be so unselfconscious now. His lack of singing skill compared with most of the other Glee kids had been a source of deep discomfort to Mike in high school. No one had mocked him for it, but it had been like pulling to teeth to get him to do more than mouth most songs, preferring to express himself through dance.

Humming a light counterpoint to the melody Mike was warbling; Kurt checked his phone for messages, startled to find more than a dozen, mostly from friends who had called to congratulate him on putting Zach in his place. Kurt wondered how they had heard, then dismissed the thought. Rachel had probably spent some time gossiping about the premiere last night, and that word of his own small part in it had leaked back to their mutual acquaintances. He'd have to take a few minutes and catch everyone up after work.

Kurt began to search his closet for potential outfits for them both. Mike was slightly taller than he was and longer through the torso while Kurt had longer legs.

For himself, Kurt chose one of his favorite new outfits from the Marc Jacobs Spring collection, slacks, shirt, light sweater and jacket all in different shades of blue. Adding underwear and shoes to the stack of garments, he set them neatly on the bed to wait for his turn at the shower, then started putting together something for Mike.

Pulling out and rejecting several items, Kurt nodded as he drew forth a pair of charcoal slacks that he normally wore with a pair of his fancier shoes, both to show them off and to hide the fact that the pants were just slightly too short on him. He matched it with a pumpkin colored button-down shirt
that someone had given him as a gift, but which Kurt never wore due to the unappealing, sallow appearance it gave to his skin. It would look far better with Mike's darker coloring and no one who saw him would recognize that he was wearing borrowed clothes.

Adding a pair of socks and shoes – for once glad that he wore a 12 – Kurt went to place the outfit and some boxers atop the hamper just inside the bathroom door. He caught a glimpse of Mike's shining, water-slick skin through a gap in the shower curtain, and was sorely tempted to change his mind and hop in with him, but he held strong. There would be plenty of time for that later.

They managed to get through their morning routines with no more than a few kisses and hugs in passing. Kurt was secretly thrilled with how easy it was, knowing that this boded well for future co-habitation. Mike had taken a few minutes to examine the apartment, sheepishly admitting that he had been too busy to pay much attention to his surroundings the night before. He was particularly pleased with the large poster on Kurt's dining room wall, especially when Kurt told him how he had bought it as a reminder of their time together in Lima.

Mike's pancake skills were every bit as good as advertised and Kurt ate his fill before leading Mike out of the apartment and escorting him through the bustling streets of New York. The studio he rented wasn't too far away and unless it was bad weather or he was running late for some reason, Kurt liked to walk to and from. He could grab his truck later for going to Rachel's place and picking up Mike's belongings.

"I still can't believe how much traffic this place has," Mike mused, watching the hundreds of humans and sea of vehicles, the majority of them bright yellow taxicabs, hurrying through the city. "I saw it the year New Directions went to Nationals here, and I've seen a million movies, but it's somehow different when you're actually in the thick of it."

"It's not for the faint of heart," Kurt agreed with a laugh. "This is why I usually walk. I love being part of the hustle and bustle. I grab the subway once and a while if it's raining or something, but I hate it. You get used to it, though."

He shrugged. "I guess you'd have to."

Worried, Kurt said, "Are you having second thoughts? About moving here, I mean?"

Mike pulled his attention away from the traffic and grabbed Kurt's hand. "No, don't worry, I'm not going to change my mind. This place is a little overwhelming, but if living inside of an ant farm is the price of being with you, then I'm willing to pay it." Seeing that Kurt was not entirely reassured by this, he picked up his hand and kissed it. "Don't worry, Kurt. Show me some of those famous sights later and just give me a little time to get accustomed to all this. I've lived in a lot of places and I'm a very adaptable guy. Before too long, I'm sure I'll fall as much in love with this place as you have."

Honesty shone from his dark eyes, bright and sincere, and Kurt allowed himself to relax. Suddenly a memory flashed through his mind and he winced. "All the time I was living in Lima I had dreams about the things I would do and see and how I would take New York by storm, but I was completely unprepared for the reality of it when I finally got here. I had lived in the dorms part time when I was at Dalton, but this was the first time I'd ever been more than an hour away."

"Homesick?"

"Terribly," he said. "I was just starting college and I was overwhelmed by the noise and traffic and press of strangers when all I wanted was a familiar face. I barely ventured out of my dorm room for the first week. My poor roommate thought I was some kind of basket-case because I kept bursting into tears every time I saw something that reminded me of home."
"How long did it take you to adapt?" Mike asked, squeezing his hand sympathetically.

He smiled. "Not long. After a while I started making friends and finding where I fit. What cemented it was the first time I got to see a real Broadway musical. It was . . . well, you saw for yourself how magical the whole experience can be. And then I got asked out by a cute guy for the first time, and that helped too!"

Mike chuckled. "Did you take him up on it?"

"No, Blaine and I had made our apologies over the summer and become friends again, but I was still very much in the tragic-diva moping stage about breaking up," Kurt admitted sheepishly. "But it was nice to realize that I actually had possibilities here, and that the society around me was a lot more accepting than I was used to. That thought relaxed me a lot and helped shake me out of the self-protective bubble I'd been living in."

"I'm glad. Boy, I remember the first time I ventured out with a guy," Mike said, shaking his head in rueful remembrance. "It was probably two or three months after I left Lima and decided to be open about my sexuality. I'd long since accepted myself, but I'd never actually put it to the test, so when a guy asked me to have dinner with him, I was terrified. Not enough to say no mind you. He was hot."

Kurt grinned and playfully pinched his cheek. "Aww, that's so sweet! Little baby gay was going out on his first big-boy date."

Mike swatted his hand away, but he could not help laughing. "Shut up, I'm sure you were no better off the first time."

"Worse, probably," he admitted with a smile. "I must have changed clothes about fifty times. And I was pacing so much, waiting for him to show up, that my dad threatened me with a tranquilizer gun."

Chuckling, Mike asked, "Does Burt actually have a tranquilizer gun?"

"I never asked. Too afraid to know the answer. Anyway, back to your date."

"Right, well the guy, his name was Terry . . . or maybe Gary? I can't remember anymore. Anyway, he was really nice. Kind of a classic redneck, which my naïve young self hadn't thought actually came in the variety of gay. Not my type at all, but like I said he was good looking, and I was flattered that someone had asked. Not to mention that I was more than a little anxious to turn in my v-card."

Kurt raised an eyebrow. "Yes, I imagine you were. Why do I have a feeling this story doesn't end well?"

"Because you're smarter than I was," Mike decided promptly. "So, here I am, all dressed up in my tight jeans and boots and very best plaid shirt, having ribs and chicken at some little barbecue joint in Oklahoma while Gary or Terry tells me all about the cattle ranch he lived and worked at. I was doing my best to seem interested and make him believe we'd really hit it off. You know, generally like somebody who would be willing to be taken home to bed."

Kurt smiled. "And did he?"

"Eventually, after quite a few beers – I kept worrying that we'd get carded, but we never did - and a little line-dancing and cheering him on while he rode one those mechanical bulls to impress me . . ."

At this, Kurt burst out laughing. "Oh, you're kidding!"
"I'm not," he chuckled. "Anyway, it was still early when we eventually made it back to his place and he decided to show me around. I lost track of how many cattle we looked at, and the smell was starting to make me feel a little queasy but I soldiered on like the horny teenager I was. Then we got to the rendering pen, where the remains of that day's butchering were being delivered for disposal. Remember when I told you how I draw the line at working with waste products?"

"Oh, god, what was he thinking?"

Mike made a face. "I don't know, but I threw up meals I'd eaten a week ago, most of it on my date. Needless to say, there was no virginity losing happening that night, nor did I get asked out for a second date."

Kurt was laughing almost too hard to walk straight, so it was fortunate that they had reached their destination. "I shouldn't laugh," he wheezed, "but that's awful, and disgusting, and so freakin' funny!"

By this time, Mike was laughing too. "I know! Of course, I didn't think it was very funny at the time. Fortunately, the next couple of times I dated things went much better and eventually I managed to become the confident, well-adjusted, entirely non-virginal gay man you see today."

"Lucky for me." Still giggling a little, Kurt led the way to his studio and unlocked the door. They were a few minutes early, so he had time to set everything up for the day's lesson and show Mike around the place. "Not much to see, I know, but this is where the magic happens."

Mike nodded, looking around the neat, well-organized room, noting that the space was clean and polished and at the same time comfortable and welcoming. "It's very, you."

"Thanks," Kurt told him, recognizing the compliment in his tone. He looked up and smiled when the sound of footsteps on the hardwood floor alerted him to the arrival of his client. "Gwen, right on time!"

She was a still attractive older woman whose silvery hair was arranged in a short, stylish cut that flattered her slender physique and narrow face. Her deep brown eyes scanned over Mike with a combination of curiosity and surprise. "Are you sure? I can come back in a few minutes if you're not ready for me."

"No, please come on in," he urged taking her hand and giving her a friendly peck on one thin cheek. "Gwen Suttler, allow me to introduce you to Mike Chang. I was hoping you wouldn't object to a small but impartial audience as we get you ready for your audition Friday."

Suddenly, her eyes widened and she laughed. "Is this the gentleman who made such a splash with you at the 'Trophy Wife' party last night?"

Startled, Kurt said, "What?"

Reaching into her large shoulder-bag, the woman pulled out a copy of a popular local entertainment journal. "Honey, you need to keep track of who's watching if you're going to go around bitching out ex-boyfriends and performing showstoppers with new ones."

She found the page she was looking for and handed it to him. Kurt read silently, holding the page out far enough for Mike to read it too. There was a glowing review of Rachel's new show, followed by a description of the after-party, where Kurt's rant was highlighted in exquisite detail. The paper was a bit of a rag, so it shouldn't have surprised him so much, but it was weird to read about a scene he had been too angry to recall properly, seeing himself and Zachary through the eyes of a thrilled gossip
columnist. She seemed to have taken particularly joy from his casual tossing of the wine into his ex's face. Kurt got the distinct impression that whoever wrote this had been in his shoes at some point.

"Why would she write this?" he wondered helplessly, knowing his face must be about ten shades of red by the time he finished reading about the impromptu song and dance number that had followed. "Why would anyone care about some random guy having a fight with his ex-boyfriend in a roomful of Broadway stars?"

Gwen laughed. "Because you're not some random guy. Half the hopefuls and a good many of the success stories in this town have taken instruction from you. Do you honestly think that none of us have compared notes? I know you have a better grasp of the gossip mill than that!"

"Not to mention that Rachel was talking you up pretty good last night," Mike threw in, shrugging at Kurt's look of disbelief.

"Not just me, Gene Kelly," Kurt shot back, reminding him of the strong sell their friend had been giving his own skills. At least he understood the reason for the copious phone messages now!

Gwen laughed again, eyeing the two men with interest. "This is only one of a dozen papers that were covering the event last night, so I'm positive this isn't your only source of buzz. If you play your cards right you could milk this for a lot of extra business." Addressing Mike, she said, "You are a dance instructor, I take it?"

"I . . . have been," he said. "I can't do it here without a local business license. I sent in the application, but I haven't got it yet."

"So you will be giving lessons?" she persisted.

Her avid interest told Kurt that Mike was not going to have any difficulty lining up clients once he got started. Gwen had been active in Broadway circles for many years and her personal recommendation could do great things for an up and comer. He had not been aware that Mike had already set the wheels in motion to begin doing what he loved, but the realization thrilled him. If he had taken that step, then there was no doubt that Mike was serious in his intention to live here. It made him want to shout and sing and dance for joy, but he kept those feelings locked behind a calm mask.

"That's my plan," Mike said with a grin. "Eventually, anyway."

Kurt let them get to know each other a bit, then glanced at the clock and clapped his hands. "Okay, enough about us," he said briskly. "Let's get you ready to wow the pants off that musical director on Friday, Gwen. In addition to the usual run-through material, I'm going to have you practice some performance pieces in full character. Just to give us both a feel for how it's going to look once you get the part."

"I like the way you think," she agreed.

"If you don't object to Mike staying, I may have him read the introduction lines before each song, so I can see how they'll come across."

"Fine by me," she agreed, drawing her shoulders back and centering herself to get back to business. "You're the boss."

Three hours later, everyone was a little tired but Kurt and Gwen were both satisfied with her performance. Her two audition choices had been picked apart, criticized, tweaked, discussed and put back together in many different ways, giving her more options to choose from when it came time to
use them. She sounded fabulous, looked great, and radiated confidence. That was one of Kurt's primary goals with any singer, making certain that they believe in their own abilities. It was surprising how many veterans were plagued with self-doubt.

"If you do that on Friday and don't get this part, I'm going to personally go down there and bitch-slap the director," Kurt vowed, giving her a congratulatory hug. "You were fantastic today. I'm proud of you."

She hugged back, beaming happily. "Thanks, Kurt." She held out a hand to shake Mike's. "And thank you, too. Having someone to perform for really helped."

"My pleasure," he told her. "Honestly. I never realized just how much work goes into a private voice lesson before. I've developed a whole new respect for both of your crafts. You're going to do great this week, I know it."

Thanking them both again, Gwen gathered her things and departed.

"Were you just being polite?" Kurt asked him curiously as he put everything back in its former order.

"No, that was really something," Mike told him. "Of course I remember how lessons were with Mr. Shue but this was totally different. One on one it's so much more intense and precise. I could feel the difference when she would follow your advice and make some tiny change to her performance. You're really great at this, Kurt."

He found himself blushing at the sincere words, unable to quite look Mike in the eye. "Thanks. Well, I'm done here for today, so let's go home and grab my truck. Do you want to go get your things from Rachel's now? She said she'd be home until three. Or we can go get lunch first, if you'd rather."

"Let's get my stuff," he decided. "We can drop your truck off back at the apartment, change into something comfortable and then wander through the streets of New York like a couple of gawky small-town tourists."

Kurt laughed, liking that idea very much. The years had turned him into one of those jaded locals, often too busy to look up and really see all the wonders this amazing city had to offer. "That sounds like fun. Let's go!"
Settling In

After a short visit with Rachel and her fathers, during which Rachel positively gloated over the fact that Kurt had been mentioned by name in four different columns about her show, he and Mike dropped off the suitcases and changed quickly into more comfortable clothes and went exploring.

"Mercedes . . . Mercedes . . . yes, I know . . . of course I will . . . you know I did . . . he is . . . yes, he's right here. Do you want to talk to him to prove it? No, I'm not going to . . . because it's personal! Just because you . . . all right . . . no, there's nothing wrong but you . . . Mercedes, stop interrupting me!"

Mike was laughing silently as he listened to half of the mostly one-sided phone call Kurt was having with his best friend. She had called as Kurt was giving a store by store window shopping tour of his favorite clothing boutiques on Fifth Avenue, and Mike had been more than happy to take a break to let him answer the call. He was currently standing with his butt perched on the edge of a large ornamental sidewalk planter, watching with amused eyes as Kurt paced back and forth, unable to stay still while talking.

"Hi, Mercedes!" Mike called out loudly, capturing Kurt by the waist when his pattern drew him close again. He could hear her cheerful return greeting. Glancing at Kurt, who had stopped moving, giving him the opportunity to speak again if he liked, Mike grinned and added, "Can you give Kurt back to me now? I'd let you guys keep talking but he has me tied to the bed and I really need him to finish what he started. Thanks, talk to you later!"

Her wild laughter cackled clearly over the line as Kurt squawked, "Don't listen to him! We're on Fifth, broad daylight, fully clothed and . . . what do you mean, I must be doing something wrong? Yeah, well, it's not my fault you and David have the constitution of rabbits! Mike and I are more about quality. Yes, dear, that means we've 'done it'. Being a teacher is having a bad effect on you, Mercedes, you sound like a thirteen-year-old. Yes, more than once! Jeez . . ."

He was laughing by this time, shooting Mike looks that were equal parts exasperation and fondness as the other man began to subtly but suggestively jerk his pelvis upward, all the while keeping his facial expression ridiculously wide eyed and innocent.

"I'm surrounded by perverts. Anyhow, I have to go. I promise I'll mail you a copy of the Broadway Journal. Rachel tells me it had the best write-up. Actually, I'll send two and you can give one to my dad, he'd get a kick out of it."

Kurt paused for a few seconds to listen, then smiled and said, "So, is that a yes about the wedding planning? Great! In that case, here's my first official dress and decorating tip for you: say no to orange. Okay? A few flowers in your bouquet and decorations will be fine, just don't overdo it. It tends to be an overwhelming color and you don't want your wedding chapel to look like a pumpkin patch. Trust me. Mercedes, how long have I been putting practice weddings together? Uh, huh, and who was it that put together a perfect wedding for my Dad and Carole with only a week's notice all those years ago? That's right! Okay, I'll let you go. Love you too." He laughed. "I'll make you a deal; I'll kiss Mike for you if you'll kiss David for me. Right . . . okay, bye."

Stuffing his phone in his pocket, Kurt leaned sideways and grabbed Mike's chin, giving him a hard, smacking kiss on the lips. "That one is from Mercedes."

Mike grinned and kissed him back. "You can tell her I said thanks. That was quite a conversation. Was she worried that you were being stubbornly celibate?"
"I guess. She ordered us to, and I quote, 'get some of that hot Euro-Asian fusion going'. She seemed disappointed that I didn't want to give her all the details."

A blush tinted Mike's high cheekbones, even as he laughed. "You think she's looking for ideas to spice things up with her fiancée?"

"No, she's just nosy when it comes to my love life! Though if she does want advice on spicing things up, she's grilling the wrong friend. Maybe I'll tell her to ask Tina. There's no way she hasn't had to get a little creative with Artie and five kids offers pretty solid proof that they have an active love-life."

"She is pretty wild," Mike agreed mildly.

Kurt's eyebrow rose. "Excuse me? How would you know? Aren't you the guy who just told me about the nineteen-year-old who was desperate to get his v-card taken away?"

"One hundred percent true, but Tina and I did a little making out while were dating. You know, before I made up my mind to tell her the truth. A couple of times she was so into it that I wasn't entirely sure I needed to be there."

Kurt made a face. "Wow, really more than I wanted to know." He smiled and shook his head. "Sounds like Artie is a pretty lucky guy, though."

Capturing his hand, Mike squeezed it and said, "He is, but so am I."

Squeezing back, Kurt said, "That makes three of us, then. So, what would you like to see next? I'm sure you aren't really as interested in clothes as you're so sweetly pretending to be. We have all afternoon to do whatever we want. It can be as touristy as you like."

Mike considered for a moment, then said, "Can you give me a few suggestions?"

"Let me see . . . we can go over to Battery Park and see the military fort and the Hope Garden memorial, then grab the ferry over to Ellis and Liberty Islands if you'd like to see the Statue of Liberty and the immigration rolls. Or we can go up to the top of the Empire State Building, though I have to tell you that I've done that and it isn't nearly as thrilling as the movies make it out to be. We could go back and see Broadway by daylight if you want to check out more of what's playing. Soho and The Village are right near there, if you'd like to check those out. They're a little run-down but a lot of fun to poke around in, especially if you're at all interested in LGBT history."

"I am, but maybe not today," Mike decided.

Kurt nodded. It could be a pretty weighty subject and they were just out for fun today. "Okay, we also have the Metropolitan Museum of Art, or Rockefeller Center? We could go poke around in Central Park, or . . . oh, are you still a baseball fan? I think that should be in season by now, so if you want to we can see if anyone is playing today. We could either go to the Bronx to check out Yankee Stadium or to Queens if you're more of a Mets man. I don't care, either way."

Mike looked extremely tempted by this offer, but said, "Today isn't supposed to be all about me. Or do you like baseball? I don't think I've ever asked you before."

"Like is a bit strong, but it's okay. Dad used to take me to Cincinnati Reds games every now and then when I was growing up." Seeing Mike's questioning look, he explained farther, "He'd already figured out that I was gay, but I don't think he'd quite reconciled himself to the fact yet. He wanted to steer me toward traditionally boyish things, since I was more interested in girlish ones like fashion and musicals. Not that girls can't like sports, but you know how it is. Until I came along, he'd never
really understood that sexuality isn't a choice."

"That doesn't upset you?" Mike asked curiously, settling into step beside Kurt as they began walking again and noting the amusement on his face as he recalled Burt's less than subtle attempt at manly father and son bonding.

Kurt shook his head. "Not any more. My dad and I learned a lot from each other over the years, including the fact that we can't change each other and don't really want to. He stopped dragging me to ball games when I was about 12, and I stopped trying to sneak stylish clothes into his wardrobe in the hope that he'd give up on flannel and baggy jeans."

They laughed together and then Mike said, "So, I guess baseball is out then."

"Not at all. The uniforms are hideous and the food is unhealthy, and I've never understood why they can't figure out a winner in five innings, which would only take an hour or so, instead of nine that take up half the afternoon, but I don't mind an occasional game," Kurt told him. "I'm not one of those boyfriends who pouts and whines if he doesn't get his own way all the time, Mike. Baseball may not be my favorite pastime, but it can be fun as long as I bring sunscreen and something to read during the boring parts."

"Maybe another time then," Mike said, giving him a one-armed hug. Kurt was relieved that his willing sacrifice would go unneeded for today. "Actually, why don't we start with some lunch and then figure out what we want to do from there."

Kurt smiled. "Excellent idea. Dining can actually be a cultural adventure in itself around here. For example, Little Italy and Chinatown are both places that I simply don't set foot in unless I'm ready to eat. The smells alone are enough to drive a person wild."

"Would you have any objection to Chinatown?" Mike asked hopefully.

"As long as you don't try to force me to eat chicken feet."

Grinning at the old joke Mike said, "I promise, I won't. That was more my mom's thing anyway, but I grew up on traditionally prepared Chinese food and I still love it."

"Then let's go," Kurt said simply. "I understand cultural pride through food. My dad isn't a great cook, but he used to make this amazing sauerbraten from a recipe that had been passed down from his German great-grandmother."

"Did he stop?" Mike asked curiously, taking note of the 'used to'.

Kurt shrugged a bit guiltily. "Yeah, at least when I lived there he did. I refused to eat sauerbraten anymore after I found out it was venison. I couldn't stand the idea that we were eating Bambi."

Mike laughed. "Guess it was lucky for your dad that Disney hadn't made any movies starring cute baby pigs, cows or chickens at that time."

He chuckled. "I know, right? I did give vegetarianism a shot in high school, but that had more to do with worrying that I was going to get too fat to be a Cheerio than any kind of morality issue. Rachel tried to get me to keep it up, but I eventually went back to my evil, omnivorous ways in spite of her emailing me a constant stream of sad-looking baby animal photos."

After lunch, the two young men spent the afternoon wandering through any section of the city that looked interesting to them. Mike did eventually give in to the lure of Liberty Island and Ellis Island, which somehow led them to a discussion of the original "X-Men" movie and who was hotter
between Hugh Jackman (Kurt's choice) and James Marsden (Mike's).

"Come on, the dude shoots lasers out of his eyes! And if we're just talking about the actor, he did a couple of movie musicals later. Doesn't that count for a few hotness points?"

Kurt scoffed. "Please. Lasers and a buffed-out leather uniform have nothing on retractable metal claws and a physique that tempts me to believe there's a God. And if we're only talking about actors, are you forgetting that Hugh played Peter Allen in the smash Broadway hit, "The Boy From Oz"? Not to mention that he's hosted both the Oscars and the Tony's."

The discussion continued to Greenwich Village, where Kurt brought Mike just as evening fell, to introduce him to the other side of his work/play time, the Regal Theatre. Neither man would yield their point, so they finally called it a draw. Just the same, Kurt could not resist as he hugged Emily, Elise and the other members of the Regal crew hello, calling out, "Straw poll! "X-men", who was hotter, Cyclops or Wolverine?"

Answers flew out from everyone, leaving a tie when two of the straight guys refused to pick on the grounds that Halle Berry was hotter than both of them.

"Misty, help me out here!" Kurt pleaded when she was the only one left who had not chosen.

She laughed. "Sorry, Kurt. I know you have a kink for Mister Hot and Indestructible, but my vote goes to the Professor."

Kurt and Mike both made disbelieving faces at this.

"Hey, I think bald dudes are sexy," she said with a shrug. "And his voice sends shivers down my spine. I've been Team Stewart ever since I first saw him playing Captain Picard. You gotta love a guy who commands with respect and intelligence instead of brute force. Plus he was the only one who didn't look ridiculous in that form-fitting singlet everybody wore the first season of Trek."

Though she had not won him the argument, Mike warmed to her immediately. "You're a Star Trek fan?"

"Totally! You?"

"Yeah!"

Kurt rolled his eyes at Emily, who was watching and laughing as Connor and Jason immediately jumped in with the two as they fell into a rapturous discussion of the characters and starships that categorized the various series. "I think I just lost my boyfriend to a bunch of aliens in uniform," Kurt said wryly, listening to Mike extol the virtues of the original series.

She just laughed at him. "Now you know how I feel when you and Elise start ranting about fashion designers who revolutionized entertainment as we know it."

His eyes sparkled, knowing she had a point. It was cute, though, how enthusiastic Mike was about such a – to him anyway – silly thing. He'd have to ask whether Mike had ever brought this subject with Carole. Suspecting he now finally had a good idea what Finn, Artie, Sam, Puck and Mike used to talk about during their weekend video-game sessions, a ritual he had always been a little jealous to be excluded from in spite of not being much of a gamer in high school, Kurt suddenly felt better about missing them. Between this and Sam's endless obsession with anything by James Cameron, he would have been bored to death. It was also nice to see Mike making friends so quickly within his circle.
"Mike!" he called out a few minutes later, giving a sharp whistle when nobody heard him over their own excited chatter. His boyfriend looked up, startled. Kurt laughed. "If you can manage to tear yourself away from the Enterprise for five minutes, I'll give you a tour of the theater, and then we can let these guys get back to work and see how things are going."

Mike quickly exchanged phone numbers with Misty and the guys before making his way back over to Kurt. "Your friends are really great," he said happily as they broke away from the others.

"Glad you like them," Kurt said honestly. "I hoped you guys might hit it off, though I wasn't expecting that particular reason."

The theater was small, but Kurt had had a part in nearly every aspect of its productions over the last few years, so he was able to make the short tour interesting and informative, throwing in anecdotes about the history of costumes and prop pieces that Mike appeared to find very intriguing.

"I can't believe you own your own New York Theatre," Mike marveled as they returned to take seats in the audience section, preparing to see what the others were working on. "That's super impressive."

"Co-own. More like a ten percent share really," he corrected. "Emily and Elise found the place a few years ago. It was really run-down and in danger of being torn down so it was relatively affordable. Em and El took out a mortgage and the rest of us; that is all of the people you met tonight who were making more than just their rent and food each month; put in enough capital to refurbish it and get it going. Every time one of our shows made a profit we put it straight back into repairs, improvements, new costume materials or set pieces, or whatever was needed most. I imagine we'd get a pretty decent return on our investment if we wanted to sell the place, but so far none of us has wanted to. There’s something to be said for putting on whatever we want to. We might never be the Gershwin, but we have a lot of fun and we usually draw a fair crowd, so we scrape a tiny profit off it too."

Mike looked around, nodding in satisfaction. "It's still impressive, more so actually. It's really cool that you all do this for the love of it, not just worrying about whether you make a ton of money. I think that's part of the reason I never settled down to one permanent job before. Dancing gives me that kind of joy, almost everything else is just a way to make ends meet."

"Almost?" Kurt asked, interested to find out more about the motives of this man, who was still in many ways a mystery to him in spite of their long acquaintance.

"I did enjoy the massage therapy," he said, sounding a little embarrassed as he added, "Probably why it's the only occupation I devoted three years of my life to, even though I had to take a bunch of other jobs the entire time to pay for it."

Kurt leaned over to press his head against Mike's shoulder. "That makes sense to me. Anyone who's ever seen you dance could tell that you have an innate understanding of the human body and how it moves and flows. You're also very empathetic. It's not surprising that you'd be drawn to a discipline that's all about making people relax and feel better."

Looking surprised and a bit flattered, Mike lifted his arm and snuggled closer to Kurt, resting his temple against the top of Kurt's head. "That's my dance. Anyone who's ever seen you dance could tell that you have an innate understanding of the human body and how it moves and flows. You're also very empathetic. It's not surprising that you'd be drawn to a discipline that's all about making people relax and feel better."

"Do you miss it?" Mike whispered, noticing that Kurt was avidly watching the current scene play out, his mouth automatically following along to the words when Georgia began to sing. "You say you've done pretty much everything around here, but you've never mentioned being out front. Don't you ever want to be in the spotlight, singing for the crowd?"
"Sometimes," he whispered back when the song came to a close and the group paused to discuss possible changes to the blocking, "but acting isn't really my thing anymore. Even in college it made me nervous, and to be brutally honest, I wasn’t that good at it. I tried, but every emotion I felt, including stomach-churning terror, seemed to be right there on my face for the whole audience to see. At least according to my professors. Musical directorship and costuming, or whatever else they need from me, is enough. I can still sing all the songs, and play all the parts I like in private."

Loyally, Mike told him, "I'll bet you're better than you think."

Kurt smiled. "It's sweet of you to say so, but I'm really not."

Even though Kurt was not technically working on this production, he was asked several times for his opinion and he eventually got up and headed down to the stage to help with a couple of things he had detected problems with. Mike looked on with a pleased smile, able to tell how much Kurt loved what he was doing.

"Sorry to take so long," Kurt apologized when rehearsal finally drew to a close and everyone said goodbye to each other. "I tend to get a little sucked in once I start. That's why I decided not to direct this production. I knew it would take more time than I could give, with everything else I had going on. I'm trying to learn how to prioritize. Something else I've never been good at."

He shrugged, trying to brush that comment off, but Mike captured his hands and turned Kurt to face him. "Hey, you're not still brooding about not spending enough time with that dick of an ex, are you?"

Kurt flushed, his traitorous face giving him away. "No, I just... I'd hate to repeat the same mistakes and leave you feeling like I don't have enough time for you." He swallowed hard. "You mean so much to me already, Mike. I don't want to mess this up."

Pulling him into a comforting hug, Mike whispered in his ear, "You won't. I'm not like him, Kurt. I promise you. I won't ever pout in silence if I feel taken for granted, and I certainly won't try to punish you by screwing around behind your back. In fact, I won't feel taken for granted, or let you feel that way either, because we're going to be honest with each other and enjoy however much time we're lucky enough to have together. We're going to be partners for the rest of our lives, if I have my way."

Realizing that Kurt had started to cry when the strong arms tightened around him and wet warmth began to soak into his shoulder, Mike held him firmly with one arm, the other hand lifting to stroke the back of his head. "Partners, friends, lovers; I want it all, and I want it with you."

"I love you, so much," Kurt said, looking at Mike with wet but happy eyes. "I want all of that, too. I'm not naive enough to think we'll never fight, but I promise you that I'll do my best to be open with you and try to understand your side. And I'll apologize when I'm in the wrong, though I should warn you here and now that I have a tendency to be very stubborn about my own point of view."

"I never would have guessed," he said with a smile, pressing his lips against Kurt's to seal the promise. "Let's grab some dinner and go home. We'll put on a movie we've both seen way too many times, and pay absolutely no attention to it."

Kurt laughed, dashing away the dampness on his cheeks. He loved how casually Mike had said that word, home. "Sounds perfect."
The Promise of Forever

The beginning of August found Kurt and Mike driving back to Ohio. It was a week until Mercedes and David's wedding and there were a million last-minute details cropping up that had poor Mercedes frantic. She had wanted a big church wedding, but was starting to panic as the day loomed closer. Knowing that she needed her best friend and wedding planner on-site, Kurt had closed up shop for a little summer vacation. His friend Georgia had kindly agreed to fill in with any clients who could not wait for his return.

Mike had received his business license in June and had started to take occasional dance students. He was not enough of an opportunist to have milked the gossip-rag publicity from Rachel's premiere party for clients, so business was light so far, but people had a way of finding what they needed, and the public knowledge of Mike's affiliation with Kurt – much to Kurt's own surprise and gratification - seemed to be enough to convince potential clients that Mike's standards would be high.

Living arrangements had also been settled. Finn and family had purchased the former Chang residence, and were settling in nicely. Finn was getting set up to begin his new job at McKinley high school while his wife had started working part-time in the pediatric ward at Lima General. She would work until around Halloween and then take the rest of the year off for maternity leave. For Kurt's impulsive guess about the upcoming increase in his family had proven correct. He would be an uncle again just before Thanksgiving.

Between the sale of his house and the money received from his share of the family business, Mike discovered that he had enough to rent a tiny dance studio a few blocks away from Kurt’s, as well as the apartment two floors down from Kurt's.

Kurt had been disappointed that Mike had followed through on his intention to keep a little distance between them in the early stages of their relationship, but he could not deny that it was working well for them. It was unexpectedly pleasant to retain a little private space, still knowing that Mike was only a couple of floors away. It felt right to be able to take their time, coordinating their schedules to meet up for real dates just like any other couple.

Depending on the weather and their own impulse, they spent evenings going to movies, concerts, plays, and sporting events, taking turns picking the venue. Kurt found it adorable that Mike loved long romantic walks, bike rides, and skating trips through Central Park during the long warm spring and summer days, never one to stay cooped up indoors when they could be out enjoying the day. His infectious spirit and the way Kurt could see him falling more and more in love with New York, was worth the trouble of buying extra sun-block.

They ended nearly every day together, cuddled up on Kurt's couch or Mike's big cozy loveseat before going to bed. They made love more often than not, but some nights they would just curl into each other and talk, or snuggle down to sleep with no other motive in mind. Oddly, those were some of the best nights of all.

The sudden, fiery destruction of his relationship with Zachary Carson had affected Kurt more deeply than he liked to admit. He was cautious not to push too hard or cling too tightly, unable to relax sometimes for the worry that he would seem inattentive or unappreciative if he admitted dislike for something that Mike was enthusiastic about. He had sternly resisted tagging along when Mike returned to Lima for a few days in May to sign the final papers on his house, sell off some furniture, and pack the rest into a trailer for his new home.

Unfortunately by the time Mike came back, Kurt had fretted so badly about being unhelpful that he
went too far the other way, barreling in and organizing all of Mike's belongings into his new apartment with barely a pause to consult him, much less express his happiness at having Mike back. He had nearly had a panic attack when Mike became irritated with his pushiness and they ended up having their first argument.

In short, they were learning the best ways to live with each other, slowly becoming comfortable with each other's habits and styles, beginning to compromise where it was necessary and adapt when it was not. Surprisingly, it was not as hard as Kurt had feared once he stopped anticipating trouble. Mike was very easy-going and inclined to let Kurt have his way in most areas, and Kurt was careful not to take advantage of that gift, or to take it for granted. He went out of his way to do nice things for his partner, making sure to offer sweet – and sometimes sexy – little gestures of thanks whenever Mike did something that touched his heart.

They began to relax into a shared life and Kurt did not think he had ever been happier with anyone. He could see the quiet joy and unwavering love that filled Mike's eyes every time he looked at him, and together they slowly healed the torn places in each other's soul.

The best thing about having flexible work schedules was that they could both afford to take off for Lima and spend the week before the wedding. Mike had naturally been invited as well, and since Kurt knew it would potentially feel a little strange for Mike to be staying at the Hummel home instead of the home he had grown up in, he was determined to make sure that this would be a good trip for both of them.

The families were of course ecstatic to have them back for another visit so soon. They had all heartily supported the change in status from long-distance friends to not-quite-live-in boyfriends, though Finn was still giving himself credit for getting them together in the first place. A hilarious delusion that the couple had decided to let him hang on to.

As Kurt pulled up in front of the Hummel home, he honked and then laughed in shock as family and friends virtually flooded out to greet the new arrivals. Burt and Carole, Christy and Kathy, Finn, Julie and little Kurt, Mercedes and David, Lynne Chang-Lee, her husband George and their two children, and to Kurt's immense surprise, Blaine Anderson and a short cheerful-looking blond man carrying a toddler.

An incoherent babble of greetings was exchanged as Kurt and Mike were passed from person to person in what felt like an endless string of hugs and kisses. Kurt cooed and congratulated his sister-in-law on the visible bump distending her blouse, hugged his nephew, siblings and parents, and finally found himself hugging Blaine, who still looked much the same as his teenaged self, except for a few more laugh lines and a longer, wilder mop of curly black hair.

"What are you doing here?" Kurt laughed, returning the back-pounding embrace Blaine greeted him with.

"I'm David's Best Man. Didn't anyone tell you?"

Kurt shot an accusing look at the widely grinning Mercedes and said, "Hello! Wedding coordinator, here?"

She just laughed. David, grin as wide and cheerful as Kurt remembered it, threw his arms around the two of them and said, "You have no idea how much begging I had to do to get this workaholic to take a real vacation! I've been harassing him for weeks and I was still convinced he was going to back out at the last minute if I didn't lure him here early."

"Ah, and how is the life of the great international recording artist?" Kurt teased.
Blaine rolled his eyes. "One semi-respectable pop song that made it all the way to Canada does not make me an international star," he protested, then smiled, "but I'm working on it!"

"Trust me, he is," the blond man said with a grin. "And he tries out new material anywhere he sees a crowd gathering. No shopping mall, café stage or empty hotel lobby in America is safe from this man."

Kurt laughed harder. "Still have a clothing store performance fetish, eh?"

"Shut up," Blaine scolded, laughing with him. Disengaging himself from David, he pulled the blond closer and introduced him. "In case you hadn't guessed, this is Mitch, and that beautiful young lady in his arms is Laurette."

"Nice to meet you," Kurt told them, smiling as he accepted the tiny hand immediately thrust out by the beaming little 3-year-old who had clearly seen her dads do the same thing when meeting new people. Slipping an arm around Mike, Kurt said, "This is my boyfriend, Mike Chang."

Blaine nodded to him. "I remember. How are you, Mike? I was so pleased when we heard that you and Kurt had decided to get together. I used to wonder about you in high school, you know."

Kurt and Mike exchanged a surprised look. "You did?" Mike said. "What gave me away?"

"I don't know, really. Maybe it was just the way I always had an impulse to do something possessive whenever I saw you and Kurt in the same room together," he joked, honey brown eyes twinkling.

"And I had no idea he was gay," Kurt admitted ruefully. Shrugging at Mike, he added, "Of course, I never did have very accurate sense of those things. The first time I ever met David, I asked if he and his best friend were gay."

Finn cut in over their laughter, "Dude, you were convinced that I was a closet case when we first became friends. Look how that turned out!"

Jumping to defend him, Mercedes added, "Hey, Kurt's not the only one with screwed up gay-dar. After all, he was my first serious crush! He hadn't come out yet, but he was about two steps away from bursting into flames and I was so blind to it that Rachel and Tina actually tried to stage a gay intervention."

"Oh, God," Kurt groaned, squeezing his eyes shut. "That doesn't exactly help my cause, Mercedes. I was so oblivious that I didn't even figure out that you liked me until you threw a rock through my windshield and accused me of breaking your heart!"

"Is that what happened?" Burt blurted. "You swore up and down that was an accident. I never could get the truth out of you. That's why I grounded you from driving for a month!"

Kurt stared at him. "You told me that was because you found my tiara collection!"

Finn and Mitch simultaneously blurted, "Tiara collection?"

Kurt groaned and Mike kissed his brightly blushing cheek. Blaine pecked the opposite one and said, "Don't worry about it. We all have our embarrassing memories. And obviously, everything worked out relationship-wise, for all of us."

Unexpectedly coming to the rescue, little Kurt tugged on his uncle's pant leg and announced, "I'm hungry!"
"We have lunch waiting inside," Carole added with a smile, her arms draped around the shoulders of her two beaming daughters. "The girls put everything together themselves, to welcome you home."

Breathing a sigh of relief, Kurt bent and picked up his nephew. Grinning at his sisters, he said, "My heroes! Let's eat, quickly, before somebody else comes up with a way to embarrass me."

"Don't worry, bro," Finn told him with a grin. "There's plenty of time for that. You're here all week."

The large, eclectic group got along famously, everyone chattering together throughout lunch. Kurt and Mike were both pleased to see how easily Mike's family and Blaine's mixed together with Kurt's.

"I have to admit, I was half-expecting to find out that you'd asked Wes here to be your Best Man," Kurt told David. He knew that they had remained friends after graduating Dalton Academy.

He shook his head. "That was my original plan. He wanted to be here, but he's in Europe this month. He got picked to be part of the research team studying that new fossil they found off the coast of France."

Shaking his head, Blaine said, "And knowing Wes, the lure of his best friend's wedding wasn't enough to drag him away from the prospect of a paleontological discovery. Not that I blame him, really. It's a big honor for such a young guy and he's been obsessed with dinosaurs ever since his sister took him to see the rerelease of "Jurassic Park" when he was seven."

David laughed. "Exactly. He felt bad for missing this, but this dig is a big moment for him. It could make his whole career. I told him we'd send him a video of the wedding."

"Gotcha covered!" Finn blurted, drawing their attention to the camera in his hands. He loved playing amateur videographer for family events. Mercedes had hired a photographer for the wedding, but she had been happy to accept Finn's offer to capture everything leading up to the event on his mini-cam.

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An hour later, sitting back against Mike's chest in his favorite chair, gently stroking the strong cords of the forearm encircling his waist, Kurt smiled as he watched beloved friends and family laugh and chat, mix and mingle together.

Lynne, Carole, Blaine, Julie and George were playing a card game in one corner. Dad, Finn and Mitch were on the sofa watching a baseball game on mute, cheerfully filling in all the commentary by themselves. Mercedes and David were holding hands and whispering together, the smiles on their faces enough to tell anyone that they were two people in love. Little Kurt was happily chasing Laurette Anderson around the living room, the sea of adult legs apparently making a wonderful obstacle course for two three year olds, while the twins and the two Lee children played some kind of computer game. Even Crookshanks had joined the party, claiming Kurt's lap within seconds of him sitting down, deliberately and amusingly ignoring Mike.

A feeling of happiness swept over Kurt as he watched them all. He had thought that he was contented before with Zach, but now the deep swell of emotion filling his heart told him just how hollow that relationship had really been. He felt incredibly lucky to have finally found the real thing.

"What are you thinking about?"

Hugging Mike's arms a little tighter around him, he said, "How amazing life can be."

"I know what you mean. Whoever would have thought, all those years ago when you were being bullied for who you were and I was hiding in the closet, afraid to be myself, that one day we'd be
here together with all of this love around us?"

"I don't believe in God," Kurt mused, "but sometimes I really do have to give some credit to miracles."

One week later, after a flurry of last minute decorating snafus, dress and suit fittings, a little expert bullying of the caterer and bakery, and the soothing of several small panic attacks, everything was as good as Kurt had been able to make it for his best friend's wedding. Which was to say, perfect.

The church was festooned in flowers and swathed in fine silk ribbons, Mercedes had chosen a rainbow assembly of pink, orange, green and yellow and Kurt had done his best to keep the shades low-key and properly blended. A summer wedding should be colorful and happy, but not bright enough to knock your guests' eyes out of their sockets as they entered the room!

Glancing at Mike, smiling brightly in his seat on the bride's side of the church next to Kurt's family, Kurt gave him a subtle wink. Blaine caught the gesture from his place next to the nervous-looking groom and grinned. Their eyes locked and for a moment, Kurt was dragged back a dozen years to the daydreams they had once conjured about sharing this very scene, with themselves in the role of soon-to-be-wed couple. From the sparkle in Blaine's eyes, Kurt knew he was thinking of the same thing, and they let themselves share a moment of silent amusement. They had loved each other then, but it had been the first-time love of innocent boys. Kurt could see in his eyes that Blaine was as happy as he was that they had grown out of that infatuation and found real love elsewhere, while still remaining friends.

Standing next to Blaine, David's two cousins fidgeted nervously. Across from them and standing next to Kurt were Tina Abrams, and David's sister Adrianna. The two women wore pretty pale-orange bridesmaid dresses, which Kurt and Blaine's ties, pocket squares and the rosebuds in their lapels matched perfectly. Kurt simply had not been able to steer Mercedes clear of that color, but considered himself lucky to have it confined to this.

His wandering mind was refocused by the striking up of music. A small cousin of Mercedes, and Finn's son Kurt had been enlisted as flower girl and ring bearer and the tiny pair toddled in to coos and picture-taking from the assembled audience. There were chuckles as well at the dark scowl on little Kurt's face. Clearly, he was not nearly as impressed with this grand occasion – or the miniature tuxedo he wore – as his companion, who beamed proudly at everyone in her little pink dress, tossing rose petals with more enthusiasm than accuracy.

Following the little ones, Kathy and Christy entered in matching yellow dresses that were a simpler cut of the bridesmaid gowns. The two recently turned ten-year-olds were walking with slow, careful precision, matching floral bouquets clutched in their hands as they walked up the aisle and took their places, one on the groomsmen's side and one on the bridesmaids'. As Mercedes' god-daughters, she had very much wanted to include them in her wedding party.

Kurt flashed his sisters an encouraging smile, letting them know they had done a great job, then his breath caught as 'Here Comes the Bride' began to play and Mercedes swept in on her father's arm. Everything and everyone else in the room seemed to vanish as he looked at her. The white wedding dress was form-fitted through the bodice, with a long, full skirt and wide lace straps at the shoulders. The veil was pinned carefully to Mercedes' complicated up-do, it's creamy folds floating around her as she walked. She was so beautiful that it made Kurt's heart ache.

Mercedes' father lifted the veil and kissed her cheek before handing her over to her husband to be. Kurt looked at David and had to gulp back a sob. His face was full of awe, wonder, and so much
love as he looked down into Mercedes' eyes that it was all Kurt could do not to cry. His best girl was in excellent hands.

Handing her bouquet to Kurt, Mercedes placed her hands in David's as the preacher began his service. Kurt's mind wandered as the endless litany of praying, praising, etc. droned on. His face remained pleasantly neutral but his thoughts were looping back through all the years that he and Mercedes had spent as friends. He remembered the girl with the tremendous voice and uncertain self-esteem who had become his very first friend in high school. The tough-talking, soft-hearted diva who had been his anchor throughout his difficult years at McKinley, and his support when he had been forced to leave her for another school. The beautiful young woman who had been his official prom date, but never held it against him when he had wanted to dance with his boyfriend.

Kurt's mind flashed over the warmth, laughter, tears and long-distance talks that had seen them both through colleges, boyfriends, and a hundred different heartaches and hopes. His eyes smarted again when he thought about the unwavering friendship that had still been offered so freely when he had come home shattered and confused this past spring. A part of Mercedes was leaving him today, but Kurt knew that the greater part never would. They would stand by each other in the future, just as they always had in the past.

His mind clicked back to the ceremony just as the preacher read the vows. It had come as no surprise that Mercedes and David preferred traditional, time-honored wedding vows to writing their own. They were delightfully old-fashioned people in some ways and those words were classic for a reason. Love, honor, cherish, until death do you part; there was no stronger promise in existence.

Kurt's eyes again drifted over to Mike, who was blinking back tears of his own. As if feeling Kurt's eyes on him, he glanced over at him. Neither of them could look away. When David's shaky voice said, "I do," both of them impulsively nodded.

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The reception lasted far into the night. Kurt found himself singing on and off throughout the party. He had not planned that into the schedule, but a good reception rarely followed a script, so he just went with it. He, Finn, Tina and Artie were called up by Will Schuester to perform a song while Mike danced with the bride. Later on, Kurt and Mercedes sang together. Then, later in the evening, Blaine, David, a couple more ex-Warblers David had invited, and Kurt got up on stage again and did an a cappella song that was not quite the same without the beat-box sounds, but impressed the listening crowd anyway.

Kurt also danced the night away with a wide variety of partners. He danced with the bride, Carole, Lynne, every one of the bridesmaids' including his sisters and the tiny flower girl. And, surprising him a little, he also danced with the groom, Blaine, Mitch, Finn and finally, when his own skills as a dance partner finally became a bit less in-demand, Mike.

"Equal opportunity Gene Kelly, I like it," Mike joked as he swept Kurt into his arms.

David and Mercedes had just left to begin the first night of their honeymoon at a nearby hotel and the crowd was still buzzing with joy and high on the good time they were having. The hall was rented until 2am and everyone seemed determined to take advantage of it, though the crowd had thinned considerably as those people who had brought children slowly departed for home.

Mike grinned as he watched the remaining guests dance. "Wow, guess everyone took Mercedes seriously when she told us to have a good time!"

"I know!" Kurt said, smiling as he allowed Mike to spin him. "It's crazy. Whoever would have
imagined a wedding party like this one in good old, stubbornly-conservative little Lima."

Mike stared deeply into his eyes and brushed back a lock of hair from Kurt's forehead, kissing him gently. "How are you doing? Feeling a little blue now that Mercedes is gone?" he asked, seeing the trace of melancholy in Kurt's eyes. Kurt nodded. "I thought so. You guys hugged each other goodbye for so long, I think David was starting to feel a little jealous."

Kurt smiled playfully. "He'll get over it. Mercedes and I are like sisters."

Mike laughed at the little joke. "She'll always be your girl, Kurt. The kind of friendship you two share doesn't come along every day. It won't fade just because she's married now."

Hugging him, Kurt said, "I know, but I think I needed to hear somebody say it. She and David have been living together for a while now, but somehow it feels so much more real now that she's Mrs. Wainwright." Noticing the thoughtful little frown creasing the skin between Mike's eyebrows, Kurt asked, "What is it?"

"Nothing. I . . . I was just wondering if now would be an appropriate time for a birthday present."

Kurt's brow wrinkled "What are you talking about? My birthday was in May and yours isn't until . . ." He gasped. "Oh, my God! Your birthday is tomorrow! Oh, Mike, I'm so sorry. With all this wedding craziness, I totally forgot."

"I know," he said with a laugh. "It's okay, honestly. And actually we just passed midnight, so it's my birthday right now. I figured the reception would last at least this long, so I brought the thing I got for you with me."

Not sure what to think, Kurt said, "You bought me a present for your birthday, and you decided to give it to me at Mercedes' wedding reception? You're a nut. And I really am sorry I forgot. I promise, I'll make it up to you." He kissed him, trying to fill it with as much promise as he could given the proximity of the crowd. "Happy Birthday, my love."

He hummed contentedly. "I like hearing you call me that. And you'll make it up to me? Does that mean I get homemade chocolate cake tomorrow?"

"Mmm," Kurt purred in agreement, hooking his chin over Mike's shoulder. "If that's what you want. I was thinking more along the lines of amazing sex, but if you'd rather have cake…"

"Can't I have both?" he asked archly.

Kurt grinned and hugged him harder. "Absolutely. You can have whatever you want as long as it doesn't get so loud that it sends my family into therapy."

Mike leered playfully. "Ooh, now that has possibilities!" He kissed him, then asked, "So, about that other present? Can we go out to the garden for a minute?"

"You're serious," Kurt realized. Mike nodded and he grinned. "Lead the way!"

The reception hall had a picturesque garden with a fountain, benches, and rows upon rows of fragrant flowers. It was practically a cliché for romance and Kurt shivered with delight as Mike led him by the hand into its splendor, his skin breaking out in goose-bumps in spite of the heat of the day that was still clinging to the still summer night.

Holding up a finger to indicate that Kurt should wait, Mike jogged out to the adjacent parking lot to get his surprise. Kurt watched him go with a smile, anticipation and curiosity filling him as he sat on
a bench, inhaling the sweetly scented air around him. The garden was lit by a series of subtly placed lamps, providing enough illumination to see the colorful flower beds without destroying the romantic dusk.

Mike was back in a few minutes, sitting a little ways apart from Kurt on the wide stone bench and presenting him with a medium size, silver-wrapped box.

Giving him a smile, Kurt opened the box only to find another, smaller one inside, with a card lying on top of it. The simple white card showed a couple of balloons and the words 'Life Begins at 30'. On the inside, it said only, 'I love you.'

"That's very sweet, but you do know that I'm only 29, right? Same as you."

"I know. Keep going," he ordered, long fingers fidgeting nervously.

Kurt obeyed, pulling out the smaller box and lifting the lid. As he had halfway expected, this one held an even smaller box, plus an envelope. He picked up the envelope, shooting a questioning glance at Mike, who nodded. Inside was a piece of paper; the kind of stock used for invitations. Heavy white paper with silver-scalloped edges. A wedding invitation. Hands shaking, he opened the card and read aloud, "You are cordially invited to the wedding of Michael James Chang and Kurt Elliott Hummel, May 27, 2023." He gulped around the lump in his throat, saying faintly, "My birthday . . . next year."

Picking up the last box, a flat velvet jewelry case, Mike opened it to reveal two identical golden bands, each with a small diamond embedded in the center of a beautifully etched music note.

"Engaged on my 29th, married on your 30th. That way we'll never forget our anniversaries and we're sure to live happily ever after," Mike said softly, taking Kurt's hand and trapping the wedding-ring box between their joined palms. "I know it's a little soon. We've only been an official couple for a few months, and I almost changed my mind about asking this tonight because I was afraid I might be rushing you, but something I saw in your eyes during the ceremony today told me that this was right for you too."

He paused, a hopeful, questioning look in his eyes. Kurt nodded, so stunned he could barely breathe.

"Kurt, I . . . I've never felt about anyone the way I do you. I didn't even know it was possible to love another person so much, and I know in my soul that that feeling is only going to get deeper and stronger as time goes on. I don't ever want to be without you. I want us to grow old together, watch our children grow up together, spoil our grandchildren together, and be there for each other through all of the good times and all of the bad. I love you, Kurt Hummel, and I want to become your husband. Will you marry me?"

Kurt had not even made it halfway through the proposal before tears started sliding down his face. Part of him wanted to protest the impulsiveness, but he could not. He knew that Mike meant every word of what he was saying. It was time to let go of the past and trust his own heart again.

He smiled, his doubts falling away as he looked into those warm brown eyes, seeing them reflecting his own feelings back at him. "I love you too, Mike. So very much. I would be honored to be your husband."

The tears shimmering in Mike's eyes spilled down his cheeks, mingling with Kurt's as their lips met in a deep, loving kiss.

A kiss filled with the promise of forever.
May 2023

Kurt Hummel had been planning weddings since he was two years old and he was very good at it, as his parents and best friends could attest. He always had the perfect idea when anyone came to him for a suggestion, and he had conjured up fantasies of his own wedding day a million times, planning it out a million different ways: what he would wear, who he would invite, how everything would look, what everyone would do and say at the reception.

Getting married had long been one of Kurt's fondest wishes.

In a way that was the problem. All it had ever been before was a vague hope of one day finding the person he had longed for all his life. His original wedding fantasy had just been himself and a faceless (but somehow handsome) stranger. Later that anonymous man had been replaced by a dumb but adorable jock, a boy who would later go on to become his step-brother instead. Then had come a 'when we grow up' type of small town daydream; marrying his high-school sweetheart. Then that relationship had ended and he had gone back to empty but beautiful dreams.

Even his subconscious had realized that he had no interest in spending his life married to Jeremy, Andy, or Emmitt, but a near-desperate craving to make that far away dream of perfect love come true had possessed him when he had passed the latter half of his twenties and found himself alone. That craving had led him to Zachary and bred an endless number of fantasies with him, covering his flaws and assigning him virtues that a more rational eye would have seen that he did not possess. Separated by more than a year, Kurt could see now how much of that relationship had been made up inside his head.

It was a shame, but he could not entirely regret what had happened. If it had not been for what happened with Zach, he might never have gone back to Lima and found his true love in the unexpected form of an old friend. What he had this time was the real deal. Kurt had gone into this relationship with his eyes wide open and every defense raised against the expectation of being hurt, but it had not happened. Mike had neatly knocked down every barrier, one by one, proving himself by the simple virtue of being honest and loving.

Mike Chang was everything Kurt had ever wanted, and more than he had dared to wish for. That realization was sometimes as scary as it was exhilarating. And the best part was that Mike felt the exact same way about him. He could see it sometimes, looking up from some everyday chore to find Mike staring at him as if he was a daydream come to life.

Real, lasting love had finally found them both and their commitment to that love was about to be announced to the world.

The trouble with having created so many weddings in his imagination was that it was almost impossible to choose the right scenario now that the moment had finally arrived. Kurt wanted this event to be perfect, something they could both look back on fondly in years to come. Unfortunately, in this respect, Mike was not particularly helpful. Whenever Kurt asked his preference for colors or fabrics or wedding attire, Mike would just smile and say, "Whatever you want. I'm not picky."

The venue, at least, had been easy to choose. Neither he nor Mike wanted to go back to Ohio, which meant that their family and friends from Lima would be coming to them. And while it was a little unusual, they had decided that the Regal would make a fine place for a wedding. It had a center aisle and plenty of seating, it wouldn't cost anything to use, it did not have the religious connotations of a
church, and the theatre just happened to have dressing rooms and a large anteroom that would make a perfect reception hall. Emily had gotten herself ordained online and offered to perform the ceremony for them. It felt a bit tacky, but once again solved the problem of an atheist groom who refused to be married at a courthouse.

Kurt's 30th birthday was looming ever closer and Kurt had called his brother to vent some of his mounting anxiety. They had been on the phone for half an hour and Kurt had gotten most of his issues out in the open, aware that he had a captive audience while Finn was busy feeding his new son. William Bertram Hudson – Will for short – was a docile, patient baby with his father's large appetite and easy-going nature, and he liked to take his time over a bottle, never leaving one half-full.

"Dude," Finn finally said, cutting Kurt off mid-gripe. "What's the big deal? You got this. Remember that weird Arabian harem thing you decorated our room with that time, or that other time when you dressed up like Two-Face for your duet assignment in glee club? Everybody thought that was pretty cool, even though I still don't get what a Batman character had to do with jazz. And Mike was one of your dancers for that, wasn't he? You're getting married on a stage, so he'd probably be totally cool with it if you guys did something like that again. Just maybe, y'know, without the crazy super-villain makeup."

Kurt's brain had screeched to a halt. "Okay, first of all, that outfit was an ode to the genius of Julie Andrews, not Two-Face. Secondly, the room decor was Moroccan and it was supposed to suggest harmonious co-existence between us, not a harem." He huffed and heard a sigh on the other end of the phone. "And thirdly . . . you really are brilliant sometimes."

He could easily picture the way his brother had perked up from the happiness that suddenly filled his voice. "Does that mean you're gonna do it?"

"I think it does. Something like it, anyway. Thank you, Finn."

His grin was all but audible. "Any time, Bro." When he heard Finn add a soft, "Cool, a Batman wedding . . ."

Kurt burst out laughing. "So you'll be okay if I dress you up as the Joker? After all, a Best Man needs to look the part."

A momentary pause, then an excited, "Dude! Do I have the job?"

"If you want it. And I'm only kidding about the costume, so don't worry."

"Oh," he said, sounding a bit disappointed. Then, brightly, "Actually, I don't care if you put me in another friggin' shower-curtain. I'm there."

Kurt laughed again. He had never forgotten that generous gesture. "I think we'll go a little more elegant than that, but thank you for the offer. Oh, are you going to mind being partnered up with a man in the wedding party? Mike has asked Matt Rutherford to be his Best Man."

"Really? Rutherford? Man, that's awesome. I haven't seen him in years! I'm cool with it. What about Mercedes?"

"She'll stand next to you, opposite Mike's sister," Kurt decided, scribbling the sudden flow of ideas down on a sheet of paper. "And Mike wants to have Tina, if possible, so I'll ask Rachel to be her opposite. Kathy and Christy begged to be maids of honor so they can round out the group. They've adopted Mike as a third brother already, so he was happy to agree."

Sounding a little concerned, Finn said, "That sounds cool but what about your dad? Wouldn't you
rather have Burt as your Best Man?"

"He's got a different job. Since there is no bride and Mike has no parents left, Dad is going to escort the two of us up the aisle together. It was your mom’s idea, but Dad loved it and so do Mike and I."

"That sounds awesome!" Finn crowed. Then, abruptly his tone changed. "Ew, man I gotta go. Baby Will just did some nuclear damage to his diaper. Ugh, dude, you're killing me here!"

Kurt laughed. "Good luck with that. I'll talk to you later." The call terminated without a goodbye and Kurt laughed harder, glad that he was not in the immediate vicinity of his brother and nephew.

June 2023

Once the plan had been set, Mercedes and Emily swooped in and took the execution of the wedding off Kurt's hands. This was his big day, they insisted, and they were not going to let him stress himself out too much to enjoy it. Which told Kurt that he was starting to go a bit ‘Groomzilla’ over the whole affair. Reluctantly, he backed off and let them do their work.

And they did it very well indeed. Before he knew it, the big day had arrived and he was beyond grateful that his friends had not let him become too stressed out to enjoy the event he had dreamed about for so long.

Standing in a tiny dressing room just off the theater lobby, Kurt took a few deep breaths, running his hands lightly over the fabric of his wedding outfit. It was made of fine blue silk, the loose material of his high-collared shirt and pants shifting lightly against his arms and legs to where it was gathered in tight cuffs at the wrists and ankles. The long, gold-embroidered vest he wore over it was close-fitting but comfortable; as were the soft velvet slippers that completed the ensemble. Mike's outfit was exactly the same, except that it was red and gold.

Mike had explained that in a Chinese wedding, red was traditionally the bride's color. It represented good luck, happiness, and joy, which Kurt had felt was perfect for Mike, and since this ceremony had no bride nothing was stopping him from wearing it. For Kurt, Mike had chosen a light blue fabric that stood for healing, trust, and longevity. Plus it made Kurt's eyes stand out brilliantly. He had gotten a little choked up when Kurt explained while designing the outfits that he wanted to honor Mike's heritage in deference to his absent parents. For the same reason, Kurt was also wearing his late mother's engagement ring on a hidden chain around his neck. He had wanted her symbolically close to his heart on this day.

Since it was Kurt's birthday, Mike had awakened him with breakfast in bed. He had given up the studio apartment the day his six-month lease expired and moved in with his fiancée, so there was no point in not seeing each other before the wedding. He had followed breakfast with relaxing massage, but while they were sorely tempted, they had managed to hold off on sex. They had remained celibate all week, so they could celebrate with a real 'wedding night' later.

A soft knock sounded at the door and Kurt jumped, snatching up his bouquet of mixed red and yellow roses and tulips from a side table. Mike would be carrying one as well. Opening the door he stared, wide-eyed and nervous, into the smiling eyes of his father. Burt was wearing a traditional black tux and as Kurt gave him a quick hug and accepted his offered left arm, a happy little part of him could not help imagining how picturesque the two brightly dressed grooms would look against the dark fabric of their escort's suit.

They came to a second dressing room and Mike emerged, his eyes bright and eager. They widened in appreciation as he saw Kurt in his wedding costume for the first time. He smiled and accepted his soon to be father-in-law's right arm.
Taking up their position at the back of the theater, the three smiled at each other and began their procession, walking slowly past several rows of smiling faces.

Mike had asked to choose the music they would walk up the aisle to, but had kept it a surprise. Kurt's smile widened into a grin when he recognized, "You Were Meant for Me" from their beloved, "Singing in the Rain". A thrill of pure happiness surged through Kurt as he listened. Those words had never been truer.

A set of steps had been placed at the base of the stage and both young men hugged Burt again as he handed them up, allowing them to ascend the steps and take their places. It felt a little funny, but at the same time entirely appropriate to be getting married on a stage.

Kurt's sisters and friends, each dressed in pale rose pink silk, smiled and reached out to gently touch his arm in good luck as he moved past them. Finn, also dressed in a traditional black tux, as was Matt Rutherford, grinned and gave his brother a little shoulder punch as he stepped up to face Emily, taking Mike's free hand in his.

Emily smiled sweetly at them both and began, her voice ringing clearly through the small theater. She spoke of renewal, love, and hope for a joyful future together, but Kurt was only half-hearing the words. His attention was wholly focused on the man opposite him, staring into his eyes with equal parts loving intensity and joyful disbelief. This was really happening. In just a few minutes they would no longer be just Mike and Kurt, individuals, but also Mr. and Mr. Chang-Hummel, a legally bonded unit.

Neither groom had wanted to give up his family name, so they had agreed to blend them and alphabetically had seemed the way to go. Kurt Chang-Hummel, he could not help but smile just thinking of it.

Finally, the rhythm of Emily's voice stopped and Kurt managed to shakily deliver his wedding vow. "Mike, I may have literally waited all my life for this moment. When I was a little boy, my mother used to read me fairy tales and I asked her once if a prince would ever come for a boy like me. She told me that anything was possible, and that my prince was out there, just waiting for me to find him." He smiled. "She was right. Just when I had all but given up on ever finding real love, there you were. You're everything I've ever wanted, and I'm so grateful to have the opportunity to share my life with you. I promise that I will always be true to you, I will never take you for granted, and I will show you how much I love you each and every day that we're lucky enough to be together."

Mike gulped, blinking back tears. "Kurt, without ever knowing it you taught me how to face my fears and be true to myself. You showed me what real love is, and that it's worth waiting, and working, and fighting for. A part of me has loved you since we were both sixteen and I thank God, Fate or whatever power in the universe saw fit to bring us back together again. I love you more than anything in my life, and I will love and cherish you faithfully until the day I die."

Emily had to clear her throat before she could continue. Signaling Finn and Matt to hand over the two gold rings Mike had given to Kurt on their engagement day, she waited until the two grooms had each slipped one over his partner's left ring finger, then said, "With these vows and before this company, by the power vested in me by the State of New York, I now pronounce you husbands."

Tears sparkling on their lashes, Kurt and Mike smiled and leaned in close, their lips meeting in a long, sweet kiss that had the entire crowd bursting into applause. When they finally broke apart, both of them laughed in delight, then turned and hugged their assorted groomsmen and women.

More hugs and kisses were rained upon them from every direction as they descended the steps and made their way back up the aisle. As the crowd began to file out of the auditorium area toward the
In the reception room, Kurt and Mike waded through them to reach his parents, wanting a private moment with them. When they got there, Kurt was shocked to see that his father was crying.

Instantly concerned, he laid a hand on his arm and said softly, "Dad? Is everything okay?"

"Okay?" Burt choked, trying to laugh and cry at the same time. He shook his head, brushing a trembling hand over Kurt's hair and then pulling him into a close embrace. "It's a hell of a lot better than okay. What I just saw . . . Kurt, that was everything your mom and I ever wanted for you. For you to find real love and for the people around you to figure out that there's nothing wrong with that kind of love in time for you to have a day like this one. I just wish she could have been here to see it. And your folks, too," he added, releasing Kurt and hugging Mike.

Mike's smile held a hint of sadness. "Me, too, sir."

"What have I told you about that? Call me Burt, or ... no, forget that. I just gained another son, so feel free to call me Dad. Y'know, unless that'd be weird for you or disrespectful to your father's memory."

Mike grinned. "No, I'd like that very much. I usually called him Papa, so it won't even feel strange. It might be more of an adjustment to say Mom, but I'll do my best."

Carole laughed. "Kurt has been my son for thirteen years now and he still goes back and forth between Mom and Carole, so don't worry."

Embracing her, Kurt said. "You are my mom in all the ways that matter. I hope you know that."

"Of course I do," she said softly, kissing his cheek. "And I'm so grateful that I could be here to see you two get married. I wish you as much joy in your life together as your father and I have had."

Kurt hugged her again and whispered, "Thanks, Mom."

"You guys better quit hugging everybody and get to the party before everyone thinks you snuck off without saying goodbye," Finn advised, joining the group and flinging his long arms around the shoulders of the two grooms with a beaming grin.

Taking his advice to heart, the newly united family went to enjoy the reception.

~*~*~*~*~

Hours later, following more singing, dancing, toasting and combined wishes for a happy marriage and happy birthday than he could even remember, Kurt was flying high. He had been reintroduced to Mike's best friend Matt a couple of days earlier and it amused him to find that the other man was as nice as he remembered, but just as disinclined to open his mouth. Outside of his traditional toast, he had hardly said a word all night, just smiling and listening to everyone else chatter around him. He spoke occasionally to Mike, but the two of them had been friends for so long that they hardly even needed words to communicate.

Near the end of the evening, just before Kurt and Mike were set to leave for the beginning of their first night as a married couple, they found themselves being tugged into the dressing-room where Kurt had gotten ready for the wedding, by Rachel Berry. "I'm sorry to pull you away from the party," she said, shifting a bit as if nervous, "but I wanted to offer my gift before you left, and I have to do it in private."

She whipped an envelope out of her clutch and handed it to Kurt. He took it, nodding absently at the explanation. Rachel was a bona fide Tony winner now for her role in "The Trophy Wife", just as he
had been sure she would be, and she tended to attract attention wherever she went. She was probably worried that someone would break in on the moment if she did this in front of witnesses.

"I hope you didn't buy us a vacation or something, because you know that we're already set to begin our honeymoon in Europe. We're leaving tomorrow morning and spending the next two weeks in . . . what on Earth?"

He stopped, frowning a little in confusion when he pulled out a certificate, an information form and a medical pamphlet. Mike looked equally puzzled until he opened the little brochure, "The Newman Fertility Clinic?" he read, raising his eyes to give Rachel a strange look. "Are . . . are you trying to give us money for an in-vitro procedure?"

She nodded eagerly. "I know it's a little unorthodox, but I also know how badly Kurt wants children, and from what I've heard you say Mike, I think you want one just as badly, and I really don't want to be a full-time mother, but I was thinking that I'd make a really great aunt. So if you guys are willing, I'd like to do this for you and become your surrogate. Because my dads did it and they never regretted it, and neither did I. Shelby was kind of a wash as a mom, but part of that may have been because she wasn't allowed to be part of my life until it was too late, and if you guys feel that way about me then I guess I can live with it, but I still want to be able to say that I've had a baby before I was thirty and this may be my last chance. Only, of course this isn't really about me. It's about you, but it's your wedding day and Kurt's birthday and I really, really want to give this to you as my gift. What do you think?"

Kurt and Mike were both completely stunned by Rachel's volcanic eruption of words. She had been talking so fast that the words practically spilled over one another, ending with a hopeful, big-eyed gaze, her hands clasped against her chest like a little girl.

Blinking rapidly as he shook his head to clear it, Kurt said, "Did you . . . just offer to be the egg-donor and surrogate to our child?"

"That's right!" she said, beaming at them both. "I know it's an expensive procedure and can take several tries before one gets a fertile embryo, but I've done all the research and had all my testing done, and I'm an entirely viable candidate. I've arranged to pay for three artificial insemination trials upfront."

"Rachel," Mike said, lifting his right hand in a helpless gesture. "That's . . . that's an amazing offer, but . . ."

Kurt's mouth worked a few times with no words coming out. Then he said, "Are you sure? You're on top of your career right now. Broadway . . ."

"Will still be there a year from now, and I'll still be Tony Award winner Rachel Berry. My fans and critics will still be there," she said, smiling lovingly at them both as she captured the hands they had instinctively joined when she made her offer. "I've achieved my dream. Now I want to help you achieve yours. We can set up the first appointment any time you like. Please let me do this for you, Kurt."

She knew what she was doing in appealing to him. Kurt knew it, could see that Mike had already accepted her sincerity and wanted to accept the offer, but was willing to defer to his new husband in this. "It might take a long time," he said, looking straight into Mike's eyes. "It might not succeed at all."

"It won't if we never try," he replied quietly.
"Little baby Changs?" Kurt asked, a smile breaking free as he recalled Finn's words of more than a year ago.

He grinned. "Little baby Chang-Hummels," he corrected. "A baby of our very own, with your big beautiful eyes, or my awesome dance skills. Your amazing singing voice, or my smile that my mom always used to claim would let me get away with murder."

"Add in Rachel's enormous talent and even bigger heart, and we can't possibly go wrong," Kurt finished, looking his friend in the eye and nodding his agreement. "If you're really sure . . ."

She squealed and threw an arm around his neck, capturing Mike with the other and drawing them both in close. "Of course I am!"

Fighting back tears, Kurt whispered, "Then thank you, Rachel. Thank you so much."

"Thank you for letting me do this for you. I love you both so much," she replied. "Happy wedding day!"

September 2024

They had gone to the clinic and begun the process two months later, going through a battery of testing and making the easy decision to mix the sperm and let fate decide which of them was to be the biological father. When the first implantation attempt failed, they were forced to wait three months before trying again.

After another unsuccessful round, the two would-be fathers began to fear for their chances. What if it didn't work, ever? What if Rachel became weary of being a human guinea pig and changed her mind? What if they just weren't meant to be dads?

Another round of testing was done, another few more months went by, and the hopeful trio tried again. The third time, as it turned out, was the charm. A few weeks into the New Year, Rachel was given the good news that not one, but two healthy embryos had successfully been implanted.

Kurt and Mike were having twins.

For the next eight months, the expectant fathers alternated their successful working lives with locating, buying, decorating and finally moving into a bigger home, an actual house that was a farther commute from their jobs but a better and far roomier place to raise children.

It had come as somewhat alarming news at first when the doctor had informed them that they had engaged in 'hetero paternal super fecundation', especially since Kurt was not accustomed to being accused of hetero anything, but then he had explained that the genetic markers of the boy-and-girl twins in Rachel's womb suggested that each of the fathers had managed to fertilize a separate egg. By some strange and awesome miracle, they truly were having children together.

Naturally, everyone was overjoyed for them both. The public reaction – it had not remained a secret for long that Broadway star Rachel Berry was serving as a surrogate mother for two gay friends – was also surprisingly positive. Rachel had done her best to keep their names out of the press, but curiosity was high.

Another unexpected side effect of this entire process was that Emily and Rachel had abruptly decided to bury the hatchet and be something like friends. As biological mother and a soon to be honorary aunt, they had at last found something in common. Even Emily could admit that Rachel was doing a selfless, and damned nice thing, something she herself would never have even thought about offering, and her animosity had faded almost entirely.
When the big day finally arrived, Hiram, Leroy, Burt, Carole, the twins, Finn, Julie, and Lynne were all in crammed into the waiting room, waiting anxiously for news. The young Hudson children were being looked after by the Abrams family back in Lima, but nobody had wanted to miss this moment.

Mike and Kurt were with Rachel in the delivery room when their son and daughter were born. After the babies were cleaned up and held in their mother's arms for a few minutes, Rachel had smiled tiredly and kissed them each before saying, "Go on and meet your daddies."

Her gaze was a bit wistful as she watched the nurses take the tiny babies away, but her joy overrode any regret as she watched the wonder, disbelief, and thrilled tears on the faces of her two friends as they held their children for the very first time.

Kurt had been handed a gorgeous tiny creature with Mike's straight black hair and almond-shaped eyes. She was the loveliest thing he had ever seen, even as she concentrated on wailing at the top of her lungs. "She's got her mother's singing voice, I think!"

"So does her brother," Mike said delightedly as the wee boy in his arms, a delicate creature with light skin, a pale fuzz of downy hair, and the longest eyelashes he had ever see on a baby, joined his sister's lusty chorus. "Or maybe I should blame you for this. You've got some impressive lungs, my love."

Sniffling back his tears, Kurt looked over at the exhausted woman in the bed. "I don't know how to thank you for this Rachel."

"Just say you'll let me be a small part of their lives," she replied. "Not all the time. You're their parents, not me, but I fully intend to be that awesome auntie who spoils them rotten on every holiday."

"Absolutely," he agreed, resettling the baby in his arms with the instinctive, loving experience of a big brother and a natural-born dad as she began to settle. He edged closer to Mike and surveyed their other child, looking down on his son and daughter with love and pride. For the first time, he understood the fierce protective instinct that had always characterized his own father where he was concerned. Not having an arm free, he rested his head on his husband's shoulder. Life had never been more perfect. "I love you, Mike."

"I love you, too," he said sincerely, turning his face to kiss Kurt's forehead, then bending to do the same for each of his babies. "All of you."

At that moment, Kurt knew. There would be trials, stresses, worries and tears in the years to come, but every one of them would be worth it for the happiness he now felt, and the joy and laughter that would be theirs together. In a little while, they would introduce Melody Rachel and Flynn Matthew to a throng of adoring grandparents, aunts and uncles, but this moment was for them alone.

Another page had turned and a new chapter of their lives was just beginning. And Kurt had never felt so content.
This is a bonus chapter, originally written as part of an anthology story for the word-prompt "thousand", but I decided I would post it as an epilogue to the main story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

EPILOGUE

Kurt hummed in his sleep, arching into the sensation of quick, soft kisses being rained over his face and neck. His eyelids fluttered drowsily and a smile drifted across his lips when he realized that he was not dreaming after all. His husband was kissing his way along the shell of Kurt's left ear with great concentration, as if afraid that he might miss a spot. "That tickles," he mumbled, smiling and squirming a little.

Realizing that he was awake, Mike gave up on Kurt's ear and pressed a smiling kiss to his mouth, continuing right down his chin and along the path to his Adam's Apple and the hollow above his breastbone.

"Mmm, not that I'm objecting," Kurt sighed, shifting again when Mike's hands began to get involved in the action, stroking light patterns along his bare torso, "but to what do I owe the pleasure of this amazing wake-up call?"

Since their son and daughter had been born three months ago, leisurely awakenings and slow, gentle lovemaking had mostly become a fond memory. These days the two of them were lucky most of the time if they managed to stay awake long enough to share a kiss goodnight.

"Tuesday," Mike explained cryptically.

Kurt frowned, trying to figure out what that meant. "You're saying that you want a quickie before you go to work?"

Since each of them controlled his own schedule, Kurt as a voice instructor and Mike as a dance coach, they had been splitting their time between lessons and dad-duty. Kurt went into his Manhattan studio on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, and stayed home with the babies on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays while Mike went to work. Sunday was family day and pretty much the only time the two of them got to spend together.

Mike's lips had made their way down to Kurt's belly button, which he was teasing with tiny licks and kisses, making his husband squirm and laugh. "Nope," he said cheerfully, nipping a small fold of skin gently.

A gasp escaped as Mike began playfully outlining the ridges of his abdomen with the tip of his tongue, pausing to kiss each lightly delineated bump. "Oh, that feels so good," he hissed when his playful lover kissed his way back up the bumps of Kurt's ribcage and began focusing his attention on each of Kurt's peaked pink nipples. Struggling to get his brain working again, he glanced at the clock, seeing that it was nearly 8 am and ventured, "But aren't you worried about being late to work? Your first class is at eight thirty on Tuesdays."
Playfully hitching his eyebrows, Mike's laughing brown eyes twinkled at him as he said, "Jody is taking over for me. I've got all day. Why, you have some place you need to be?"

"No, b--but you . . . I mean . . . I thought."

It was getting harder and harder to make sense as Mike continued his blissful torment.

Taking pity on him, Mike hitched himself higher on the bed, settling his weight on top of Kurt as he returned to his mouth for a few long, passionate kisses. "I arranged for Jody to take my shift over two weeks ago, because I wanted my calendar completely free today," he confessed. "And yours is about to become free too. I've arranged to have Emily and Elise come by in about an hour to pick up the kids for a 24 hour babysitting gig."

A surprised expression lit Kurt's features as he suddenly realized upon the mention of their children, that he had slept an entire night undisturbed. "Did you take twin duty all by yourself last night?"

At three months old, Melody and Flynn were just starting to get the hang of sleeping through the night, but so far it had been a rocky road. If one wasn't waking up wanting a bottle, diaper change, or some fatherly attention; the other one was. Kurt and Mike had quickly developed into excellent caretakers, but the constant onslaught of infant demand was exhausting.

Mike yawned. "I may have. Okay, yes, I did, but they only woke me once. They're getting better at that whole sleep when it's dark out thing."

Kurt laughed and stroked both hands through Mike's thick black hair, scraping his fingernails lightly along the other man's scalp in the way that made him almost purr with contentment. "You're too good to me."

"I could never be too good to you," Mike countered with a smile, pecking Kurt's lips again. "You deserve the best of everything, always."

"No more than you do," he replied, sprinkling a few kisses of his own over Mike's face. "Are you going to tell me what this is all about? It's a little early for Christmas, and I know it's not our anniversary."

He grinned. "No, but you're close."

Kurt pressed his hands lightly against his husband's chest. Curiosity piqued by the fun he was clearly having with this mystery, he asked, "Can I have a hint?"

Mike pondered the question for a moment, then sang him a verse from one of Kurt's favorite musicals.

**Live in my house**
I'll be your shelter
Just pay me back
With one thousand kisses
Be my lover - I'll cover you

Since Mike almost never sang voluntarily, Kurt was even more confused by the clue. "Um...there's a new production of "Rent" beginning somewhere and you're taking me to see it?"

"No, although we could definitely go see a show today if you want to. Try again. The hint is in the lyrics."
"That doesn't really help. We're already at home. You are my lover and you were doing a pretty fine job of covering me in kisses just now."

He grinned even wider. "You almost had it. How many kisses?"

Eyes narrowing in confusion, he ventured, "One thousand?"

"Right! When did we meet, Kurt? Like, not the first time in high school, but when it really mattered. When did we meet, exactly."

Kurt thought back to that moment, nearly three years ago, when he'd gone home to see his family in Lima with his heart, hopes and self-esteem in tatters from the betrayal of having been cheated on. He remembered that first surprise meeting with a man he had not seen in nearly ten years. Kurt smiled, recalling the way his heart had unexpectedly stuttered back to life within a few days of that defining moment. "March, 2022. The fifteenth, I think?"

"That's right. Exactly two years, eight months and twenty-five days ago."

He considered that for a few moments, then guessed, "One thousand days?"

"Exactly! Happy milliversary, darling," Mike said, kissing him deeply again.

Kurt finally could not hold back a laugh. "Milliversary? Is that even a real thing?"

"Sure! Well, maybe. It is for us. Because one thousand days ago, you changed my entire life for the better. I still remember the way I felt the first time I saw you, sitting on your dad's front porch steps in the cold, with no shoes and what looked like Burt's old clothes on, and a face that seemed like you were about to cry. You looked so vulnerable, and so beautiful, and so strong all at the same time. I think I fell a little bit in love with you right then and there."

Kurt was touched. "You never told me that before. I didn't think I had enough of a heart left at that moment to fall in love, but I definitely knew that I felt drawn to you. I made an excuse to visit you the very next day with Finn, telling myself I just wanted to catch up with our old friend, but the truth was that every time we spoke it just made me want to spend even more time with you." He shook his head. "One thousand days. That sounds like such a long time, but it doesn't feel that way at all. Not after everything that's happened."

"Friendship, courtship, engagement, marriage, fatherhood," Mike listed. "It's a lot of living for such a short span of time, and this is just the beginning for us."

"So, what exactly is the approved method for celebrating a milliversary?" Kurt asked with a smile, wrapping his arms around Mike's neck. "I'm sure you know, because it seems to me that you've been planning for this occasion for a while."

Mike licked his lips. "I was thinking maybe we'd start with those thousand kisses. I haven't been keeping a very good count, but I'm sure we can get somewhere in the ballpark if we try hard."

"Sounds like a good plan," Kurt agreed, his voice husky with want as he raised his head to meet Mike's lips. It had been far too long since they had had the time to make out like teenagers. They lay in bed, kissing and touching for an undetermined length of time until the sound of happy babbling from the baby monitor interrupted the moment. The two fathers looked at each other and laughed when the cooing nonsense suddenly doubled, taking on an almost harmonious quality.

"I swear, those two are going to be more into performing than we were once they get a little older," Kurt declared. "Doesn't it almost sound like they're trying to sing together?"
Mike chuckled. "It's our own fault for allowing Rachel to supply the maternal half of their DNA. I strongly suspect that she came out of Shelby's womb already belting show-tunes. Between her genes and yours, what else could we expect?"

"Hey, now. Don't forget that Melly shares your DNA, oh great Asian dance master. It's not my fault if your little swimmer danced his way into the arms of a baby-Barbra."

"Do eggs have arms?"

"Shut up and go see to your children," Kurt laughed, smacking him playfully on the shoulder.

"What about you?"

Kurt wriggled out of his husband's arms and stood, striking a flirty fist-on-hip pose when he caught the other man ogling his butt. "I'm going to grab a quick shower and put on some clothes before Em and El show up and become scandalized for life."

Mike burst into hearty peals of laughter. "The day Emily Switek starts fanning herself like a maiden with the vapors over the sight of a little man-flesh is the day I fly to Tibet and become a monk."

"Oh, don't do that. I'd have to go with you and I could never pull off the haircut."

"Not to mention the need to keep our hands off each other 24/7."

Kurt grinned wickedly and slapped his husband on the rump. "That too."

They split up for the twenty minutes it took Kurt to clean up and dress, and Mike to change two diapers and fetch his hungry offspring a pair of warmed bottles, then Kurt joined his husband in the nursery and settled into one of the two rocking chairs with his son. Mike walked the floor with his daughter, who always seemed to prefer a little exercise with her breakfast.

"So, tell me. Are there activities planned for this thousandth day celebration, or does it just involve a lot of making out? Because honestly I'd be fine with either one," Kurt teased, hitching Flynn up against his towel covered left shoulder and patting his back until a good-sized belch escaped.

Mike did the same for Melody, who managed to produce a guttural noise that put her brother to shame.

"Nice one," Mike praised her, switching babies with Kurt as their little boy began to fuss, no longer content to lie still now that he was fed and comfortable. Addressing his husband, he said, "I tried to come up with a few appropriate activities. I thought we'd start by going into town and having breakfast at Kirkland's. Did you know their jumbo croissant sandwiches and a full-fat mocha with whip are almost exactly a thousand calories?"

Kurt winced. "No, and I did not need to know that. You know that used to be my favorite on-the-go breakfast when I was single?" When Mike just continued to grin at him, he smiled. "I guess it won't hurt to have one for old times' sake."

"And then I was thinking we could go to the arboretum and visit that massive Christmas display they have going."

"The one that advertises a thousand varieties of holiday enjoyment for the whole family? I think I'm sensing a pattern here."

Dark eyes sparkling, Mike said, "And of course we'll need to be sure to stop and make out every so
often, just to make sure our kissing average doesn't fall below the minimum."

Kurt grinned. "Well, if we must."

"I wanted to take you on a hot air balloon ride, because they're advertised as floating 1000 feet above the city, but apparently those companies all in the off-season."

Rising from his chair, Kurt shifted his daughter over a bit so he could kiss the disappointed look off his husband's face. "We'll do it for our wedding anniversary next year. In the mean time, we can go shopping and find ourselves a nice thousand piece jigsaw puzzle."

Mike's eyes lit up, glad to find that Kurt was into the spirit of the occasion. "That could be fun. My sister and I used to do puzzles together."

"Yes, but not tonight, okay? This is going to be our first day alone in over three months. I don't want to waste a minute of it. Now, I believe you said something about going to a show tonight? I happen to know the perfect one for us."

He looked interested. "Oh?"

"Yep. 'Glowing in the Dark' just had its one thousandth show last month. We'll be a few performances over the mark, but it will still fit in with the general theme of the day."

"I like it," Mike agreed happily, "and when that's over, we'll call Em to check on the kids, because I know we'll both be dying for an update by then. And if all is well, we'll come back home and I'll make you stove top burgers and fries, like I did our first night together in New York."

Kurt's heart suddenly felt like it was about to explode from the sheer amount of love bursting from within it. "If you keep this up, I may just have to take you dancing tonight, Mr. Chang-Hummel."

Leaning closer to give him a deep kiss, then laughing as the babies took this opportunity to grab both of their faces, Mike said, "I can't think of any way I'd rather end the day, Mr. Chang-Hummel."

From the front of the house, the doorbell rang, signalling the arrival of their dear friends and volunteer babysitters.

"Time to go see Aunty Em and Ellie, little ones!" Mike chirped, bouncing Kurt's tiny doppleganger in his arms and making the baby boy laugh, which made his sister laugh too and pat Kurt on the nose so he would pretend to nip at her fingers. "Let's get you on your way so that Daddy and I can go back to our room and have a nice long dance rehearsal before breakfast."

"Mike!" Kurt laughed. "Don't say that in front of them!"

"What? You started it. They don't know what we're talking about anyway."

Kurt blushed, unable to hide his grin as he opened the door to his dear friend and her wife. "Hi Em, Elise. Thank you so much for doing this for us!"

"Happy to, kid," Emily told him, making grabby-hands at the baby. "Now gimme that little munchkin!"

Kurt handed Melody over with a slightly reluctant air, as Mike did the same with Elise and Flynn. He was looking forward to spending the day alone with his husband, but this was the first time they had both been away from their children at the same time and he could not help feeling a pang of worry.
Fortunately, after more than ten years as friends, Emily could read Kurt like a book. "Don't get your undies in a twist, Daddy. You know they're in good hands. The four of us are gonna have a blast together, and you two are going to take it easy, have fun, and get a good night of uninterrupted sleep." Looking them up and down, and detecting the higher than usual color still infusing Kurt's cheeks, she smirked. "Or a good night of uninterrupted something anyway. I expect details if you choose Door number 2."

"Not a chance," he laughed, kissing her on the cheek and then kissing both babies as Mike returned from a quick trip to get the twins' prepacked diaper bags, each loaded with enough supplies and changes of clothing for a dozen babies.

A few minutes and a lot of fussing and reminders later, both parents waved goodbye a little sadly until their friends' car was out of sight.

"Think they'll be all right?" Kurt asked wistfully, leaning into Mike's embrace.

He nodded. "Yeah, they'll be fine. Think we'll be all right?"

Kurt laughed. "We will if we keep ourselves well distracted all day."

"Where would you like to start?"

"Well, if we're really going to breakfast at Kirklands, then I think we need to burn off some calories first," Kurt decided, shutting the door with his foot and pressing his husband up against it, brushing his lips against Mike's well-defined jawline. "Plus, I think I have a few kisses I need to catch up on."

THE END

Chapter End Notes

And that's it! Hope you have enjoyed. Comments would be most appreciated!

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